Institute of Coaching
McLean, Affiliate of
Harvard Medical School

IOC RESEARCH DOSE

DIFFERENT SHADES OF DESTRUCTIVE LEADERSHIP

Bottom line consequences of different types of destructive leadership? Abusive leaders (ridiculing, belittling, bullying) generate significant anxiety and negative affect in followers, while exploitative leaders (self-interest, taking credit, manipulating) significantly increase followers' intention to leave now or later in addition to generating negative affect.

Introduction

Over the past 15 years, researchers have explored the nature and

processes of destructive leadership – defined as a process over a period of time where repeated activities, experiences and/or relationships led by supervisors is perceived as hostile and/or obstructive by followers.

One reason for the interest in destructive leadership is that understanding of the "negativity bias" was emerging around that time. We learned that negative information has greater motivational and emotional significance than positive information. Further, negative information of different types is perceived as more dissimilar than positive information of different types.

This led to research interest in exploring different destructive leader behaviors, which might lead to different impacts, by authors Schmid, Pircher Verdorfer, and Peus in Germany. Today's dose features their 2018 article titled *Different shades—different effects? Consequences of different types of destructive leadership.*

(This article is part of a series, available for download, titled: Fifty Shades of Grey: Exploring the Dark Sides of Leadership and Followership.)

The authors explain the rationale for their investigation:

"The 'bad is stronger than good' phenomenon has important implications for the domain of leadership. Not only are destructive leader behaviors likely to have a far stronger impact on followers than constructive behaviors, but the adverse impact of such destructive behaviors is likely to outweigh the benefits gained from positive relationships (e.g., with coworkers or customers). Negative interactions with a leader are likely perceived as more nuanced and more dissimilar from each other than in the case of positive information about the leader.

Types of Destructive Leader Behaviors

Based on the literature, the authors created a four-quadrant construct (Figure 1 in the article) with two dimensions to organize destructive leader behaviors:

1. target, i.e. directed at followers or organizations
2. level of hostility

Let's have a closer look.

What are follower-directed behaviors?

- Abusive supervision - high in hostility: *"The most widely researched construct appears to be abusive supervision, referring to followers' perceptions of the extent to which their supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors (public or private ridicule, shouting, belittling, intimidating, bullying, undermining), excluding physical contact."*

- Exploitative leadership – low in hostility: *"Exploitative leadership targets followers but is not inherently hostile or aggressive. The primary intention is to further the leader's self-interest by exploiting others, for example: taking credit for followers' work or undermining the development of followers to benefit the leader. Exploitative leadership may be overtly friendly toward followers."*

What are organization-directed behaviors?

- Harmful to organization - high in hostility: *"Behaviors that fall into this construct refer to acts of genuine aggressiveness toward the organization. Examples would be sabotage, equipment destruction, or vandalism. Such explicitly hostile behaviors against the organization are likely to be performed covertly and thus remain unseen by others. As such, they are less likely to elicit effects on followers."*

- Harmful to organization - low in hostility: *"Organization-directed destructive leadership include behaviors that violate the established rules and social norms of conduct in an organization. This encompasses a broad variety of behaviors: theft (e.g., stealing small materials such as pens, but also money or time), talking negatively about the organization, using company properties for personal gain, as well as fraud or corruption.*

The authors note that it makes sense that an abusive leader, who shouts and belittles, has a different effect on a follower than a leader who exploits followers, or a leader who violates organizational rules. Their research sets out to test this hypothesis.

Description of Two Research Studies

The first study surveyed 297 participants (46% women, mean age of 26, 95% in for-profit sector) and divided them into three experimental groups –scenarios on abusive leadership, exploitative leadership, and organization-directed. Each group was presented with hypothetical scenarios and asked to rate them using 6-7 items for their assigned category.

The second study was a field study where 167 followers from a variety of occupations and organizations (72% for-profit, 37% female, 67% with university degree, mean age 36) rated their immediate supervisor in terms of the three categories. Participants' perception of abusive supervision and exploitative leadership were assessed with 15-item scales, and organization-directed destructive leadership by the same assessment used in the first study.

In both studies, the authors examined the differential impact of these destructive leader behaviors on two outcomes:

1. impact on followers' emotional reactions – negative affect and anxiety
2. followers' turnover intention (intent to leave), immediately or later at the right moment

Research Findings:

1. Both abusive supervision and exploitative leadership generate significant negative affect for followers.
2. Abusive supervision leads to the strongest overall negative effect for followers, likely due to direct, hostile attacks on individuals.
3. Abusive supervision generates the highest level of anxiety and upset in followers, but not a high intention to leave now or later, perhaps because of the presence of some self-attribution or lack of other job options.
4. Exploitative leadership has the strongest impact on general turnover intention for staff (intent to leave now or later at the right time).

Applications for Coaching

Based on this research, that shows that different kinds of destructive leadership have different impacts on followers, coaches have the

opportunity to:

1. Help clients understand the likely impact of abusive or exploitative behavior of leaders (themselves, bosses, or colleagues) in increasing negative emotions including anxiety, as well as increasing the intent to leave now or later.
2. Help clients consider whether they, their bosses or colleagues behave in ways that may be perceived as abusive or exploitative, and if so, consider how best to encourage a focus on behavioral goals that lead to constructive leadership.

"The most important thing in good leadership is truly caring."

-Dean Smith

The IOC Team

Coaching with Science in Mind

CITATION: Schmid, E. A., Pircher Verdorfer, A., & Peus, C. V. (2018). Different shades—different effects? Consequences of different types of destructive leadership. Frontiers in Psychology, 9. 27-42.

This article is part of a series by Frontiers in Psychology, available for download, titled: Fifty Shades of Grey: Exploring the Dark Sides of Leadership and Followership.