

# From Destructive Leadership to Destructive Followership: A Conceptual Model

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*The literature on destructive leadership is relatively early, and the research and theory development addressing destructive leadership is underdeveloped. This article is an attempt to develop a conceptual model for destructive leadership. By integrating the trait theory of leadership, the paper attempts to explain that personal ideology and traits of the leader act as an antecedent to destructive leadership. The paper further proposes that the followers' personality traits act as a moderator of the influence of destructive leadership. In extreme cases, destructive leadership can invite destructive followership. Finally, a theoretical framework is proposed integrating the destructive leadership literature followed by discussion and limitation of the study.*

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## Introduction

Leadership is one of the most over-researched areas of social sciences (Gardner et al., 2020), evolved with a series of 'school of thoughts', the scientific study of which dates early 1930 and onwards (House & Aditya, 1997). Interestingly there is no consensually agreed-upon definition of leadership among scholars. Definitions vary in terms of emphasis on leader abilities, personality traits, influence relationships, cognitive versus emotional orientation, individual versus group orientation and appeal to self-versus collective interests. Traditionally, leadership research has considered leadership as a positive phenomenon and the attributes associated with a leader focused on personality variables all exclusive of 'desirable', 'good' and 'effective' characteristics (Yukl, 2006). There is no escaping the fact that the leadership literature has focused on constructive, successful leadership over the years. Still, the recent stream of research suggests a dark side of a leader too (Schmid et al., 2018).

Contrary to popular belief, some leaders, rather than behaving in stereotypical

‘ideal’ manner, behave in manners that are detrimental to followers and organizations. The potential effect of destructive leadership on individual followers are pretty severe and, in extreme cases, results in job tension, burnout, emotional exhaustion, intention to quit (McCallaghan et al., 2019), reduced family well-being (Hoobler & Brass, 2006), and deviant work behavior (Schmid et al., 2018), to name a few.

The literature on destructive leadership is relatively early, and the research and theory development addressing destructive leadership is underdeveloped (Einarsen et al., 2007). The basis for better understanding is yet to be explained. Research in this area lacks both integration of diverse concepts and review of its consequences, and a theoretical model of destructive leadership explaining the underlying relationship between destructive leadership, its antecedents and its consequences are scarce. Further, followers’ reaction to destructive leadership has been under-explained (Yukl, 2006) and has much been reported as a linear function to leaders’ behavior. This review addresses a few of the above limitations.

### **The Destructive Leadership**

Tepper (2000) documents that leaders may actively and intentionally behave destructively towards subordinates and the organization as a whole. Within the domain of destructive leadership arguably fall several concepts which include, ‘dark side’ of leadership (Conger, 1990), abusive supervisor (Tepper, 2000), derailed

leaders (Shackleton, 1995), psychopaths (Furnham & Taylor, 2004), to name a few.

Einarsen et al. (2007) defined destructive leadership as “the systematic and repeated behavior by a leader, supervisor or manager that violates the legitimate interest of the organization by undermining and sabotaging the organization’s goals, tasks, resources, and effectiveness and/or the motivation, well-being or job satisfaction of subordinates.” According to the definition, all physical and verbal repeated behaviors lead to destructive leadership. This eliminates isolated misbehavior or an outburst of a leader, which could result from any ‘bad day’ or by chance. Only when a leader repeatedly acts aggressively or sustained hostile behavior qualifies a leader to be destructive.

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Little effort has been made to show the relationship between the reasons and consequences of destructive leadership. Further, only a few studies attempted to distinguish between types of followers (e.g., Padilla et al., 2007). The paper proposes a model of destructive leadership, antecedents to personal ideology and personality trait. The study further proposes that the consequences of destructive leadership will depend on the personality trait of followers, such that the followers low on agreeableness, conscientiousness and high on emotional sta-

bility are likely to revolt against destructive leadership by becoming a destructive follower.

### **Nature of Destructive Leadership**

The supervisors' sustained verbal or non-verbal display of hostility can include humiliating in person or public, the threat of job loss, aggressive facial expression and withholding information (Tepper, 2000), to name a few. These acts of destructive leadership can be broadly divided into two categories, those directed towards interpersonal mistreatment and/or those directed towards task-related mistreatment.

### **Interpersonal Mistreatment**

Quality interaction, dignity, and respect at the workplace are essential and core elements to the perception of fair treatment (Bies, 2001). Playing favorites can be regarded as interpersonal mistreatment, and this tendency can divide employees against each other and destructive leaders express anger outwardly towards un-favorites (Williams, 1989). This can result in counter-productive work behaviors. Aggressive supervisors have a low level of tolerance (Prkachin & Silverman, 2002) and have a low ability to manage interpersonal conflicts. In a study conducted by Shaw et al. (2011),

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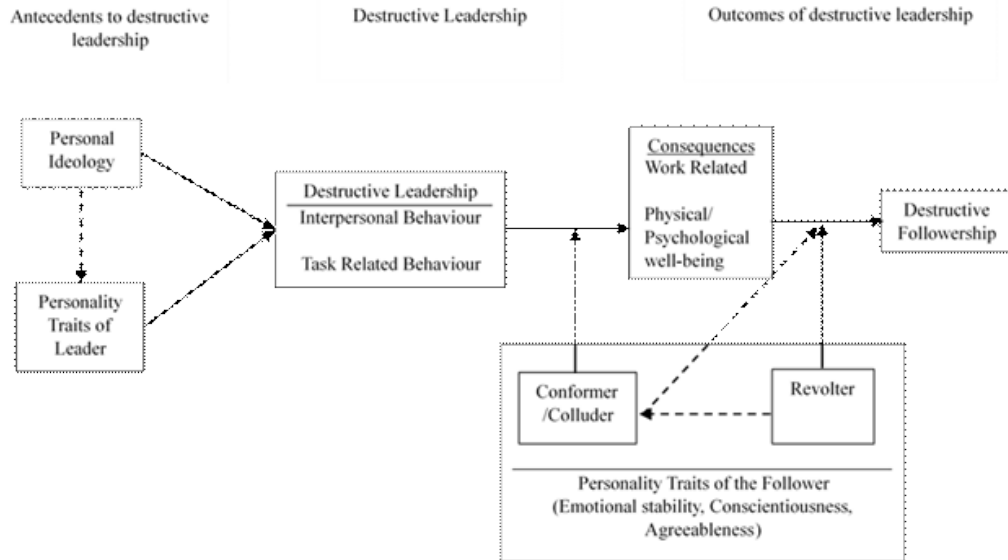
many respondents reported that these supervisors also tend to punish inappropriately for offences and commits a severe breach of trust at some of the other points of time. This can lead to emotional instability among subordinates, and a sense of disassociation from others can develop, which may eventually result in decreased productivity.

### **Task-related Mistreatment**

Making a decision based on inadequate information is a characteristic of destructive leadership. In the study conducted by Shaw et al. (2011), many respondents reported that destructive leaders either do not know what is going in a business unit or do not pay attention to what matters. They don't even seek information and opinions from others which can hamper the productivity and effectiveness of work in progress. Other destructive behaviors include the over-controlling and authoritarian nature of destructive leaders. An attempt to exert control and dominate everything can lead to dissatisfaction among subordinates.

Further, destructive leadership focuses on personal aims; they may not have explicit expectations as it can be a mismatch with organizational goals. When subordinates are not clear of what they are expected of, their productivity may decrease. Thus, interpersonal mistreatment (playing favorites, unmanaged interpersonal conflicts, inappropriate punishing) and task-related mistreatment (over-controlling, not seeking information) are behaviors that reflect destructive leadership.

**Fig. 1 Proposed model of Destructive Leadership**



**Antecedent to Destructive Leadership**

The conditions that predict the occurrence of abusive supervision are not known much (Tepper, 2007) and the reasons as to why supervisors abuse specific subordinates are less explored. Only a few studies (e.g., Hoobler & Brass, 2006) investigated the antecedents of abusive supervision empirically. This section argues that overemphasis on personal ideology, in interaction with the personality trait of the leader, can lead to destructive leadership.

*Personal Ideology:* According to Bass and Steidlmeier (1999), an essential component of destructiveness is the leader’s evil intention. These bad intentions in an individual could have developed over time and can result from adverse life events, a perusal of personal

aims instead of larger social objective and an unrealistic perception of constraints and opportunities.

*Negative Life Events:* Childhood adversity like low socioeconomic status, parental discord, child abuse, parental criminality leads to exploitive adulthood (Katz, 1997). It has also been found that abused children distance themselves from others, and those who face powerlessness in childhood use coercive influence techniques later in their lives to gain power (Goodstadt & Hjelle, 1973). Psychopaths ignore the feelings of others, often exploit them for personal gains and have been associated with un-socialized use of power (Hare, 1993).

*Personal Aim:* Time and again, it has been argued that a few leaders have selfish orientation, and such leaders focus on accomplishment of personal goals and

objectives (e.g., Conger, 1990; Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). As opposed to pursuing organizational objectives and needs of larger social objectives, this kind of leadership involves substituting organizational goals with personal goals. In doing so, such leadership may involve constructing a vision monument to self-interest rather than organizations' actual objective. In pursuit of personal need, individuals can irresponsibly use authority and become extraordinarily punitive, which could be detrimental to subordinates. Such aggression for personalized needs may involve leaders in destructive leadership. The needs of an individual are not a stable disposition (House et al., 1996), and needs that are strong now may disintegrate in future. But, needs are innate capacities that individuals manifest to gain satisfaction from specific experiences or behaviors. For example, an individual in hunger will derive satisfaction from eating. When these needs are met, endorphins are released, giving them pleasurable physiological changes (McClelland, 1975), and they learn that these behaviors satisfy their needs.

*The Sight of (Un)reality.* The drive to achieve very personal aims can result in an inability to assess constraints and opportunities available in the organization realistically. Thus, to pursue the personal vision, such individuals spend an enormous amount of energy without considering other organizational factors. High commitment to personalized objectives blur the viability of other opportunities, and this miscalculation can lead to an inability to detect essential changes. Obtaining necessary resources may involve

using personalized power and coercion and can involve them in destructive leadership. Thus, one can expect adverse life events, focus on personalized aims and objectives, and unrealistic sightedness of opportunity and threat as antecedents to destructive leadership.

*Personality Trait:* A recent review of 20 years of literature on workplace bullying finds that a significant challenge in investigating the bully and bully behavior is the lack of workplace bullying research investigating the perpetrator (Samnani & Singh, 2012). With limited availability on empirically tested research on the trait angle of destructive leadership, two personality traits that seem to act as antecedents to destructive leadership are trait anger and negative affectivity.

*Trait Anger.* Scholars, for long, have linked anger to aggressive behavior (Berkowitz, 1993). Individuals with trait anger have the predisposition to respond to the situation with hostility (Spielberger, 1991). These people are more easily provoked in any given situation, and they tend to perceive situations as frustrating frequently; and do not see any wrong in aggressive behavior (Elliott, 1997).

*Negative Affectivity:* Negative affectivity “reflects pervasive individual differences in negative emotionality and self-concept” and “subsumes a broad range of aversive mood states, including anger, disgust, scorn, guilt, fearfulness, and depression” (Watson & Clark, 1984: 465). Neuroticism and trait anxiety are two personality traits that

represent this broad concept of negative affectivity (Schaubroeck et al., 2007). Neuroticism is a tendency to experience negative emotions and possesses similar behavior, and such people are prone to hold intense anger and antagonistic hostility (Costa et al., 1989). People high on neuroticism can be characterized by cynicism, callousness, and uncooperativeness. Trait anxious people tend to project their fear on others and live in a constant state of physiological arousal. People with negative affectivity trait lack interpersonal sensitivity, have a negative outlook and have irrational beliefs (Hart & Hope, 2004). Persons high on negative affectivity are more prone to conflicts and their mood and behavior 'rubs off' on their subordinates (Brissette & Cohen, 2002).

### **Consequences of Destructive Leadership**

As compared to studies on antecedents of destructive leadership, little research has been carried on the outcomes of bullying and its consequences on the target (Samnani & Singh, 2012). Destructive leadership is threatening, and the intimidating behavior associated with aggression can affect the functioning of employees. The negative consequences can be segregated into work-related outcomes and physical and psychological well-being related consequences.

*Work-related Outcomes:* Over time, destructive leadership and bullying at the workplace can result in low motivation and morale of the target. They can disrupt focus (Ferris et al., 2007), absen-

teeism and reduced job satisfaction (Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007). Burnout had been cited as an expected outcome of workplace aggression and can be defined as a syndrome poised with emotional exhaustion, cynicism and a low sense of professional efficacy (Maslach & Schaufeli, 1993). Low professional efficacy is seen as a decline of experienced competence and achievement in one's work, i.e. decreased sense of personal accomplishment. Workplace trauma can reduce an employee's productivity and is also related to job anxiety and intention to leave (Ferris et al., 2007).

*On Physical & Psychological Well-being:* Bullying at work results in deteriorated mental and physical health (Hoel et al., 2004), mood swings and sleep problems (Hallberg, 2007), psychological distress, helplessness (Ashforth, 1994), perceived work-family conflict (Tepper, 2000). Stress at the job and emotional exhaustion at the workplace have been found to cause an increase in blood pressure (Schaubroeck & Merritt, 1997).

### **Destructive Followership**

With the above few exceptions, the research on interpersonal aggression has not specified the relationship between the target and the aggressor (e.g. supervisor, co-worker) (Hershcovis et al., 2007). It is very likely that if a supervisor mis-

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treats his/her subordinate, the supervisor may face aggression against himself or herself. Inness et al. (2005) found that prolonged abuse by a supervisor at the workplace can lead to supervisor targeted aggression. Further, such victims can violate organizational norms and harm the organization or its employees (Robinson & Bennett, 1995). Counter-productive behaviors can hamper organizational productivity. According to Mitchell and Ambrose (2007), followers may indulge in supervisor-directed deviance, organization-directed deviance and interpersonal deviance. Unsatisfied and irritated followers can gossip about a supervisor or act rudely towards destructive leaders; can harm the organization by stealing or destroying organizational, physical resources; and can hurt co-workers. They argued that such followers adopt a 'tit-for-tat' strategy and retaliate directly against the source of mistreatment and aggression directed against the victim's supervisor (Dupre et al., 2006). In extreme cases, bullying may stress the target to the extent that he or she may commit suicide (Rayner et al., 2002) or can take legal action against the bully.

### **Moderators of the Consequences**

Exposure to abusive supervision may induce resistance, but this effect on the part of subordinate depends on subordinates' personality. One study found that subordinates refused to perform supervisors' requests called dysfunctional resistance when exposed to abusive supervision. In such cases, subordinates high on conscientiousness were more likely to refuse supervisors' directions (Tepper et

al., 2001). Further, individuals have the predisposition to engage in a specific behavior (Shoda & Mischel, 1993). This accounts for why a situation is interpreted differently by a different individual (Skarlicki et al., 1999). Individual differences will likely make people predict workplace aggression differently. An initial reaction to destructive leadership is compliance with bullying, as is found in more than half of the victims (Zapf & Gross, 2001). Destructive leadership and its related concepts are cognitively evaluated, as it is the perception of the target and is subjective to that target. As situation leadership literature suggests, there are different types of employees based on their maturity levels (Ferris et al., 2007). Hence, not all followers will perceive and react to destructive leadership similarly.

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*Colluders/Conformers:* Padilla et al. (2007) used these terms to define two types of susceptible followers. These are either unable to or unwilling to resist abusive leadership. They may have their needs or fear of deviance. *Conformers* are those who comply with destructive leadership out of fear and try to minimize the negative consequences. Kellerman (2004), in a similar typology, calls these followers bystanders who allow bad leadership to happen. Followers like conformers who are low on emotional stability have been the targets of destructive leadership more than those who have

a high level of emotional stability (Coyne et al., 2003). It has been found that after initial compliance with destructive leadership, victims, over time, leave the organization. The audience of such incidences exhibits different reaction by first trying to understand why bullying has happened (Green & Mitchell, 1979). At times, they interpret that the victim invited those actions. And finally, they land up comparing their action, and to avoid bullying, they may alter similar actions in future (Bandura, 1977). To increase predictability in an uncertain world, these followers tend to obey authority (Milgram, 1974) and are characterized by negative self-evaluation, psychological immaturity and unmet basic needs. To meet the need for safety and security, these followers have their self-interest in following destructive leadership. *Colluders* are followers who actively participate in destructive leadership and seek personal gains. They have needs for social order and cohesion. They often imitate higher status individuals and can be characterized by selfishness (Padilla et al., 2007).

These followers do not retaliate because offenders are well-positioned, and the cost associated with any such action will inhibit them. They do not tend to speak against the offender and are passive (Goldberg, 1990), and such followers are very unlikely to retaliate to negative behaviors. Employees low on conscientiousness are vulnerable to bullying (Samnani & Singh, 2012); hence both conformers and colluders will have less tendency to take revenge. Instead, they will change their mental model to accept

destructive leadership, but this will not negate the negative effects of destructive leadership.

*Revolters:* According to negative reciprocity norms (Gouldner, 1960), victims of mistreatment tend to retaliate. The followers of this group may seek revenge and focus on retaliatory behavior once they judge destructive leadership as responsible for having caused harm to them. A frustrating way to retaliate could be resistance and ignoring the offenders' request (Tepper et al., 2001). Individuals low on agreeableness have an antagonistic tendency and express their disagreement more often, confront conflict, and openly challenge workplace bullying. Followers high on conscientiousness have high standards and strive to achieve goals. Hence, they will recognize bullying more, even more, if they judge such destructive leadership as a threat to their performance. Similarly, high emotional stability tends to calm, secure and confident (Robbins et al., 2009), and such traits, to an extent, can balance the emotional instability caused due to destructive leadership and can give emotional strength to oppose destructive leadership proactively.

**Victims of workplace aggression sometimes do not retaliate directly to the source of aggression due to fear of negative consequences**

Destructive leadership increases followers' irritation, which can relate to the level of aggression towards co-workers (Schat et al., 2006). The literature on

misplaced aggression argues that victims of workplace aggression sometimes do not retaliate directly to the source of aggression due to fear of negative consequences; instead, they abuse co-workers and mistreat them and others. The same phenomenon can also be explained using social learning theory (Brown et al., 2005), which states that destructive leadership behaviors are imitated by followers in the form of resistance and workplace bullying by victims. Those who are high on emotional stability, high on conscientiousness and low on agreeableness are most likely to perceive destructive leadership as an extreme social stressor. As a reaction to workplace bullying, they may bully weak and vulnerable victims. Prolonged exposure to bullying by a supervisor and emotionally stable co-workers can influence weak co-workers and prime them to react to destructive leadership and aggression from co-workers; more specifically, they may outburst and become a destructive follower.

## Discussion

The relationship of individuals with work has always been complicated. Apart from a paycheck, far more is received by individuals from work. Some trade-off is always possible to make, but if an individual's health is declining and emotions are exhausting, it is time to consider how much that paycheck costs. On the other hand, organizations invest a lot in their employees in induction and training, developing, maintaining and retaining them in their organization. Employees' performance, career progress, well-being, and salary attainment has been linked

with supervisor-subordinate relationship quality (Scandura & Schriesheim, 1994). However, supervisors who abused the use of power and hostility at the workplace may produce negative outcomes at the workplace, and one such example is destructive leadership. The conditions that predict the occurrence of abusive supervision is far less studied (Tepper, 2007), and this study is a step towards this limitation of destructive leadership literature. The article proposed a model of destructive leadership and conceptualized that the personality traits of both leader and follower can act as antecedents to bullying behavior.

The study makes an essential contribution to the body of research. The paper expanded the content by examining individual personality traits and personal ideology as antecedents to destructive behavior moderated by a situational factor (organizational checks and balances). A potential expansion of literature in terms of types of followers has been examined. A few followers can adopt 'tit-for-tat' strategy and retaliate directly against the source of mistreatment and aggression directed against the victim's supervisor (Dupre et al., 2006) and engage in destructive followership.

## Limitations & Future Research

Destructive leadership, by its definition, consists of supervisor-subordinate mistreatment, which is a downward and vertical form of mistreatment. Workplace bullying can also involve other forms of mistreatment, including upwards vertical bullying and horizontal (between co-

workers) mistreatments. This study attempted to describe when and how a follower can become destructive and revert.

The study exclusively focused on individual-level antecedents and consequences of destructive leadership. This kind of leadership has been found to reduce the chances of team success (Ramsay et al., 2011). It can be expected to have other negative consequences on teams, customers and clients (Padilla et al., 2007) and the organization.

Further, incidents of silent treatment have also been reported (Tepper, 2000) as a tool of destructive leadership. It seems that it is not just an act of commission that can lead to destructive leadership, but the act of omission can also be a part and a tool for destructive behavior. A study on both overt and covert destructive behavior can demonstrate the intensity of consequences in each type of destructive leadership.

This article expands the literature by discussing the importance of trait factors in determining destructive behavior in the workplace. The research developments in the literature of destructive leadership are still in the nascent stage, as discussed earlier. Studies on antecedents, moderators and consequences are still called for.

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