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Psychological Profile: Characteristics of Abusive Leaders Abusive leaders often exhibit a unique psychological profile that distinguishes them from their more benevolent counterparts. Research indicates that these individuals tend to possess narcissistic traits, seeking constant admiration and a sense of entitlement. They display low empathy, manipulating and exploiting others to achieve their own goals. Additionally, traits such as impulsivity, a need for control, and a lack of emotional regulation are often characteristic of these leaders. Furthermore, many abusive and authoritarian leaders exhibit traits associated with the Dark Triad - a trio of personality traits comprising narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. These traits collectively facilitate manipulative and exploitative behaviours, allowing these leaders to exert control over others without regard for their well-being. Let's see some characteristics of the Dark Triad. Narcissism: Self-Promotion and Confidence. Narcissism is a key trait in the Dark Triad and is characterized by an inflated sense of self-importance and a desire for admiration. Individuals with high narcissistic tendencies often excel in self-promotion, confidently presenting their skills and accomplishments. Machiavellianism: Manipulation and Strategy. Machiavellianism, another trait in the Dark Triad, emphasizes manipulative and strategic behaviour to achieve personal goals. Individuals with Machiavellian tendencies are adept at navigating office politics, forming alliances, and making calculated moves to advance their careers. Psychopathy: Charm and Charisma. Psychopathy, the third trait in the Dark Triad, involves traits like superficial charm, lack of empathy, and a tendency to manipulate others for personal gain. While extreme psychopathy is detrimental, moderate levels of psychopathic traits can manifest as charisma and charm. Such individuals might come across as charismatic leaders who can inspire and influence their teams. Risk-Taking and Confidence in Uncertainty. The Dark Triad traits are often associated with higher risk tolerance and a willingness to venture into uncertain territory. Individuals with Dark Triad traits might be more inclined to step up and take charge in situations that others might shy away from. Short-Term Success Focus. Individuals with Dark Triad traits often exhibit a focus on short-term gains and immediate rewards. This can translate to a strong drive to achieve rapid success and a willingness to do whatever it takes to climb the corporate ladder swiftly. Behaviours of Abusive Leaders Abusive leaders demonstrate a range of detrimental behaviours that poison the work environment and hinder organizational success. Such leaders are known for their verbal and nonverbal aggression, belittling, and demeaning subordinates. They often set unrealistic expectations and employ fear tactics to maintain control. Micromanagement and a refusal to accept dissent are common, stifling creativity and autonomy. Furthermore, these leaders frequently engage in favoritism, pitting team members against each other to solidify their power. They may also manipulate performance evaluations to maintain a sense of dependency among employees. These behaviours not only create a toxic workplace but also erode trust and collaboration within teams. Effects of Abusive Leadership on Individuals and the Organisation The effects of abusive leadership reverberate through the workplace, and acceptable behaviour. Communicate boundaries respectfully to your leader when necessary. Focus on Self-Care Engage in activities that promote your physical and mental well-being. Regular exercise, meditation, hobbies, and spending time with loved ones can help you manage stress and maintain a positive outlook. Develop a Supportive Network Cultivate relationships with colleagues who share similar experiences. A supportive network can provide emotional relief and a platform for sharing strategies to cope with the situation. Consider Escalation: If the abusive behaviour persists and your efforts to address it internally prove ineffective, you may need to escalate the matter to higher management, human resources, or an external regulatory body if applicable. Seek Legal Advice: If the situation becomes unbearable and potentially legally actionable, consult with a legal professional to understand your rights and options. Explore New Opportunities: If the situation becomes untenable and you are unable to find a resolution, consider exploring new job opportunities where you can work in a healthier work environment. Remember, protecting yourself in an abusive work environment is essential for your mental and emotional well-being. Each individual's circumstances are unique, so it's important to assess the situation and choose the strategies that best fit your needs and goals. Ultimately, your well-being should be a priority, and seeking help when needed is a sign of strength, not weakness. #LeadershipInsights #ManagementStrategies #ProfessionalDevelopment #PositiveLeadership #EmployeeEngagement #DarkTriadTraits #WorkplaceEthics #LeadershipImpact #WorkplaceMentalHealth #EffectiveLeadership Source: Thomas Andre Fure/ShutterstockOver the past few years, our culture has seemed to arrive at a reckoning. Abusive behavior from leaders is far less tolerated than it once was, and those that have used their power to create hostile environments and harm their colleagues, co-workers, and employees are increasingly facing the consequences of their actions. The waves are being felt across multiple institutions, including business, academia, and the arts. This paradigm shift is being met not so much with surprise, but with a feeling of relief that it has finally arrived. Still, a huge question looms. If these destructive leaders are so blatantly harmful, how do they manage to achieve and hold onto their level of power for so long? The root of the problem is the behavioral red lines that many leaders demonstrate, along with the depths they will go to in order to ensnare themselves, avoid consequences, and cover up their negative impact. The Dark TriadResearchers continue to expand their understanding of destructive leadership and the impact it has on humans and organizations. A more recently observed phenomenon is The Dark Triad: the combination of Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy. Leaders who have all three of these characteristics use their character flaws to engage followers. After all, being an openly flawed person makes a leader appear vulnerable and self-aware, which is likely to appeal to others who have flaws themselves. However, while engaging and charming in short encounters, these leaders cannot sustain positive interactions under stress. That's where the destructive tendencies come in, doing harm to those around them. Still, though, these leaders do sustain power, which only means that their stress continues, as do the outbursts and destructive behavior. When it comes to the Dark Triad, it's important to understand the differences between the three core traits. Despite the similarities, each predicts unique outcomes. And while the dark triad personality traits may exist independently, they tend to be correlated behaviors MachiavellianismA Machiavellian leader usually displays a lack of affect in interpersonal relationships, a lack of concern with conventional morality, gross psychopathology, and low ideological commitment. They believe that others are gullible and, combined with a lack of concern for others, this leads to manipulation. In the political world, Russian President Vladimir Putin seems to be a true, modern Machiavellian. In 2013, as the U.S. prepared to intervene in Syria, Putin took to the pages of The New York Times and urged caution. As the Guardian pointed out, Putins op-ed was a rebuke of Americas morally guided foreign policy initiatives, a move that showed he wasn't so much concerned with morality as he was in achieving his desired outcome. And it worked, with pundits and politicians who dislike Putin underrating their heads in agreement. In getting that outcome, he could manipulate his followers into believing he had the strength and resolve to solve any problem. NarcissismThis trait is all too common in leadership personalities is that those who cast aspersions their way are often viewed with skepticism. It took years for the open secret of Rudins behavior to be taken seriously by the press, and not everyone has access to media contacts who can break the dam. It's imperative that organizations take steps now to ensure that there are clear channels for those suffering under psychopathic leadership to pursue help, gain internal support, and make a career change if they so desire. A huge part of this process is for boards and the senior decision-makers who are putting these leaders into power to understand that they may be producing unsustainable short-term business outcomes, due to the human cost surrounding them. Human resources professionals and other leaders can get educated on the signs/indicators of corporate psychopathy that are outlined here. Be prepared to act, regardless of whether or not you currently see any signs of corporate psychopathy. After all, so many of the examples Ive provided have remained hidden, and that may be the case right now. LinkedIn and Facebook image: Thomas Andre Fure/Shutterstock INTRODUCTION Toxic leadership is a type of leadership that is destructive to members of a team, an organization, and society at large. It is ubiquitous and has been for centuries. Yet, within the larger body of the leadership literature, toxic leadership accounts for an alarmingly small percentage of the leadership research. There are dozens of widely known and well documented cases of the devastating consequences of toxic leadership. So, why is there such little scientific interest in conceptualizing and operationalizing toxic leadership? It seems, at an outset, that toxic leaders are found everywhere. Indeed, it appears to occur in every industry and at every level of government (Lipman-Bluman, 2005). As Wright (2015) points out from a military context, there are almost a countless number of historical examples whereby leaders place an emphasis on service and sacrifice above anything else resulting in the destruction of follower morale. More disturbingly, nobody is immune to toxic leadership. This paper endeavors to examine toxic leadership. It starts the journey by exploring the multi-faceted elements of toxic leadership which makes this paper compelling in the broader scholarly discourse on leadership. The paper then reviews the behaviors, characteristics, and consequences of toxic leadership, which is essential to the development of a philosophical, pragmatic, and comprehensive understanding of toxic leadership. This in and of itself, as the paper will demonstrate, is foundational to more organizations and individuals saying no to toxic leadership. Students of leadership should care about this research because virtually everyone has been exposed to toxic leadership at some point in their lives whether in a workplace, family setting, or even within a community context and volunteer activities. Toxic leadership impacts all of us, which is why we so desperately need to understand it. The primary purpose of this paper is to examine what healthy and toxic leadership look like, drawing an important comparison and juxtaposition between the two for current and aspiring leaders to examine. This comparison becomes important because, while there are still many scholars pointing to personality as the primary driving force behind leader behavior, while Itzkovich, Heilbrunn, and Alekscis (2020), rightly assert that there are many other complex variables that can contribute to leader behavior. Thus, the objective of this paper is to develop a working definition of toxic leadership based on the existing research surrounding both healthy and toxic leadership. From a structural point of view, the paper will first demonstrate what healthy leadership looks like both in theory and practice. Second, the paper will review some of the behaviors, characteristics, and consequences of toxic leadership. Third, the paper will present a working definition of toxic leadership from which future research can be built from. Finally, the paper will present concluding thoughts and a call to action for further scientific study. HEALTHY LEADERSHIP How leadership is defined is essential to the discourse surrounding toxic leadership. As Stogdill argues in his study, there are almost as many definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the subject (Brookes, 2014, p. 202). Yet, there are a few definitions that have permeated academic and popular press resources consistently throughout the years. Previous research and publications by the authors of this paper have explored dozens of definitions of leadership, accounting for deep research into each of the widely accepted styles of leadership. From this work, the authors arrived at the Winston and Patterson (2006) definition of leadership as follows: An intentional means by which a leader influences a group of people in an organization to a widely understood future state that is different from the present one. (Gandolfi & Stone, 2018). The word intentional is a critical element of this definition. Gandolfi and Stone (2017) discuss the intentionality required to practice leadership, as well as to cultivate and develop leadership skills. Two important points are noteworthy: One, while this paper is not about leadership styles per se, every leadership style does in fact require intentionality (Gandolfi & Stone, 2017). Second, it cannot be assumed that all intentional efforts to build and grow leadership skills is done so for the mutual benefit of the leader and the follower, or even if this is the intent that it will remain that way indefinitely. The notion of organizational values discussed previously (Itzkovich, Heilbrunn, & Alekscis, 2020) can influence the intentionality and ultimately the output of a leader. Influence is one of the most important elements of the stated leadership definition. Good, or healthy leadership is influence driven by motivation, inspiration, and prioritization, which can engender a sense of calm and safety (McDermott, Kidney, & Flood, 2013). Whether it is top down, matrix, or a flat organizational structure, leaders must be able to influence others. Gandolfi (2016) asserts that the combination of five components render a potent working definition of leadership - (i) there must be one or more leaders, (ii) leadership must have followers, (iii) it must be action oriented with a (iv) legitimate course of action, and there must be (v) goals and objectives. Several important points are made here. One, there is an inherent leader/ follower dynamic. Two, goals and action steps become very important in that the leaders and followers must work together to achieve the goals set out by the leader(s). The question then arises as to what end? Are followers giving their time joyfully or forcefully? For instance, when organizational advocates joyfully give their time and talents to the organizational mission, they in turn enhance the value of the organization and the all-important means by which the future organizational state gets achieved. Achieving the desired state begins to bring about difficult questions for the organization and its leadership. The idea of joy and satisfaction in the workplace is accounts for the Winston and Patterson (2006) definition of leadership. Identifying the toxic nature of leadership is an important first step in differentiating between healthy and toxic leadership. Boddy and Croft (2015), put it bluntly by stating that toxic leaders employ and demonstrate dysfunctional characteristics (p. 46). While this is a true statement, it is important to go deeper for the purposes of understanding and clarification. Dysfunctional characteristics can mean different things to different people, can be applied across various contexts, and most certainly are observed through different lenses that must account for industry type, geography, and local customs and cultures. This is not to say that toxic leadership should be excused in some cultures or industries and not in others. Rather, a more finite examination of toxic behaviors and toxic leader characteristics can help the academic and business communities reach consensus on what toxic leadership is, how to identify it, and how to see the gaps between toxic and healthy leadership. Practically speaking, it is essential to identify these gaps because, in stressful work environments, followers attention can be diverted from their work and focus on where the stress is coming from, thus reducing their own performance and the organizations overall effectiveness (Srikanth, 2020). Therefore, a review of how toxic behaviors and traits impact both the followers and organizational mission is of equal importance. According to Webster, Brough, and Daly (2014), there are key leader behaviors associated with toxic leadership which include, intimidating, bullying, manipulating (Machiavellianism), micromanaging, arrogance (narcissism) and engaging in abusive or unethical behaviour (p. 346). These are deeply intentional behaviors that are designed to produce the precise results that one person or group of individuals desire for an organization whether it be in the short-term or long-term. Left unchecked, these behaviors can be woven into the very fabric of the organization and once this occurs, it becomes extremely difficult to shift the organizational culture back to a healthy state. Some of the additional behaviors of toxic leadership as postulated by the authors of this paper are the following: The behaviors and characteristics of toxic leadership are not excluded from the grand vision toward achieving the mission, and not just a cog in the corporate wheel (Winston & Patterson, 2006). This is important because it places equal emphasis on both relationship and purpose between the leader(s) and the follower(s). When this type of relationship reaches equilibrium, it generates trust, commitment, and longevity. The reason is that followers want to be heard. Gandolfi & Stone (2018) assert that placing the needs of the follower first is arguably the most unselfish posture that leaders can take toward their followers. This is significant in creating organizational humility and essential in discerning if the leader/follower relationships are positively influential or coercive. In his seminal work, Collins (2001) defines five levels of leadership, where the Level 5 leader blends extreme personal humility with intense professional will (p. 21). There is a clear balance here - results versus humility. The two can live in harmony, but it is not an easy line to walk for any leader. Driven leaders can easily forget about followers, and humility in the wrong context or without the proper understanding of what humility is can be perceived as weakness. Effective leadership is not linear, nor is it a one-way form of communication or event; rather it is highly interactive (Northouse, 2007). Interaction is critical, and it comes in many forms, though it must be driven from the top. If there is no incentive to be interactive, it simply will not happen. This encompasses another key element of the authors of this papers definition of leadership, how the leader moves the organization toward the widely understood desired future state. This becomes the critical moment for the leader, the follower, and the organization. It is the proverbial fork in the road where healthy leadership and toxic leadership start to noticeably deviate from one another and determine the all-important means by which the future organizational state gets achieved. Achieving the desired state begins to bring about difficult questions for the organization and its leadership. The idea of joy and satisfaction in the workplace is accounts for the Winston and Patterson (2006) definition of leadership. 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Practically speaking, it is essential to identify these gaps because, in stressful work environments, followers attention can be diverted from their work and focus on where the stress is coming from, thus reducing their own performance and the organizations overall effectiveness (Srikanth, 2020). Therefore, a review of how toxic behaviors and traits impact both the followers and organizational mission is of equal importance. According to Webster, Brough, and Daly (2014), there are key leader behaviors associated with toxic leadership which include, intimidating, bullying, manipulating (Machiavellianism), micromanaging, arrogance (narcissism) and engaging in abusive or unethical behaviour (p. 346). These are deeply intentional behaviors that are designed to produce the precise results that one person or group of individuals desire for an organization whether it be in the short-term or long-term. 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