

The Dark Leaders: A Conceptual Study on the Flip Side of Leadership

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Abstract—Leaders aid themselves and others for the righteous things. They build an inspiring vision, set directions and create something new. Recent misuses of power in politics, corporate and religious arena have invigorated interest in dark side of leadership. Though, being in undercurrent in India, the research on the dark side of leadership has not been much pursued. Thus it becomes the need of the hour to explore this side of leadership in Indian context. This paper addresses the conceptual understanding of the destructive leadership focusing more on one of its recent concept of 'Toxic Leadership'. This paper highlights the major traits and the consequences of the dark side of leadership from organizational perspective. As derived from the literature, a toxic leader for one can be perceived a hero by others. This paper also discusses the flip side of destructive leadership showing how destructive behaviours also may have constructive elements for the subordinates and organization as a whole.

Keywords: Leadership, Dark side of leadership, toxic leaders, destructive leadership, organizations.

1. INTRODUCTION

Leadership is about mapping out where one need to go to "triumph" as a team or an organization; and it dynamic, exciting, and inspiring. Since the time of civilization, the leaders have been placed on pedestals in our society, admired and eulogized for their supernatural capacity to goad positive change. This "heroic conceptualization" of leaders, however, fails to consider those cases in which leaders exert deleterious effects on subordinates and organizations accentuating this "dark" side of leadership. There is a general

consensus among scholars that leaders sometimes make decisions that harms followers and long-term organizational performance.

Recent misuses of power in politics, corporate and religious arena have invigorated interest in dark side of leadership. Traditionally, leadership research focuses on factors associated with effective leadership, often with an innate assumption that ineffective leadership simply reflects the absence of leadership. However, research on destructive side of

leadership clearly document that this phenomenon includes a variety of different behaviours that is not limited to the mere absence of effective leadership behavior. ([1]; [3]; [7]; [21]; [39]).

Major research in this area has been conducted abroad and most of the papers found in the military context and despite recent empirical support for the perspective, conceptual work in the area lags behind other theoretical perspectives. Moreover, in India this dark side of leadership has always been in tinge but went unnoticed by the researchers for long. From the era of Ravana or Kansa from mythology to the corporate scam like of Satyam Corporation, or religious swindle of self-styled 'Godman' Spiritual babas India has witnessed the presence of dark leaders in all prominent fields. Thus it becomes indispensable to explore this side of leadership in Indian context.

2. THE "DARK" SIDE OF LEADERSHIP

In the past years, with the exception of a few [32]; [33]; [6]; [39]; [12], a lot of leadership researches have focused on the positive relationships and outcomes of leader actions [41]; [30]. In fact, the early 80s research on the "Romance of Leadership" which is a social constructionist approach, suggests observers often mistakenly assume that leaders possess a herculean ability to control the fates of their respective organizations [31]. Certainly, this research advocates that leaders are not always interested in affecting change for the good of the organization and its members, but rather are sometimes motivated by their own eccentric interests [33]. In explanation, House and Howell [14] proposed the existence of a personalized charismatic leadership orientation, based on personal dominance, authoritarian behavior, self aggrandizement, exploitation of others, and self-interested motivations. After the work of House and Howell's [14], most influential research contributions, a number of researchers have begun to investigate various dysfunctional traits, despicable behavior,

and harmful outcomes associated with destructive leadership styles.

3. DEFINITIONAL ISSUES

All significant human achievement requires leadership to unite people, channel their efforts, and encourage their contribution toward the goals of the collective enterprise. Thus, leadership effectiveness concerns how well a group is able to accomplish its purpose [17]; [13].

But, as Kellerman [20] notes, negative leader behaviors can be placed on a gamut ranging from ineffective/incompetent to unethical/destructive. The unethical/destructive extremity of this continuum can include behaviours such as bullying, manipulation, duress and communication blockage, rather than persuasion, influence and commitment ([5]; [16]; [34]). They use impression-management as their tool to influence people in their favour. The ineffective/incompetent extremity usually involves avoiding passive leadership style [49] and laissez-faire leadership, with less concern for tasks and followers [7]; [49]. Although unethical and evil actions are obviously bad, it is more difficult to establish that grandiosity or egocentrism are wicked. Adrian Furnham [8] categorized leaders into Sad, Bad and Mad leaders. Sad leaders are characterized by ineffective and incompetent leadership; they do not have the skills and abilities to perform the job. Bad leaders are autocratic and toxic, and they lead in a manner that is unethical evil or unjust. In describing mad leaders Furnham says they are those who are anti-social or deviant; folks who are mentally wobbly or psychologically maladjusted. Furthermore, dark side leader personalities are usually associated with positive effects, at least in the short term [12]; [13], and this makes it difficult to equate them clearly with destruction.

Up to now, few studies [4]; [36]; [51] have really explored the dark side of leadership. Even though this concept has been evolving, it is still indistinct. Certainly, authors do not convey an understandable picture of it and label this *dark side* differently: destructive [34], bad [20], evil [52], charismatic [37], narcissist [27], pathological [52], Machiavellian [52], leadership derailment [39], aversive [51], bullying [12], abusive [39] and toxic [25]; [36].

Researchers like Conger and Kanungo [5], describe several destructive behaviors common to narcissistic leaders, such as ignoring reality, overestimating personal capabilities, and disregarding the views of others. Hogan and associates [12]; [13] provide taxonomy of eleven "dark side" personality dimensions, each related to leader behaviors that alienate coworkers, disrupt teams, and undermine group performance.

3.1 Some Concepts of Destructive Leadership In Relation To Subordinates and Organization

Therefore, the concept of destructive leadership should account for destructive behavior aimed at both subordinates

and at the organization. Hence, destructive leadership as defined by Ståle Einarsen, Merethe Schanke Aasl and, Anders Skogstad (2007) is: **The systematic and repeated behavior by a leader, supervisor or manager that violates the legitimate interest of the organization by undermining and/or sabotaging the organization's goals, tasks, resources and effectiveness and/or the motivation, well-being or job satisfaction of subordinates.**

Table 1

Concept	Descriptions	Author and Year
Health Endangering Leaders	subordinates develop poor health and attribute these health problems to the leader's behaviors	Kile (1990)
Petty tyrant	uses his/her power and authority oppressively, capriciously, vindictively against subordinates	Ashforth (1994)
Abusive supervision	Supervisor's hostile, verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact	Hornstein (1996)
Bad Leadership	The want for power, influence, aggressiveness, greed for more money & success. Involves in corruption, lying, cheating & stealing. Priority to self-interest ahead of the organization's interest.	Kellerman (2004)
Toxic Leaders	Behaviors such as corruption, hypocrisy, sabotage and manipulation, as well as other assorted unethical, illegal and criminal acts.	Lipman-Blumen (2005)
Abusive leader	primary objective is the control of others through fear and intimidation	Tepper, Henle, 2011

After the relevant review of literature it has been gathered that Hitler was destructive because he led the German people into external domination and poverty, not because he was a racist who ignored staff feedback while pursuing a personal agenda. However, no one can deny the fact that Hitler was a leader; on the contrary, people can agree with Kellerman [20] that Hitler was a prime example of destructive leadership.

Sankowsky [37] describes how narcissists "abuse power," Conger ([4]) refers to "problematic or even disastrous outcomes," while O'Connor et al. [33] refer to "destructive acts" and note that some charismatic leaders "may be more interested in personal outcomes".

4. TRANSFORMATION FROM BRIGHT TO DARK

While focusing on the 'dark side' of leaders' behavior it becomes utmost important to first understand what prompts the bright leaders become dark. Research has proposed that

dysfunctional behaviors in leaders can be a product of some personality traits, critical situation and organizational influences intermingled that lead to such conditions that permit these behaviours to surface [40]. Some of the contributing factors are:

- 'Dark' personality traits
- Insecurity or over-confidence
- Past experiences
- Unrestrained power
- Organizational culture
- Followers and peers
- Competitive environment.

The mounting curiosity in the 'dark side' of leadership is owing to the findings that the 'dark side' meddle with the effectiveness of a leader in building and maintaining high performing teams and generating soaring bottom line for organizations. The leaders are under immense pressure and stress for a profitable transformation in their team as well as organizations. As noted by researchers - A dynamic environment will increase the effect of stakeholder pressures on corrupt behavior and allow the leaders' dark side to emerge.

As noted earlier in some studies, being in a position of power can affect a leader's ability to consider other perspectives. This, together with an unimpeded personality, could result in him being unaware when his attitude and behavior lead to dysfunctional outcomes to those around him.

A subordinate who works under dark leaders and has frequent exposure to them will easily be able to identify this 'dark side', which can affect their perception of him and lead to an erosion of trust in this person's leadership capabilities ([17]; [12]).

5. TOXIC LEADERSHIP

Toxicity is acutely sniping. Toxic derives from Greek mythology: *toxicus* means "poison". [44]

The first person who linked toxicity with leadership was Dr. Marcia Lynn Whicker who proposed in her research three types of leaders within workplaces: "trustworthy (green light), the transitional (yellow light), and the toxic (red light)". Later, Lipman-Blumen defined [25] toxic leaders as "*individuals, who by dint of their destructive behaviours and dysfunctional personal qualities generate a serious and enduring poisonous effect on the individuals, families, organizations, communities, and even entire societies they lead*".

5.1 Concept of Toxic triangle

Even when leaders holds a good vision (e.g. fulfil the mission of the firm) and want the best for the company, they can bring toxicity within their firm and create an alienated surrounding because of the *toxic way* they lead others.

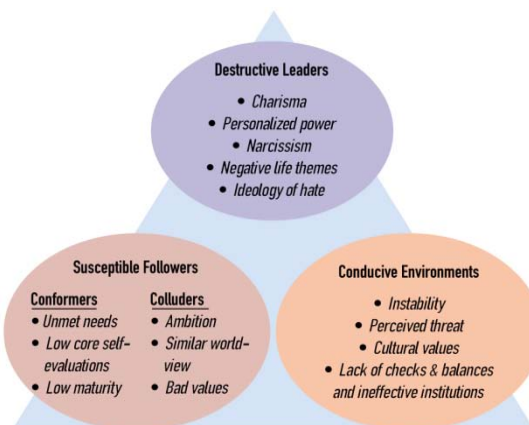


Fig. 1

Source: Padilla, Hogan and Kaiser (2007)

The research work by Padilla, Hogan and Kaiser gave the concept of "toxic triangle" which is based upon three components: "destructive leaders", "susceptible followers" and "conducive environments" [34], there exists a union among them that explains the creation of toxicity. In the first component, the authors pointed out that some characteristics such as charisma and narcissism could lead to toxicity. The second element—susceptible followers—describes that people are expected to follow because of certain psychological needs. The third component refers to some factors in the environments favorable to the creation of toxicity. Interplay of these creates the conditions for the leader's hidden "dark sides" to surface.

5.2 Basic Traits

The basic traits of a toxic leader are generally considered to be insular, intemperate, glib, operationally rigid, callous, inept, discriminatory, corrupt or aggressive [21]. Other traits pointed out by prominent researchers like J. Lipman Blumen, G.E. Reeds, Kellerman, Maccoby [20]; [25]; [26]; [27] are as follows:

- Oppositional behaviour.
- Plays corporate power politics.
- An over competitive attitude Perfectionist attitudes.
- Abuse of the disciplinary system (such as to remove a workplace rival).
- A condescending/glib attitude.
- They are shallow and lack self-confidence.
- Poor self-control and/or restraint.
- Physical and/or psychological bullying.
- Procedural inflexibility.
- Discriminatory attitudes (sexism etc.).
- Causes workplace division instead of harmony.
- Use "divide and rule" tactics on their employees.
- Arrogant, irritable.

6. THE POSITIVITY IN GREY AREA

While a number of studies have highlighted the negative effects that various dark side traits can have, some researchers have pointed out that there are times that these dark side traits can have 'bright side' consequences.[12] [23]. It was established that certain dysfunctional personality styles correlated with leadership and effective leadership behaviours. Some researchers also discussed four possible implications for leader emergence and leadership effectiveness of traits as shown in the Table.2.

Narcissistic individuals are typified by self-absorption, self-serving behaviours and aggression. They maintain exaggerated views of their own self worth, but these behavioral traits sometimes have some positive associations in the leadership process. In an empirical study of 300 military cadets, the best rated leaders were those who were high in egotism and self-esteem, two positive aspects of a narcissistic personality [35]. Study has shown that to condense ego threatening conflicts, narcissistic leaders may adapt their interpersonal interactions for a positive impressions on the people they want to control [24]. Moreover, narcissistic leaders favor aggressive, gallant, and magnanimous actions which will uplift their image as a leader. This in turn acts as an advantage for subordinates and organizational performance.

Machiavellianism: The term coined after Machiavelli's famous book 'the Prince' describing dark traits of individual.[28]. Machiavellianism is used to describe individuals who are manipulative or cunning, with a strong need for power [29]. They tend to have high motivation to lead, and often distinguished as charismatic with willingness to empower their own social capital for the sake of accomplishment of their group goals.

Hubris: hubris are people with excessive pride and self confidence who socially play on impression management. In a leadership position, they are likely to project power, strength, and authority in difficult situations, stimulating confidence among their group and peers. Indeed, hubristic leaders are more confident and committed in their tasks, support innovation [10], and test the limits of their organization's productive capacity.

Social Dominance: The literature reveals that the people who get high scores on ratings of dominance are the most preferred and suited for the authority and leadership positions.[47][48]. They display a strong desire for achievement and control [46], making them attractive to enthusiastic followers.

While discussing the dark side of leadership, a prominent fact could not be ignored that the so-called 'bright side' can also have damaging outcomes for organizations and subordinates when taken to the extreme.

Table 2

Social Desirability	ACTUAL EFFECTS IN SPECIFIC CONTEXT OR SITUATION	
	Bright	Dark
Bright	Socially desirable trait has positive implications for leaders and stakeholders. Example: Conscientious leader displays high ethical standards in pursuing agenda in long-term interest of organization.	Socially desirable trait has negative implications for leaders and stakeholders. Example: Self-confident (high CSE) leader pursues risky course of action built on overly optimistic assumptions.
Dark	Socially undesirable trait has positive implications for leaders and stakeholders. Example: Dominant leader takes control of ambiguous situation, and assumes responsibility for the outcome.	Socially undesirable trait has negative implications for leaders and stakeholders. Example: Narcissistic leader manipulates stock price to coincide with exercise of personal stock options.

Note: CSE = core self-evaluations.

Source: Judge, T.A., Piccolo, R.F. and Kosalka, T. (2009),

To discuss a few, highly **conscientious** leaders tend to be disciplined, cautious, inflexible, highly critical of subordinate performances and analytical, and therefore often resist any change or innovation and avoid taking risks.[12]. This sometimes results in poor organizational performance, missing the apt opportunities and failure to make the best use of organizational resources.

The bright trait of **core self evaluation (CSE)** capture one's fundamental judgments about his potential and functioning in the world, extremely positive self-views can have the same adverse effects associated with narcissism and hubris. [42] Extraverted leaders are bold and quick decision makers so may be less expected to implore input from subordinates and peers. This aggressiveness often alienates the group members who deserve the credit and attention. [12]

The leaders with high degree of **emotional stability and agreeableness** are often lenient in their team handling and performance evaluation. In order to minimize the conflicts in the interest of their peers their decisions are often skewed. [9]

The **Charismatic** leaders, through their excellent skill of public speaking inspire unconditional devotion from followers even in radical situations. It is evident in the literature and the society around that in some bizarre cases, an especially persuasive charismatic leader misuse their interpersonal power for personal gain, and exploits followers who are vulnerable to the leader's manipulative appeal [15].

Instances of such deviant behavior are termed as personalized, 'dark side' of charismatic leadership [4]; [15],

These findings from the literature strike a chord that both 'bright side' and 'dark side' traits can have positive or negative effects on individuals and the organization depending on the situation and the individual's levels of the various traits [19].

7. EFFECTS OF THE DARK LEADERS

Studies of the 'dark side' of personality have found it to be associated with the potential for derailment, poor work performance and the performance of deviant behaviours. [8]; [12]; [37] After some prominent research it was empirically proposed that dark side personality traits can upshot leaders for bad decisions, creating disrespect for himself, alienating their co-workers and also deflating the morale of their teams. Hogan and Hogan [12] found that individuals who score high in each of the dimensions in the Hogan Development Survey (HDS) were extremely self-centered and preferred their own needs before others. This temperament led to others not trusting these individuals.

Researches affirmed that mistreatment is provoked through the "poisoning of enthusiasm, creativity, autonomy, and innovative expression. Toxic leaders disseminate their poison through over-control". Toxic leaders are skilled in using charm, manipulation, and harassment to undermine people [25]. Toxins within leaders are difficult to trace for both leaders and followers. Often, toxins in leaders are related to self-fish, deceiving, domineering, rude, demanding and reckless people who "like to succeed by tearing others down" [21]; [43]

The consequences of toxic leadership are metaphorically defined as "iceberg in the fog". [45]. As in iceberg, by the tip of the leader's behaviour one cannot estimate the destructive consequences it will have on the humans. This explanation of reality demonstrates that often good leaders hide some toxic features which harm themselves too [44].

It has been established through various empirical and conceptual studies that destructive leadership generate physical as well as psychological damage to the vicinity it exists. It affects not only the employees work attitudes and behaviors but gives them a lot of negative psychological reactions. To list a few, abusive supervision is significantly correlated to subordinates anxiety, work stress, emotional exhaustion, depression; low self-esteem, fatigue and also a sense of injustice or emotional labor on leader-follower relations play an intermediary role [39]. In addition, studies on destructive leadership conducted [50] establish that bad leadership that is allied to psychological reactions are pessimistic reactions with common emotional feelings such as: Anger, frustration, self-insight, self-esteem. The symptoms like tiredness, irritation, and painfulness or revenge are related

to Anger. Decreased self esteem and self insight will compel them to doubt their own abilities and low sense of self worth. As a consequence their will be some psychological reactions which include distrustful or sense of threat, voluntary quitting, distress or sense of betrayal, helplessness, a sense of mistreatment and lower motivation.

8. COMMON MYTHS ABOUT TOXIC BEHAVIOR

Myth 1: We would make out if there is someone toxic in our team. No, these people are quite charismatic and funny and adept in masking the toxicity for their advantage. Thus, it's not easy to make out from their overt behaviour.

Myth 2: We can't get rid of these people, they are profit makers. Yes, we can. Leaders low in interpersonal traits in turn affects the performance of the team.

Myth 3: If their behaviour continues bad, subordinates wouldn't accommodate with them. Yes, they will anyhow put-up with bad leaders, because followers are driven by their pragmatic needs and lack courage and insecurity. The coworkers get along because they comply and withdraw rather than confrontations.

Myth 4: Bad leaders can't be dealt individually. Yes, they can't be. Joint efforts from both management and subordinates are required to counter such problem. First systems approach and then individual approach will be effective in handling toxic leaders from contaminating the organization.

9. CONCLUSION

In a way by exploring the dark side of leadership, a more accurate view of leadership may emerge which again may contribute to the general understanding of leadership effectiveness and leadership development. Dark leadership leads to lasting and enduring damages to the organization's culture by contravening the legitimate interests of the organization and decreasing the employee commitment and drive for betterment of goal and duty. Based on extensive results findings, Zapf and Einarsen [7] were of the view that there is great support to the notion that negative events in social interactions have a stronger effect than do positive events. Hence, understanding and preventing destructive leadership may be as important or even more important, than understanding and enhancing positive aspects of leadership.

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