
REVIEW

A descriptive literature review of harmful leadership styles: Definitions, commonalities, measurements, negative impacts, and ways to improve these harmful leadership styles

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Abstract There are many harmful leadership styles — the egotistic leader, the incompetent leader, the ignorant leader, and leaders that are reckless, cruel, or even evil. To understand what ultimately are considered leadership traits that are contrary to good order, discipline and productivity, the author conducted a review of the literature to obtain a current typology (the grouping of items by their similarities) of selected harmful leadership styles — specific styles that are counter to enabling others to succeed, overcome challenges, achieve desired results, and create a positive environment in which to work. The paper focused on three distinctly harmful leadership styles (abusive, bullying, and toxic), and set these in context with each other and within the domain of destructive leadership in general. Commonalities, measurements, negative impacts, and ways to improve these harmful leadership styles were identified from the literature and detailed. The paper concluded with recommendations for future research and action.

Keywords: harmful leadership, toxic leadership, abusive leadership, bullying, destructive leadership, toxic leadership scale

Introduction

People who work for harmful leaders often have no choice in the matter, have been found to love their jobs in spite of working for such leaders, or are unfortunate pawns of history. The more fortunate work for good leaders who are inspirational, have integrity, set a good example, and are supportive and encouraging. This paper focuses on the harmful leadership traits of destructive leaders.

There are many harmful leadership types — the egotistic leader, the incompetent leader, the ignorant leader, and leaders that are reckless, cruel, or even evil. To understand what ultimately are considered leadership traits that are contrary to good order, discipline and productivity, the author conducted a review of the literature to obtain a current typology of selected harmful leadership styles — specific styles that are counter to enabling others to succeed, overcome challenges, achieve desired results, and create a positive environment in which to work. The paper defined several harmful leadership styles, including those considered toxic, abusive, bullying, and disruptive, and set these in context with each other and within the spectrum of destructive leadership. Then, commonalities, measurements, negative impacts, and ways to improve these harmful leadership styles were identified from the literature and discussed. Finally, very broad conclusions on the way ahead were drawn.

Purpose

The purpose of the paper was to provide a useful typology for better understanding harmful leadership styles. The paper addressed the following four areas of inquiry. First, the research

focused on the commonalities and characteristics of the main categorizations of harmful leadership, including abusive leadership, bullying, and toxic leadership. Second, negative consequences or outcomes of these harmful leadership styles were explored and compiled. Third, the paper draws from the literature ways these harmful leadership styles are commonly measured and assessed. Last, the author provided critical analysis of the research to identify candidate topics for further inquiry and how the negative effects of harmful leadership might be mitigated.

Definitions

This section defines both constructive and destructive leadership before introducing and focusing on three embodiments of destructive and harmful leadership: abusive, bullying, and toxic.

Constructive leadership

Constructive leadership combines a focus on both mission accomplishment and team welfare. One without the other could lead to a weakening of the synergy needed to excel as a team consistently. Constructive leaders couple human traits such as honesty, respect, sincerity, justice, and honor with organizational/team strengths such as confidence, direction, achievement and striving for the greater good. Team members respect and place their trust in constructive leaders, in direct contrast to what occurs when led by a destructive leader (Norman, Avolio, & Luthans, 2010).

Destructive leadership

Kathie Pelletier (2010) defined destructive leadership as the “systematic and repeated behaviour by a leader, supervisor, or manager that violates the legitimate interest of the organisation by undermining and/or sabotaging the organisation’s goals, tasks, resources, and effectiveness and/or motivation, well-being or job satisfaction of subordinates” (p. 375). Destructive leadership, she stated,

... can involve acts of physical force (e.g., shoving, throwing things, slamming fist on a desk, sexual harassment that includes inappropriate physical contact), and passive acts such as failing to protect a subordinate’s welfare, or failing to provide a subordinate with important information or feedback. (p. 375)

Aasland, Skogstad, Notelaers, Nielsen, and Einarsen (2010) added that destructive leadership is not one type of leadership behavior, but instead involves a variety of behaviors, that it 1) involves systematically acting against the legitimate interest of the organization, whether by abusing subordinates or by working against the attainment of the organization’s goals, including any illegal behaviour, and 2) emphasizes repeated destructive behaviour as opposed to a single act such as an isolated outburst of anger or spontaneous misbehaviour (p. 439).

Pinning down the definition of destructive leadership is a challenge. Elle (2012) argued that destructive leadership is a manifestation of multiple toxic leadership styles. Steele (2011) provided that destructive leaders use dominance, coercion, and manipulation, as opposed to constructive leaders who use influence, persuasion, and commitment. Reed and Bullis (2009) offered that destructive leadership, toxic leadership, and petty tyranny are used interchangeably. This is why this paper chooses to subordinate toxic leadership under the broad category of destructive leadership.

Destructive leadership appears to be lessening as a problem, as it is less acceptable and tolerated in modern organizations. Reed and Olsen (2010) cited senior leaders who believe that the problem of destructive leadership used to be much worse than it is today. Nevertheless, the problem of destructive leadership remains far-reaching. According to

Gallus, Walsh, Driel, Gouge, and Antolic (2013), this harmful leadership style has deep roots both psychologically and organizationally.

Einarsen and Skogstad (2007) developed a model of destructive and constructive leadership behavior, as illustrated in Figure 1:

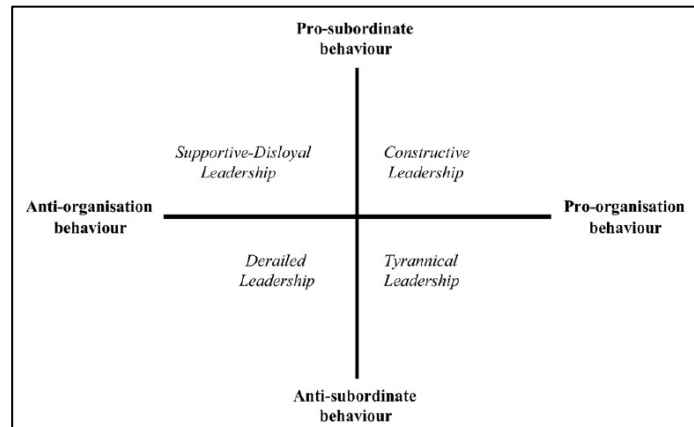


Figure 1. Model of destructive and constructive leadership behavior

The relationships in Figure 1 establish understandable boundaries between what is considered constructive leadership (pro-subordinate *and* pro-organization behavior) and what is inferred as destructive (anti-subordinate and/or anti-organization behavior). Each harmful leadership style is a blend of negative leader behavior covered later in the section entitled Commonalities.

Found within the literature surfaced three distinct harmful leadership styles: abusive, bullying, and toxic, discussed in detail below.

Abusive leadership

According to Tepper (2000) and Tepper, Duffy, Hoobler, and Ensley (2004) abusive leaders are characterized by their “injurious actions that include public ridicule, angry tantrums, inconsiderate actions (i.e., rudeness), favoritism, non-contingent punishment, and coercion” (p. 374). Hornstein (1996) suggested that toxic leaders are primarily concerned with gaining and maintaining control through methods that create fear and intimidation (p. 374). Ashforth (1994) argued tyrannical leaders are “distrusting, condescending and patronizing, impersonal, arrogant and boastful, and rigid and inflexible. They take credit for the efforts of others, blame subordinates for mistakes, discourage informal interaction among subordinates, and deter initiative and dissent” (p. 374).

Mawritz, Mayer, Hoobler, Wayne, and Marinova (2012) found that abusive supervision has effects beyond the supervisor–subordinate dyad, which appears according to numerous research efforts to be a common tell-tale of harmful leadership styles.

Tepper (2007) provided antecedents of abusive supervision, including organizational injustice, perceived psychological contract breach, and negative affect (p. 1268).

Aryee, Chen, Sun, and Debrah (2007) argued that as a counterproductive behavior, abusive supervision is influenced by the interactive effect of supervisors’ perceptions of interactional injustice and authoritarian leadership style. Further, subordinates’ perceptions of interactional justice rather than procedural justice account for the influence of abusive supervision on affective organizational commitment (p. 200).

Bullying

Schmidt (2008) identified that bullying was sufficiently different in scope and meaning from supervisory mistreatment such as abusive supervision (p. 24). Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, and Cooper (2003) defined bullying at work as harassing, offending, socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone's work tasks. In order for the label bullying, or mobbing, to be applied to a particular activity, interaction or process, it has to occur repeatedly and regularly (e.g. weekly) and over a period of time (e.g. about six months). Pelletier (2010) offered that bullying is using mental or physical strength against someone who is likely to be in a weaker or subordinate position to the person who is engaging in bullying.

Bullying appears primarily to be a condition inferred by a vulnerable target of hostile behavior. Hoel and Cooper (2001) described this construct as one or several individuals over a period of time [who] perceive themselves to be on the receiving end of negative actions from one or several persons, in a situation where the target of bullying has difficulty in defending him or herself against these actions.

But, not all bullying is necessarily harmful, for example, that which builds teamwork in a controlled boot camp training exercise. Alexander, MacLaren, O’Gorman, and Taheri (2012) found that workplace bullying actually increased group cohesion, describing a long history of quasi-abusive practices that military leaders use in boot camp and Special Forces training as examples of toxic leadership behaviors that can actually build camaraderie and feelings of connectedness among the followers.

Toxic leadership

Lipman-Blumen (2005, 2010), one of the first to pioneer research into toxic leadership, defined it as “...a process in which leaders, by dint of their destructive behavior and/or dysfunctional personal characteristics, inflict serious and enduring harm on their followers, their organizations, and non-followers, alike” (2005, p. 1).

Leaders are considered toxic, Lipman-Blumen advised, when they inflict:

...serious and enduring harm on their constituents by using influence tactics that are extremely harsh and/or malicious. In short, toxic leaders exhibit destructive behaviors that work to decay their followers’ morale, motivation, and self-esteem, although there is considerable overlap in conceptualizations of toxic, tyrannical, unethical, and destructive leadership. (2005, p. 376)

Lipman-Blumen (2005), also one of the first to describe the multi-dimensional framework of leader toxicity, said toxic leadership contravened basic standards of human rights by consciously reframing toxic agendas as noble endeavors.

Reed (2004), advised that those practicing toxic leader syndrome, display three primary elements:

- An apparent lack of concern for the well-being of subordinates;
- A personality or interpersonal technique that negatively affects organizational climate; and
- A conviction by subordinates that the leader is motivated primarily by self-interest. (pp. 6-7)

Lipman-Blumen (2005) provided the following enduring dysfunctional qualities of character marking the toxic leader:

- Lack of integrity that reveals leaders as cynical, corrupt, or untrustworthy;
- Insatiable ambition that prompts leaders to put their own sustained power, glory, and fortunes above their followers’ well-being;
- Enormous egos that blind leaders to the shortcomings of their own character and thus limit their capacity for self-renewal;

- Arrogance that prevents toxic leaders from acknowledging their mistakes and, instead, leads to blaming others;
- Amorality that makes it nigh impossible for toxic leaders to discern right from wrong;
- Avarice that drives leaders to put money and what money can buy at the top of their list;
- Reckless disregard for the costs of their actions to others, as well as to themselves;
- Cowardice that leads them to shrink from the difficult choices; and
- Failure both to understand the nature of relevant problems and to act competently and effectively in situations requiring leadership. (pp. 4-5)

Jowers (2015) described toxic leaders as having a combination of self-centered attitudes, motivations and behaviors that adversely affect subordinates, the unit, and mission performance.

Whicker (1996) offered that toxic leaders are bullies, enforcers, and street fighters, maladjusted, malcontent, and often malevolent and malicious people, who succeed by tearing others down and glory in turf protection, fighting, and controlling others rather than uplifting followers, that have deep-seated but well-disguised sense of personal inadequacy, selfish values, and cleverness at concealing deceit. Norton (2016) described toxic leadership as a demotivational behavior that negatively impacts unit morale and climate.

Regarding the effect of toxic leadership, Lipman-Blumen (2005) offered that “internal forces that push followers to tolerate toxic leaders are both psychological, that is, lodged in their psyches, and existential, that is, embedded in the followers’ human condition”, and that “strong yearnings for leaders percolate up from our unconscious, where psychological needs send us in search of leaders who can comfort our fears” (p. 5). According to Reed (2004), toxic leaders represent to suffering subordinates a daily challenge that often results in unnecessary organizational stress, negative values, and hopelessness. Lipman-Blumen (2005) said the type and degree of harmful consequences that an individual toxic leader generates might vary from one situation to another (p. 1).

Not all toxic leaders are totally ineffective, however. Many are extremely successful in results. Steele (2004) noted that toxic leaders are usually not incompetent or ineffective leaders in terms of accomplishing explicit mission objectives. He said many times they are strong leaders who have the right stuff, but just in the wrong intensity, and with the wrong desired end-state, namely self-promotion above all else (p. 4).

One does not become a toxic leader overnight. Schmidt (2008), citing Goldman (2006), described toxic leaders who had clinically diagnosable mental health disorders, i.e. long-term derivative conditions. Norton (2016), citing Reed (2004), advised that “losing control in the moment or having a bad day does not make a leader toxic” (p. 144).

Elle (2012) defined toxic leadership as contagious, far-reaching, and insidious. Jowers (2015) concurred, citing an Army wife, stating that the effects of toxic leadership flow into the marriage and home life of those who experience toxic leadership (p. 19). Toxic leaders, according to Elle, do not add value to the organizations they lead; rather, they have a negative impact on unit climate, erode unit cohesion and deflate esprit de corps. They cause unnecessary organizational stress, emphasize negative values and create an environment of hopelessness (p. 3).

Finally, Schmidt’s quantitative research (see Figure 2) included factor loadings of toxic leadership dimensions to represent to what extent a factor explains a variable in the authors’ factor analysis.

Self-Promotion	
Drastically changes his/her demeanor when his/her supervisor is present	.74
Denies responsibility for mistakes made in his/her unit	.80
Will only offer assistance to people who can help him/her get ahead	.84
Accepts credit for successes that do not belong to him/her	.85
Acts only in the best interest of his/her next promotion	.87
Abusive Supervision	
Ridicules subordinates	.87
Holds subordinates responsible for things outside their job descriptions	.72
Is not considerate about subordinates' commitments outside of work	.74
Speaks poorly about subordinates to other people in the workplace	.82
Publicly belittles subordinates	.91
Reminds subordinates of their past mistakes and failures	.84
Tells subordinates they are incompetent	.79
Unpredictability	
Has explosive outbursts	.83
Allows his/her current mood to define the climate of the workplace	.86
Allows his/her mood to affect his/her vocal tone and volume	.86
Expresses anger at subordinates for unknown reasons	.81
Causes subordinates to try to "read" his/her mood	.78
Affects the emotions of subordinates when impassioned	.69
Varies in his/her degree of approachability	.67
Narcissism	
Has a sense of personal entitlement	.71
Assumes that he/she is destined to enter the highest ranks of my organization	.76
Thinks that he/she is more capable than others	.85
Believes that he/she is an extraordinary person	.82
Thrives on compliments and personal accolades	.75
Authoritarian Leadership	
Controls how subordinates complete their tasks	.72
Invades the privacy of subordinates	.70
Does not permit subordinates to approach goals in new ways	.84
Will ignore ideas that are contrary to his/her own	.81
Is inflexible when it comes to organizational policies, even in special circumstances	.73
Determines all decisions in the unit whether they are important or not	.74

Figure 2. Factor loadings of toxic leadership dimensions

Note: Factor loadings represent how much a factor explains a variable in the authors' factor analysis.

Each harmful leadership style, in short, contains a unique mix of negative leadership behaviors. The next section will identify from this review of the literature several commonalities associated with each of these harmful leadership styles.

Commonalities of harmful leadership styles

This paper approached commonalities among the leadership styles from a holistic perspective, reasoning that whatever is common or driving behavior among these leadership styles must also be common among the humans involved.

Shared leader behaviors are the primary commonality associated with the three harmful leadership styles discussed here. In Figure 3, Pelletier (2010) compiled a matrix to illustrate the commonalities.

	Abusive	Bullying	Toxic
Demeaning/marginalizing, or degrading	X	X	X
Ridiculing/mocking	X	X	X
Social exclusion	X	X	X
Ostracizing/disenfranchising employee			X
Inciting employee to chastise another		X	X
Exhibiting favoritism	X		X
Harassment (including sexual)	X	X	
Emotional volatility	X	X	
Coercion	X		X
Using physical acts of aggression		X	X
Threatening employees' job security		X	X
Forcing people to endure hardships		X	X
Being deceptive/lying	X		X
Blaming others for the leader's mistakes	X	X	X
Taking credit for others' work		X	
Pitting in-group members against out-group members			X
Ignoring comments/ideas			X
Acting disengaged			
Stifling dissent			X
Being rigid			X
Presenting toxic agendas as noble visions			X

Figure 3. Commonalities in selected harmful leadership styles

Because each leadership style discussed here shares multiple negative leader behaviors, it stands to reason that identifying, measuring, minimizing and ultimately improving such negative behavior could help harmful leaders become less destructive.

Leader and follower behavior are likely ingrained and subordinate to internal needs. According to Aasland, et al. (2010), many leaders display both constructive and destructive behaviors, indicating the existence of an inner compass that directs behavior (p. 438). Norton (2016), citing Reed (2004), postulated that leader behavior likely stems from feelings of inferiority, which, when combined with narcissism, creates a potentially disastrous mix of toxic behavior (p. 144).

Toxic leaders, who initially charm, but ultimately manipulate, mistreat and undermine their followers, engage in a wide range of destructive behaviors. According to Lipman-Blumen (2005), toxic leaders engage in one or more of the following behaviors:

Toxic Leader Behavioral Traits
Leaving their followers (and sometimes non-followers) worse off than they found them by deliberately undermining, demeaning, seducing, marginalizing, intimidating, demoralizing, disenfranchising, incapacitating, imprisoning, torturing, terrorizing, or killing them;
Violating the basic human rights of their own supporters and others;
Engaging in corrupt, criminal, and/or other unethical activities;
Deliberately feeding their followers illusions that enhance the leader's power and impair the followers' capacity to act independently, including depicting themselves as the only one who can "save" the followers;
Playing to the basest fears and needs of their followers;
Stifling constructive criticism and teaching supporters (sometimes by threats and authoritarianism) to comply with, rather than to question, the leader's judgment and actions;
Misleading followers through deliberate untruths and misdiagnoses of issues and problems;
Subverting those structures and processes of the system intended to generate truth, justice, and excellence and engaging in criminal acts;
Building totalitarian or narrowly dynastic regimes, including undermining the legal processes for selecting and supporting new leaders;
Failing to nurture other leaders, including their own successors (with the occasional exception of blood kin) or otherwise improperly clinging to power;
Maliciously setting constituents against one another;
Treating their own followers well, but persuading them to hate and/or destroy others;
Identifying scapegoats and inciting others to castigate them;
Structuring the costs of overthrowing them as a trigger for the downfall of the system they lead, thus further endangering followers and non-followers, alike;
Failing to recognize or ignoring and/or promoting incompetence, cronyism, and corruption; and
Behaving incompetently by misdiagnosing problems and failing to implement solutions to recognized problems.

Figure 4. Toxic leader behavioral traits

The above listing covers a wide spectrum of leader negative behaviors, from intentionally malevolent toxic leaders acting with deliberate negative intent, to ineffective leaders notable not for malevolence but for a dearth of positive results. Luckily, there is a commonality in the steadfastness of followers. According to Lipman-Blumen (2005), followers are driven by pragmatic needs. Thus, followers often stay with toxic leaders because working for them fulfills an assortment of practical needs – like shelter, food, and doctor's bills – that appear at the lower end of Maslow's hierarchy (p. 6). Counted among such pragmatic needs, according to Lipman-Blumen, are followers' desires to share in additional attractive benefits and like political access and organizational perks that toxic leaders can provide (p. 6). Incidentally, these pragmatic needs are the one's followers most easily recognize and commonly cited as factors that hinder their escape from toxic leaders (p. 6).

To understand the commonalities in leader behavior associated with harmful leadership styles, it is important to understand the common internal, external, existential and psychological needs of both leader and follower.

Measurements

The reviewed literature included a measurement scale targeting the leadership traits associated with toxic leadership. Schmidt (2008) created a toxic leadership scale that significantly contributed to the prediction of turnover intentions, job satisfaction, and satisfaction with the supervisor even after controlling for more traditional leadership measures (p. 58). Scoring elements of the toxic leadership scale are provided in Figure 5:

Toxic Leadership Scale (scoring elements)	
<i>All items were rated on a 5-point Likert-scale, with answers ranging between 1 = "Strongly Disagree" to 5 = "Strongly Agree."</i>	
<i>All items begin with the phrase "My current supervisor..."</i>	
Self-Promotion	Narcissism
1 Drastically changes his/her demeanor when his/her supervisor is present	1 Has a sense of personal entitlement
2 Will only offer assistance to people who can help him/her get ahead	2 Thinks that he/she is more capable than others
3 Accepts credit for successes that do not belong to him/her	3 Believes that he/she is an extraordinary person
Abusive Supervision	Authoritarian Leadership
1 Holds subordinates responsible for things outside their job descriptions	1 Controls how subordinates complete their tasks
2 Publicly belittles subordinates	2 Does not permit subordinates to approach goals in new ways
3 Reminds subordinates of their past mistakes and failures	3 Determines all decisions in the unit whether they are important or not
Unpredictability	
1 Allows his/her current mood to define the climate of the workplace	
2 Expresses anger at subordinates for unknown reasons	
3 Varies in his/her degree of approachability	
Scales for Mediator and Outcome Variables	
Work Group Cohesion	Work Group Productivity
1 My work group works well together as a team	1 The amount of output of my work group is very high
2 Members of my work group pull together to get the job done	2 The quality of output of my work group is very high
3 Members of my work group really care about each other	3 When high-priority work arises, such as short deadlines, crash programs, and schedule changes, the people in my work group do an outstanding job in handling these situations
4 Members of my work group trust each other	4 My work group's performance in comparison to similar work groups is very high
Commitment	Job Satisfaction
1 I find that my values and the organization's values are very similar	<i>All items begin with the question "How satisfied are you with:"</i>
2 I am proud to tell others that I am part of this organization	1 The chance to help people and improve their welfare through the performance of my job
3 There is not too much to be gained by sticking with this organization until retirement (assuming I could do so if I wanted to) (reverse-coded)	2 My amount of effort compared to the effort of my co-workers
4 Often, I find it difficult to agree with the policies of this organization on important matters relating to its people (reverse-coded)	3 The recognition and pride my family has in the work I do
5 Becoming a part of this organization was definitely not in my best interests	4 The chance to acquire valuable skills in my job that prepares me for future opportunities
Organizational Trust	5 My job as a whole
1 The values of this organization reflect the values of its members	
2 This organization is loyal to its members	
3 This organization is proud of its people	

Figure 5. Toxic leadership scale

Steele (2011) identified that aggregating respondent groups and focusing on overall findings would be the most effective means of measuring leadership (p. 8). Steele also found that over two-thirds of the time, followers never questioned or reported toxic leadership. These two studies indicate that to measure toxic leadership, research must focus on the organization as a whole and include the engagement between follower and leader. Jowers (2015) recommended research employ a random selection process involving women married to members of all branches and authority levels and said male military spouses should be included, as a means of data mining that important segment of the domain.

Elle (2012) stated that command inspection programs are also obvious methods leaders can determine if toxic leadership exists in units under their span of control. Elle, citing Dr.

Edgar Schein, a prominent educator and researcher at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, developed a model of organizational culture and a methodology for shaping that culture (p. 16). Elle described the development process:

Schein's model identified three levels or layers of an organization's culture: artifacts and behaviors espoused norms and values, and underlying assumptions. Artifacts include tangible or verbal elements, including such things as dress and appearance, jargon, and history. Espoused norms and values are not physical in nature; they are the conscious considerations and unwritten rules, which dictate behavior within the organization. Assumptions are the actual values that the culture represents, which are typically so well integrated into the organizational dynamic that they are hard to recognize. (p. 16)

In summary, leadership measurement must focus on the creation of structural activities designed to establish both regularly-scheduled and randomly-scheduled surveys of the whole organization, making certain that all opinions are adequately addressed, particularly both the practitioner of toxic leadership and his or her targets.

Negative impacts

According to Pelletier (2010), citing Mitchell and Ambrose (2007), the consequences of harmful leadership behaviors at the organizational and subordinate level are plentiful. At the organizational level, researchers found increases in workplace deviance by subordinates who report working for abusive supervisors (p. 377). These counterproductive behaviors tend to be attributed to negative reciprocity, that is, the employee's effort to 'balance the scale' of perceived injustice by inflicting harm back onto the company (p. 377). Citing Aquino et al. (2001), Bies and Tripp (1996), Tripp et al. (2002), Pelletier argued that retaliatory behaviors can include sabotaging operations, providing inaccurate or misleading information, and withholding help when a coworker has asked for assistance (p. 377). Pelletier further added, citing Sutton (2007), that the publicizing of toxic behaviors can also negatively affect an organization's bottom line or its ability to attract qualified, ethical candidates (p. 377).

Pelletier (2010) grouped these harmful behaviors into eight dimensions of harmful leaders, as listed in Figure 6.

Dimension	Behavioral characteristics	Organizational examples
Attack on followers' self-esteem	Demeaning/marginalizing, or degrading Ridiculing Mocking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Asking employee, 'Is this the best you can do?' Telling employee the assignment is way over his or her head Telling employees their job is to work, not think
Lack of integrity	Being deceptive Blaming others for leader's mistakes Bending the rules to meet goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Taking credit for someone else's work Going against his or her word Asking employees to bend rules
Abusiveness	Displaying anger Emotional volatility Coercing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Yelling Throwing tantrums Slamming fist
Social exclusion	Excluding individuals from social functions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Intentionally bypassing an employee in a roundtable Failing to invite all work group members to an organizational outing
Divisiveness	Ostracizing employee Inciting employee to chastise another	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Telling an employee that he or she is not a team player Pitting one employee or workgroup against another
Promoting inequity	Exhibiting favoritism Being selective in promotions Favoring members of entourage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Distributing resources to the in-group disproportionately Socializing with only a select few Promoting based on cronyism
Threat to followers' security	Using physical acts of aggression Threatening employees' job security Forcing people to endure hardships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shoving or making threatening gestures Joking about firing an employee Forcing employees to work extremely long hours
Laissez-faire	Ignoring comments/ideas Disengagement Stifling dissent Being rigid	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Failing to respond when employees voice concerns that run counter to leader's objectives Criticizing employees when they speak out Insisting on doing things the old way

Figure 6. Eight dimensions of harmful leadership (pp. 379-382)

Note: Coding conducted by Glaser and Strauss (1967), Ashforth (1994), Miles and Huberman (1994), Hornstein (1996), Tepper (2000), Patton (2002), Lipman-Blumen (2005), Einarsen, et al. (2007)-- all as cited in Pelletier (2010)

Pelletier's (2010) quantitative research endeavored to determine which behaviors are worse than others (p. 85). For Pelletier's findings, see Figure 7.

Item	Mean	SD	Percent endorsing
Publicly ridiculing an employee's work	6.81	.44	98.1
Hanging a 'wall of shame' board to post employee blunders	6.80	.48	96.6
Lying to employees to get his or her way	6.72	.57	94.1
Blaming others for the leader's mistakes	6.70	.53	96.6
Taking credit for an employee's work	6.69	.59	94.1
Asking employee to falsify productivity figures to meet a goal	6.67	.59	93.7
Mocking employees as a display of humor	6.60	.69	90.3
Throwing a tantrum when goals are not met	6.56	.72	89.2
Promising you a promotion if you do something that involves bending a company policy	6.55	.75	88.2
Demoting an employee without giving good reason for the decision	6.54	.73	88.0
Failing to respond to concerns of employees	6.52	.70	90.3
Telling employees to work, not think	6.52	.76	89.1
Lying about the organization's performance	6.51	.73	88.5
Telling an employee that he or she is not a team player	6.36	.85	83.6
Creating contests between two employees where winning involves downplaying the work of others	6.36	.89	82.6
Ignoring employees' comments	6.32	.81	82.9
Greeting all of your coworkers but ignoring you	6.25	.96	79.2
Threatening to terminate a coworker, even if the statement is made in a joking manner	6.16	1.00	78.8
Making false statements about competitors	6.12	.89	75.5
Yelling when a deadline is missed	6.11	1.08	75.8
Making an employee feel as though his or her job is in jeopardy	6.09	.99	78.4
Raising voice when his/her point does not appear to be accepted by employees	5.88	1.04	67.2
Asking one of your coworkers, 'Is this the best you can do?'	5.86	1.19	66.2
Threatening to deny an employee's vacation request if a deadline is missed	5.86	1.21	68.7
Saying to an employee, 'You just don't understand the problem'	5.70	1.08	59.4
Coercing employees to accept his or her ideas	5.65	1.34	61.7
Bending the rules to meet productivity goals	5.62	1.28	58.0
Inviting specific employees to social events and excluding others	5.54	1.34	55.8
Acknowledging others' contributions to a project but not yours	5.53	1.52	60.5
Failing to disclose the reasons behind organizational decisions	5.43	1.04	45.0
Slamming a fist on the table to emphasize a point	5.31	1.27	45.0
Making employees work until the job is done, even if it means they must work all night	5.14	1.44	44.2
Not sticking to the plan of action	5.11	1.07	34.6
Encouraging good performers to put pressure on poor performers	5.09	1.72	47.9
Giving resources to the departments whose functions make the leader look good	4.93	1.45	38.0
Continuing to do things the old way	4.85	.98	26.7
Reprimanding employees when they make mistakes	4.23	1.56	24.2
Inviting a select few to an important meeting	4.20	1.50	19.3

Figure 7. *Weighted means of negative behaviors*

Reed and Bullis (2009) defined the top-fifteen frequently experienced negative behaviors, as listed in Figure 8.

Behavior	Mean	SD
Played favorites	2.42	1.23
Relied on authority	2.32	1.11
Imposed his or her solution	2.23	1.24
Guarded turf against outsiders	2.23	1.25
Lost temper	2.12	1.02
Insisted on one solution	2.02	1.17
Administered policies unfairly	2.00	1.05
Forced acceptance of his or her point of view	1.98	1.19
Would not take no for an answer	1.98	1.23
Treated subordinates in a condescending manner	1.97	1.16
Demanded to get his or her way	1.92	1.16
Boasted, bragged or showed off	1.89	1.13
Criticized subordinates in front of others	1.89	1.09
Delegated work he or she did not want	1.84	1.05
Claimed credit for the work of others	1.77	1.10

Figure 8. Top fifteen frequently experienced negative behaviors

Gallus, et al. (2013) comprehensively described the far-reaching impact of these toxic leadership negative impacts:

Those who experience toxic leadership are more likely to have reduced job satisfaction and organizational commitment and are less likely to engage in organizational citizenship behaviors...the impact of toxic leaders does not stop at the individual. Toxic leadership has even been found to negatively impact the target's personal relationships in the form of increased partner conflict and higher work-life conflict their behaviors negatively impact the uniform personnel with whom they work, from higher turnover intentions and drug and alcohol abuse to decreased job satisfaction (i.e., pay, subordinate, coworker, or supervisor satisfaction), productivity and motivation.

Toxic leaders likely understand that the power differential between superiors and subordinates may limit a target's options for responding to the abusive behavior. Indeed, it is likely that most service members feel they cannot push back against their abusive leaders, as doing so would go against the very values they were taught to uphold (e.g., chain of command, mental toughness). Targets who do confront their abusers may be perceived as insubordinate and pursuing options outside one's chain of command would be perceived by most as a violation of cultural norms.

When unit members have stronger shared perceptions about the toxic behavior of their leader, we predicted that toxic leadership would have a more substantial negative impact on unit civility.

Toxic leadership behavior would have a greater negative effect on job satisfaction and organizational commitment when toxic leadership congruence is high.

Researchers have described the "dark side" of leadership in a number of ways including destructive leadership, abusive supervision, petty tyranny, narcissistic leadership, and authoritarian leadership, among other descriptions.

Recent research has revealed a more comprehensive construct that moves beyond the typical descriptions of abuse, egotism, and power to also include two other key components of this type of leadership: self-promotion and unpredictability. The benefit of using this conceptualization in the current study is that these latter two components (i.e., self-promotion, unpredictability) provide a broader understanding of the various and sometimes subtle destructive behaviors toxic leaders use against their targets. Toxic

leaders, then, are the “authoritarian narcissists who unpredictably engage in political behaviors and authoritarian supervision.”

Targets have been found to have higher stress, greater instances of alcohol abuse, and reduced self-esteem. (pp. 589-590).

Pelletier (2010) found that toxic leaders are also skilled at fostering an ‘us/them’ dichotomy for the purpose of enhancing cronyism (‘us’); in promoting this dichotomy, leaders maliciously set constituents against one another by identifying scapegoats and inciting their followers to castigate them; toxic leaders erode unit cohesion and deflate esprit de corps; and that abusive leadership is related positively to turnover intentions and psychological distress, and related negatively to affective and continuance commitment, job and life satisfaction (p. 377).

Elle (2012) found that toxic leadership styles undermine military values, erode trust, and create a negative organizational climate.

Finally, Gallus, et al. (2013) cited multiple studies that have shown that toxic leadership is negatively related to workgroup cohesion, and perhaps more troubling, positively correlated with target abuse toward peers and interpersonal deviance.

Ways to improve

To improve harmful leadership, a better understanding of each style's dimensions and impacts is necessary. The research discussed here recommended future research and/or speculated on ways to improve harmful leadership styles. The following section represents a survey of recommended future research, followed by a section on recommended ways to improve these harmful leadership styles.

Research-Recommended Future Study

Kathie Pelletier (2010) discussed in detail the many implications of her research, from which one may infer ways to improve harmful leadership:

This study has implications not only for organizations and their leaders but the followers as well. The most obvious implication is that because harmful leadership is related to decreased employee performance, commitment, and job satisfaction (Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Mitchell and Ambrose, 2007; Tepper, 2000), strong efforts should be made to reduce the likelihood of the occurrence of these destructive behaviors. Organizational resources should be dedicated to adequately train and monitor the performance of leaders to ensure that managers and supervisors engage in appropriate, healthy management behaviors. Executive coaches who work with leaders should evaluate the leader’s interactions with subordinates (including leader rhetoric) to ensure procedural and distributive justice applies in all decision making, and that employees are treated with respect. These coaches might also benefit by educating the leader about the nature of harmful behaviors and training leaders to identify when they exhibit these potentially toxic behaviors so they might be aware of when they are approaching the toxic cliff. At the follower level, organizations should ensure safe outlets exist for ‘outing’ leaders who engage in destructive behaviors and rhetoric. A second strategy might include establishing an ethics ombudsperson who, in addition to investigating organizational corruption, could also investigate allegations of leader toxicity.

Identifying and explicating behaviors, which employees feel are detrimental to their personal and occupational well-being, provide important behavioral dimensions for further research in the areas of toxic organizational cultures and destructive leadership. It is the author’s hope that the findings of this exploratory study will be useful for researchers who are interested in developing toxic leadership written narratives, creating video vignettes for use in a lab setting, or supplementing existing behavioral typologies of

harmful leader behaviors. Further, through an understanding of the types of leader behaviors constituents perceive are harmful to their occupational well-being, practitioners can begin devising strategies to prevent toxicity from emerging in the workplace.

Future research should also identify and evaluate empirically the organizational conditions (e.g., the toxic triangle) that may enable the emergence of leader toxicity (Padilla et al., 2007) and the consequences of these destructive behaviors at the individual and organizational levels. Additionally, asking respondents to describe the effects (socio-emotional, psychological, and physical) of these toxic behaviors would add an important piece to the toxic leadership 'puzzle.' The development of a typology of toxic behavior and rhetoric will enable researchers to develop additional measures of leader destructiveness; there are only a few toxic behavior measures to date (Ashforth, 1994; Pelletier, 2009; Tepper, 2000). Consequently, the behavioral constructs identified in these studies provide a good starting point for scale development.

Aryee, et al. (2007) argued that future research must examine the antecedents (contextual and individual) of abusive supervision as well as why and how abusive supervision is related to its outcomes. The general implication of their findings was that a culture of fairness coupled with excellent supervisor interpersonal skills (treatment of subordinates with dignity, respect, and sensitivity) constituted a strategy for promoting a humanized workplace and, ultimately, organizational effectiveness (p. 200). Aryee, et al., added:

Although organizations should implement policies and practices that promote fairness, employees' perceptions of fairness are more readily shaped by their interactions with supervisors. Thus, in addition to promoting a culture of fairness, organizations should train supervisors in interpersonal relationship skills and be made aware that their treatment of subordinates shapes their subordinates' perceptions of interactional justice and subsequent reactions. (p. 200)

Einarsen and Skogstad (2007) offered that future research should attempt to empirically distinguish among the destructive leadership behaviors identified in our framework (e.g., their etiology, antecedents, and consequences).

Johnson, Venus, Lanaj, Mao, and Chang (2012) provided details of their technical proposal for future research:

An obvious direction for future research is to build the nomological (relating to or denoting certain principles, such as laws of nature, that are neither logically necessary nor theoretically explicable but are simply taken as true) net of leader identity by extending it to other behaviors. The interplay between leadership and identity is likely broader than what is currently believed. (p. 1270)

Concerning which, Elle (2012) provided this structural advice:

- Destructive leadership practices must be codified in doctrine to define it, raise awareness and reinforce the culture of intolerance;
- A system that must be changed is the evaluations for all leaders—officer, non-commissioned officer, and civilian. These evaluation systems should be revamped to provide renewed emphasis on quality leadership, Army Values, and performance; emphasizing the opposite of what occurs in toxic leaders; and
- Programs of instruction for all leadership schools should include a block on negative, destructive leadership practices to again, reinforce the Army's culture of intolerance. (p. 21)

The above-recommended topics for future research emphasized that both leaders and followers, as well as the organization as a whole, must be targeted.

Reed and Bullis (2009) made it clear that additional comparative studies across industries or demographics would also be gainful.

Research-recommended solutions

Steele (2011), quoting a former Secretary of the Army, offered four service-related recommendations to improve toxic leadership:

- Augmenting the Army's supervisor-centric leader evaluation system with peer and subordinate input;
- Pursuing both evaluative and developmental approaches to prevent toxic leaders;
- Modifying unit climate assessments so that they focus on components useful to commanders; and
- Focusing on long-term success by recognizing legitimate concerns about subordinate input, applying a top-down approach, reinforcing chain of command responsibilities of providing feedback instead of relying on centralized selection boards, and minimizing the administrative load by leveraging web-based technology. (p. 28)

Steele (2011) recommended follower-level solutions, arguing that followers not copy or emulate their toxic leaders, which sends false-positive feedback to their superior to continue these negative behaviors. Followers must also take a proactive role and realize that inaction is tantamount to supporting a toxic leader's approach. And, followers should examine environmental factors and what kind of a climate and expectations that they are actively or inactively creating (p. 32).

Williams (2005) took the opposite approach, arguing that the appropriate action on the part of the superiors is good leadership itself – leading, mentoring, training and educating in a responsible, honest, non-toxic manner – as the best way to combat of toxic leadership.

As to leader-level solutions, Steele (2011) argued that a simplistic indicator that leaders can look at to see if they are viewed negatively is to observe whether subordinates emulate leader behaviors and approaches (p. 30). The data indicated that constructive leaders would notice a strong majority of their subordinates emulating them, but toxic leaders should see much lower subordinate emulation (p. 30). In this same vein, Box (2012) sided with the leadership approach:

The climate and culture of an organization must be a positive one, and it starts with superior leadership. Key steps in fostering a culture of change begin with senior leaders avoiding aggressive, unethical, and inappropriate behavior. Leaders and subordinates must speak out against toxic and abusive leaders and must know that reprisal will not result. (p. 27)

Steele (2011) also prescribed systems-level solutions, to improving harmful leadership:

The bottom line is that a personal systems approach requires an acknowledgment of the presence and detriment of toxic leadership in the Army. The Navy does this so openly that it prompted a recent editorial in the *Army Times* (June 25, 2011) questioning why the Army and other branches cannot fire their bad commanders openly as the U.S. Navy does. It also requires accurate and consistent assessment, input from subordinates, and a focus beyond what gets done in the short-term, toward a focus on how things get done, and the long-term effects associated with constructive leadership. (p. 28)

Elle (2012) argued for a dual process ground-up, top-down approach that involved all levels of the Army:

- Ensure the topic of toxic leadership is taught at all levels is a commendable way to educate the force about this destructive phenomenon, it is not enough. A real problem with the Army's current approach is that initial efforts appear to be focused on

‘rehabbing’ the toxic leader as opposed to exposing them for what and who they are. In September of 2011, the Army instituted the first of what many believe to be several major initiatives aimed at improving leadership through self-development and limiting the amount of toxic leadership in the force;

- If the Army is serious about eliminating toxic leadership practices, it must look at how to change its culture to one that is completely intolerant of the practice;
- Starts with a strong emphasis on the Army Values coupled with powerful, frequent statements from senior leaders condemning toxic practices;
- This will ensure that Soldiers, officers, and civilians first understand this sort of destructive behavior will not be tolerated. This leadership focus must resonate with all leaders, starting from the Chief of Staff and Sergeant Major of the Army down to the platoon leaders and platoon sergeants. When toxic behaviors are uncovered, the perpetrator should be dealt with swiftly and firmly. Elimination from the service should be the penalty for the most abusive and demeaning forms of this dysfunction, where people are not treated with dignity and respect;
- Use of reinforcing mechanisms such as organizational design, systems and procedures, the design of physical space, and the use of formal; and
- These destructive leadership practices must be codified in doctrine to define it, raise awareness and reinforce the culture of intolerance. Further, a system that must be changed is the evaluations for all leaders—officer, non-commissioned officer, and civilian. These evaluation systems should be revamped to provide renewed emphasis on quality leadership, Army Values, and performance; emphasizing the opposite of what occurs in toxic leaders. Finally, programs of instruction for all leadership schools should include a block on negative, destructive leadership practices to again, reinforce the Army’s culture of intolerance.

Kiazad, Restubog, Zagenczyk, Kiewitz, & Tang (2010) stated, citing Bordia, Restubog, & Tang (2008) and Aryee, et al. (2007), that:

- Practitioners should recognize that highly Machiavellian supervisors are often perceived by their subordinates as abusive and cause negative work-related outcomes, such as reduced subordinate job performance or an increase in workplace deviance. Thus, organizations with flat, decentralized, or team-based organizational structures (where supervisor–subordinate relationships are more common) may want to be cautious when hiring (or promoting) highly Machiavellian employees;
- Organizations should also provide supervisors with training in interpersonal relationship skills and make them aware of the damaging consequences (and legal ramifications) arising from supervisor hostility; and
- The moderating role of organization-based self-esteem (OBSE) suggests that those with high esteem may be less affected by an authoritarian leader’s behavior towards them and therefore less likely to perceive it as abusive. Thus, recruiters could consider OBSE as a desirable criterion for selection decisions. (p. 518)

Tepper (2004) noted that a sense of solidarity might produce stronger levels of attachment to the organization:

When coworkers performed fewer OCBs -- discretionary actions that promote organizational effectiveness -- abused subordinates were more committed to the organization compared to non-abused employees. One interpretation of this finding is that withholding OCB may be a means by which coworkers signal solidarity and alliance with victims of abusive supervision. This sense of solidarity may, in turn, produce stronger levels of attachment to the organization (i.e., higher affective commitment). (p. 463)

Aasland, et al. (2010) stated that their research on bullying in the workplace shows that the latent class cluster (LCC) method displays better construct and predictive validity than the operational classification method (OCM) cluster analysis (p. 449).

Mawritz, et al. (2004) offered that if a work group has a low-hostile climate, the negative effects of abusive supervisor behavior can be neutralized (and even reversed), and the spiral of negative workplace behavior is thwarted (352).

Finally, Schmidt (2014), in his second major study of harmful leadership, integrated deployment status into the harmful leadership equation and found no support for hypothesized interactions caused by deployment status.

Conclusions

Self-promotion (along with unpredictability) seemed present in much of the research reviewed here (Gallus, et al., 2013; Schmidt, 2008; Schmidt, 2014). Schmidt provided several examples of self-promotion:

Examples of Self-Promotion
"...when [leaders] try and make themselves look better there is a huge loss of respect."
"[The leaders did] not worry about troop welfare; they're just worried about themselves getting their good. They're worried about, 'I want to get promoted to captain, I want to make major one day.'"
"...if that individual is concerned with the process of advancement and personal accolade it generally leads to a toxic environment."
"[When] these guys are trying to make flag [admiral], and that's all they're ever driven for, that comes through, their true colors show through."
'He's just chasing that star,' and there's a loss of respect. He's not in it for us; he's in it for him."
"...he presented an image of himself that was untouchable and he would go out of his way constantly to help you if it wouldn't put a bad spin on his name...but if someone got in a shady situation that he needed help out of it, he would be like, 'I don't want anything to do with this, I don't want to have anything to do with any situation that has the possibility of bringing me down with you.'"
"...they tended to take a lot of credit upon themselves in really obvious and blatant manners for achievements of their subordinates."
"There was an issue ... and I thought it was my fault or our fault or shop's fault ... I said 'hey this is our fault I'll take responsibility for that.' But
I went down there and told [my Master Sergeant], and he says 'No you should never do that you should always, you know, deny responsibility pass the buck, pass it up.' ... if his method of putting out the fires is to deny responsibility, that's not bringing me up to be an effective leader at some point. If other Marines are seeing you deny responsibility and passing it up that's - it sort of breaks you down and breaks down your shop and breaks everything down ... thought it was weak of him to say that."
"...the platoon sergeant started to play politics. He would do things, and then he would blame it on the officer, and it was his own choice ... he was saying stuff to the officer that we were doing things [incorrectly] and then he would come out and tell us that the officer wanted us to do something. And so basically he was lying on both sides just so he could get his end and it ended up just destroying the platoon."

Figure 9. Examples of self-promotion

Yet, Schmidt (2014), in a follow-on study to his previous research on the topic, found that relative importance analysis indicated that while the toxic leadership dimensions of unpredictability and abusive supervision were key predictors of job outcomes, self-promotion, including taking credit for other's work, was the dimension with the most predictive power (p. 2). He added that while self-promotion had the highest impact, each dimension studied explained *unique variance among the dependent variables* [emphasis added], meaning all variables should be included in future investigations on the impact of toxic leadership. It would be beneficial to understand more about the impact and nomological net surrounding largely unexplored dimensions, such as authoritarian leadership (p. 54).

Future activity (involving ways to improve harmful leadership) should be focused on identifying harmful leadership environments, primarily by identifying negative leader behavior, follower tell-tales, and organizational and/or work-unit unproductivity often

associated with harmful leadership styles. Future research should be directed at the whole organization and all of its leaders and followers, ways to strengthen the organizational structure itself (evaluations, promotions, and recognition, among others), and training targeting the positive development of harmful leaders. In other words, focus on all leadership styles that are not constructive.

A cautionary word on what must happen, as suggested by Reed and Olson (2010), if attempts to solve a bad leadership situation become untenable or have failed:

While we have an ethical obligation to develop leaders and provide them with an opportunity to learn and grow, at some point the efforts to develop and change the behaviors of toxic leaders need to end and the non-selections, eliminations, and *reliefs for cause* begin. (p 64)

That said, Tavanti (2011), citing Kusy and Holloway (2009), countered that it is not sufficient to merely fire toxic leaders, it is also necessary to identify and modify the systems that support and encourage them.

The research shows that for many of the inherent characteristics (commonalities) of harmful leadership, they are core aspects of human nature (measurements to identify and modify) that are often impossible to change or not expected to change reasonably. That is why Reed and Olsen suggested cutting an organization's losses by relieving the leader for cause early, to both mitigate future damage and set the leadership expectation bar higher for other leaders that follow.

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