

The Causes and Consequences of Bad Leadership

Jan Schilling¹ and Birgit Schyns²

¹Department of Economics and Social Sciences: Work and Organizational Psychology, University of Applied Administrative Sciences Hanover, Germany, ²Durham University Business School, Durham, UK

This topical issue of the *Zeitschrift für Psychologie* focuses on negative forms of leadership, that is, destructive leadership in its different forms, rather than re-emphasizing the still more common focus on positive leadership (Schilling, 2009). Here, the quest is not to find the holy grail of what makes a leader successful and how this contributes to organizational success but rather the opposite: to prevent the damage bad leadership and destructive leaders can do to followers and organizations. In recent years, a quickly growing stream of research concerning the dark side of leadership has emerged (e.g., Bligh, Kohles, Pearce, Justin, & Stovall, 2007; Einarsen, Aasland, & Skogstad, 2007; Krasikova, Green, & LeBreton, 2013; Martinko, Harvey, Brees, & Mackey, 2013; Tepper, 2000, 2007), which underpins the importance of the topic. While different forms of destructive leadership (e.g., abusive supervision, petty tyranny, negative leadership, aversive leadership) can be distinguished, they all have been shown to negatively impact followers and organizations (e.g., Schyns & Schilling, 2013). However, so far, we know relatively little about the antecedents of destructive leadership or how its effect compares to constructive leadership. Hence, the aim of this issue is to deepen our understanding of the phenomenon by paying special attention to its antecedents and the comparison of constructive and destructive forms of leadership. In doing so, the papers compiled here add to the discussion about how to prevent destructive leadership.

This topical issue starts off with a review paper by Pundt (2014) who outlines the theory of different ways in which charismatic leadership attempts can lead to abusive leadership perception and/or abusive leadership behavior. The author differentiates between failed charismatic attempts from the leader's side (overdramatized charisma, overambitious charisma) and failed attempts due to followers' reactions (refused charisma, disappointed charisma, and abandoned charisma). He argues that overdramatized

charisma and overambitious charisma can lead to abusive leadership perceptions, while overambitious charisma, refused charisma, disappointed charisma, and abandoned charisma can lead to abusive leadership behaviors. The paper acknowledges the process character of leadership by incorporating followers' reactions to leadership behavior and appreciating that this reaction triggers another reaction in the leader, potentially altering leadership perceptions or behaviors.

Similarly, May, Wesche, Heinitz, and Kerschreiter (2014) take an integrative view of negative leadership by looking at the interaction process between leaders and followers in coping with negative leadership. They argue that destructive leader behavior as perceived by followers leads to different types of follower coping, namely approach-oriented coping (problem-focused or emotion-focused) and avoidance-oriented coping (problem-focused or emotion-focused). Depending on how these coping strategies are perceived by the leader, their destructive leadership behavior is either enforced (due to perceptions of the follower coping behavior as either aggressive/retaliatory or submissive) or potentially altered into a more constructive leadership approach (due to perceptions of the follower coping behavior as constructive).

Keller Hansbrough and Jones (2014) focus on the leaders' part in abusive supervision by considering leader narcissism as an antecedent of abusive leadership. They develop a model that explains how narcissistic leaders' cognitive processes contribute to abusive supervision, insofar as narcissistic leaders' cognitive processes lead them to justify their abusive behavior. Specifically, the authors argue that narcissistic leaders' implicit leadership theories comprise elements of tyranny, that is, for them, tyrannical leadership characterizes typical leaders, including themselves (thus, their abusive behavior is normal for leaders). In addition, Keller Hansbrough and Jones argue that narcissistic

leaders also hold negative implicit followership theories, such as incompetence and insubordination, leading them to justify their abusive behavior as necessary to achieve the bottom line. This negative perspective is increased by narcissistic leaders' interpretation of their followers' facial expressions. Their negative implicit followership theories also lead them to interpret followers' behavior in a negative way, again leading to more abusive behaviors. While followers do not actively contribute to the process of abusive supervision in this model, the interpretation of their behavior is part of the process that leads narcissistic leaders to exhibit abusive leadership.

Two empirical contributions to this topical issue focus on comparing effects of constructive and destructive leadership. Skogstad et al. (2014) compare outcomes of constructive and destructive leadership behavior for subordinates' job satisfaction. The authors' definition of destructive leadership includes laissez-faire as well as tyrannical leadership. They report on two longitudinal studies, one spanning 6 months, the other spanning 2 years. Interestingly, they found that while tyrannical leadership predicted job satisfaction after 6 months, laissez-faire was the sole predictor of job satisfaction after 2 years. Constructive leadership did not contribute to job satisfaction in either study when destructive leadership forms were taken into account. The authors conclude that "bad is stronger than good" (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001), and that laissez-faire is potentially particularly bad in the longer term.

Yan, Bligh, and Kohles (2014) investigate the role of leaders in learning from workplace mistakes. The study comprises the full range model of leadership, starting with the constructive leadership forms of authentic leadership and transformational leadership as well as transactional leadership. Similar to Aasland et al. (2014), Bligh, Yan, and Kohles consider laissez-faire leadership a form of destructive leadership and place aversive leadership as the most negative form of leadership at the end of the continuum. In line with the authors' assumptions, their results show that constructive forms of leadership (authentic and transformational leadership) enhance follower learning from errors, while destructive forms of leadership (laissez-faire and aversive leadership) are detrimental to such learning. Interestingly, and partly in line with Aasland et al.'s findings, laissez-faire turned out to be the most negative predictor in error learning.

The articles in this issue highlight that destructive forms of leadership emerge in an interaction between situations, leaders, and followers (see also Padilla, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2007). Leaders may try to act in a particular way and their followers' reaction can lead them to either change or intensify their behavior. It has also become clear that certain types of leaders might be more prone to reacting to followers in a way that confirms their negative view of followers and thus enhances negative behavioral tendencies.

One central idea that evolves from reading the different contributions to this issue appears to be that we need to better understand the *dynamics* and the *subjectivity* of destructive leadership: How can charismatic behavior of leaders (which is often considered the gold standard for leaders)

lead to the emergence of destructive leadership? How does followers' coping with destructive leadership in turn impact on their leader's behavior over time, and how do cognitive processes and particularly implicit leadership theories bias the justification of the leaders' behavior as well as their interpretation of follower behavior?

The other conclusion emerging from this topical issue is that we need to pay closer attention to the specific *form* of negative leadership behavior. In general, comparing destructive and constructive leadership forms shows that bad is stronger than good but this might be different for different lengths of time lag effects. More specifically, it has been shown that doing nothing as a leader (as compared to acting destructively) can also be a very bad thing.

Overall, the papers in this topical issue especially help us to understand more about processes involved in the emergence of destructive leadership.

References

- Baumeister, R. F., Bratslavsky, E., Finkenauer, C., & Vohs, K. D. (2001). Bad is stronger than good. *Review of General Psychology*, 5, 323–370.
- Bligh, M., Kohles, J. C., Pearce, C. L., Justin, J. E., & Stovall, J. F. (2007). When the romance is over: Follower perspectives of aversive leadership. *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, 56, 528–557.
- Einarsen, S., Aasland, M. S., & Skogstad, A. (2007). Destructive leadership behaviour: A definition and conceptual model. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 18, 207–216.
- Keller Hansbrough, T., & Jones, G. E. (2014). Inside the minds of narcissists: How narcissistic leaders' cognitive processes contribute to abusive supervision. *Zeitschrift für Psychologie*, 222, 214–220. doi: 10.1027/2151-2604/a000188
- Krasikova, D., Green, S., & LeBreton, J. M. (2013). Refining and extending our understanding of destructive leadership. *Journal of Management*, 39, 1308–1338.
- Martinko, M. J., Harvey, P., Brees, J. R., & Mackey, J. (2013). A review of abusive supervision research. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 34, S120–S137.
- May, D., Wesche, J. S., Heinitz, K., & Kerschreiter, R. (2014). Coping with destructive leadership: An integrated theoretical framework for the interaction process between leaders and followers. *Zeitschrift für Psychologie*, 222, 203–213. doi: 10.1027/2151-2604/a000187
- Padilla, A., Hogan, R., & Kaiser, R. B. (2007). The toxic triangle: Destructive leaders, susceptible followers, and conducive environments. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 18, 176–194.
- Pundt, A. (2014). A multiple pathway model linking charismatic leadership attempts and abusive supervision. *Zeitschrift für Psychologie*, 222, 190–202. doi: 10.1027/2151-2604/a000186
- Schilling, J. (2009). From ineffectiveness to destruction: A qualitative study on the meaning of negative leadership. *Leadership*, 5, 102–128.
- Schyns, B., & Schilling, J. (2013). How bad are the effects of bad leaders? A meta-analysis of destructive leadership and its outcomes. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 24, 138–158.
- Skogstad, A., Aasland, M. S., Nielsen, M. B., Hetland, J., Matthiesen, S. B., & Einarsen, S. (2014). The relative effects of constructive, laissez-faire and tyrannical leadership on subordinate job satisfaction: Results from two prospective and representative studies. *Zeitschrift für Psychologie*, 222, 221–232. doi: 10.1027/2151-2604/a000189

- Tepper, B. J. (2000). Consequences of abusive supervision. *Academy of Management Journal*, 43, 178–190.
- Tepper, B. J. (2007). Abusive supervision in work organizations: Review synthesis, and research agenda. *Journal of Management*, 33, 261–289.
- Yan, Q., Bligh, M. C., & Kohles, J. C. (2014). Absence makes the errors go longer: How leaders inhibit learning from errors. *Zeitschrift für Psychologie*, 222, 233–245. doi: 10.1027/2151-2604/a000190

Jan Schilling

Department of Economics and Social Sciences: Work and Organizational Psychology
University of Applied Administrative Sciences Hanover
Wielandstr. 8
30169 Hanover
Germany
Tel. +49 511 1609-456
Fax +49 511 15537
E-mail jan.schilling@nds-sti.de
