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## **The Toxic Triangle: A Qualitative Study of Destructive Leadership in Public Higher Education Institutions**

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**The Toxic Triangle: A Qualitative Study of Destructive Leadership in  
Public Higher Education Institutions**

**By**

**Carrie S. Schneider**

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

**Master of Arts in Organizational Leadership**

**St. Catherine University**

**St. Paul, Minnesota**

May 2021

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Date \_\_\_\_\_

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Signature of Advisor

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank my fellow colleagues in public higher education for sharing their experiences with me and trusting me to accurately represent their lived experience in my research; I know it was uncomfortable for some of them to recall and speak about these experiences. I would also like to thank my husband, Matthew Schneider, for his support over the last six years while I was in the MAOL program.

Additionally, I would like to thank my thesis readers, my advisor, and my fellow classmates for their guidance, feedback, and support while working on this research project.

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## **Abstract**

Destructive leadership is prevalent in organizations today and it produces harmful outcomes to both individuals and organizations. Destructive leadership is more than destructive behaviors exhibited by those in positions of authority within an organization; destructive leadership is a co-creational process involving a destructive leader, susceptible followers, and a conducive environment, or what is commonly referred to in the literature as the toxic triangle of destructive leadership. Institutions of public higher education seem an unlikely atmosphere in which destructive leadership would manifest and there is minimal research on destructive leadership in institutions of public higher education. This qualitative research gathered information from the perspective of followers who have experienced destructive leadership in public higher education in the United States. This information was collected in personal interviews with ten participants who self-identified as having experienced destructive leadership in institutions of public higher education in the United States. The findings from this qualitative study confirmed that followers were subjected to a wide range of harmful destructive leader behaviors, followers were operating in environments conducive to destructive leadership, followers reacted to the destructive leadership by trying to minimize its negative impact on employees and the institution, and followers were mostly harmed, both personally and professionally, by destructive leadership. Additionally, the findings provide evidence to support the toxic triangle framework and to support the argument that destructive leadership is a complex, socially-constructed process involving a destructive leader, a conducive environment and susceptible followers.



Effective organizational leadership is important to the success of any organization, but why? Perhaps one of the best ways to understand the importance of effective or constructive leadership is to study its polar opposite, destructive leadership. Research tells us destructive leadership is prevalent in organizations today and it causes harmful outcomes to both individuals and organizations. The high-profile destructive leadership of Jeffrey Skilling and Ken Lay at Enron and Al Dunlap at Sunbeam are examples of the harmful effects destructive leadership can have on both people and organizations.

About one in four leaders is destructive (Erickson, Shaw, Murray, & Branch, 2015), and these leaders create environments that are commonly described in the literature as toxic. According to the Society for Human Resource Management (2019) more than two-thirds of American workers surveyed indicated they have worked in a toxic environment. Toxic cultures are characterized by distrust and self-serving behaviors such as nepotism, cronyism, and increased political behavior (Erickson et al., 2015). Additionally, individuals in toxic cultures perceive that destructive leaders are not held accountable for their behaviors (Erickson et al., 2015).

The presence of destructive leadership in organizations is disturbing because destructive leadership has been shown to cause devastation to both organizations and individuals. In the case of the U.S. Army, destructive leadership has been correlated to suicide among U.S. soldiers in Iraq (Erickson et al., 2015). The harm caused by destructive leadership has even been described as being comparable to a cancer within an organization because it can ruin lives, erode employee loyalty, destroy organizational effectiveness, and weaken an organization's ability to remain competitive (Erickson et al., 2015).

## **Context of the Research Study**

According to the literature, destructive leadership is more than just destructive behavior exhibited by a leader; destructive leadership is a complex, socially-constructed process involving a destructive leader, susceptible followers, and a conducive environment. These three components are what is referred to in the literature as the toxic triangle. The toxic triangle framework was proposed by Padilla, Hogan and Kaiser (2007) as the last of five components they used to define destructive leadership. In the toxic triangle framework, a destructive leader is only one part of a toxic triangle that makes destructive leadership possible. A destructive leader without susceptible followers and a conducive environment is less likely to produce destructive leadership.

Despite researchers' understanding of destructive leadership as a process involving leaders, followers, and the environment, research continues to focus on the behaviors, characteristics, and personalities of bad leaders (Thoroughgood, Sawyer, Padilla, & Lunsford, 2018). The focal point of research on destructive leadership should not be the leader because this will not account for the interactive effect that both the environment and followers have on the leader (Pelletier, Kottke, & Sirotnik, 2019). There are numerous studies examining the relationships between destructive leadership behaviors and the impact on both followers and organizations; however, these studies do not take into consideration the role of followers and the environment in the manifestation of destructive leadership.

Additionally, few studies, except for the extensive work of Lipman-Blumen (2005), focus on the experiences of followers in destructive leadership. But Even Lipman-Blumen's (2005) work is focused on understanding the underlying reasons why individuals follow destructive leaders rather than how followers react in these situations. Followers and their agency in the

destructive leadership process have been left out of destructive leadership research and are, therefore, not well understood (Milosevic, Maric & Loncar, 2020).

Also absent in the research on destructive leadership are studies of destructive leadership within institutions of public higher education. Searching the literature for studies on destructive leadership in higher education produced one case study, by Pelletier et al. (2019), of destructive leadership at a public university. Thus, we know little about destructive leadership, the experiences of followers, and the role of the environment in instances of destructive leadership in public institutions of higher education. Even though public higher education and, in general, higher education, seems an unlikely atmosphere in which a destructive leader would find susceptible followers and a conducive environment given academic freedom, labor union contracts, and faculty shared governance, one cannot assume lack of research on an unlikely occurrence is sufficient evidence to rule out its existence and cease further research on the topic.

In summary, most of the research on destructive leadership has focused on the leader rather than the context in which the leadership occurs and the role of followers. Minimal research utilizes a systems approach, such as the toxic triangle, to examine destructive leadership. Qualitative studies using interviews to obtain information on the experiences of followers and the context of the situation are largely absent from the literature as are qualitative studies of destructive leadership in public higher education.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The practices of leaders may have negative implications for their followers and organizations, especially for destructive leaders. Past studies have focused on identifying the behavioral traits and characteristics of destructive leaders (Erickson et al., 2015; Illies & Reiter-Palmon, 2008; Ovidia, Sergiu, & Loredana, 2016; Padilla et al., 2007) however, we know little

about followers' perspective and their environment in the destructive leadership process, and we know even less about the destructive leadership process within institutions of public higher education. Thus, this research project is designed to provide insights from the perspective of followers who experienced destructive leadership in institutions of public higher education in the United States.

### **Purpose of Research**

The purpose of this research thesis is to understand the experiences of followers in a destructive leadership process in institutions of public higher education in the United States.

### **Research Questions**

This research study has one main research question and two sub-questions. The main research question is (1) How do followers respond to destructive leadership behaviors at institutions of public higher education? The sub-questions are (2) How does the environment shape this response? and (3) How are followers impacted by destructive leadership?

### **Overview of Method**

Because the purpose of this research study is to understand the lived experiences of followers who experienced destructive leadership in public higher education, a qualitative method was selected as the most appropriate method to gather data. According to Creswell (2016), using a qualitative approach to study a phenomenon provides the researcher with the ability to report the voices of participants, look at how processes unfold, focus on a small number of people, develop a complex understanding, lift up the silenced voices of marginalized groups or populations, create multiple views of the phenomenon, contrast different views of the phenomena, study sensitive topics, and reflect on our own biases and experiences. Additionally,

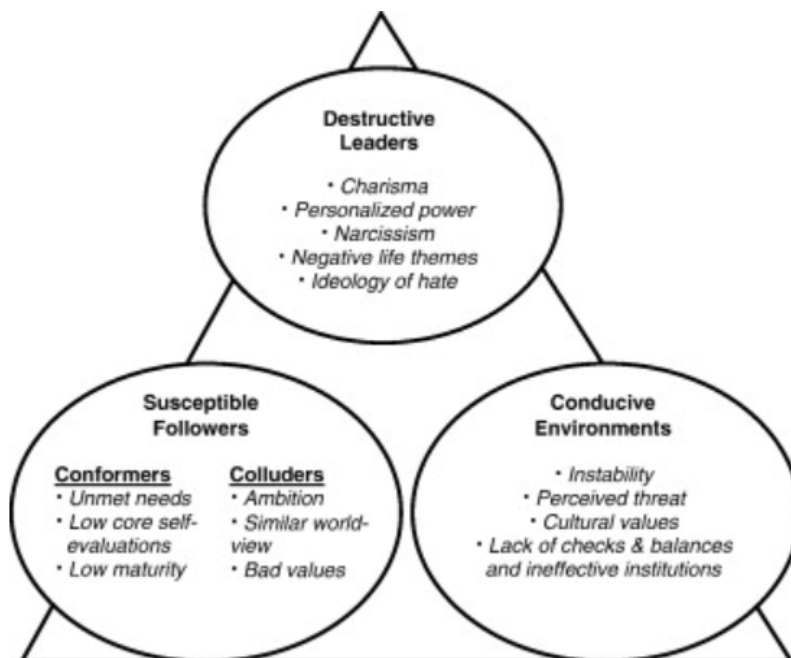
a qualitative method was selected because it was a requirement of the thesis research project in the Masters of Organization Leadership (MAOL) program.

### Theoretical Framework

The toxic triangle framework will be utilized to inform this research. This concept describes leadership as a social process that is constructed by both leaders and followers within the context of an environment (Padilla et al., 2007). In the toxic triangle framework, a destructive leader (with their destructive behaviors, values, and motives) is only one of three elements that makes destructive leadership possible (Padilla et al., 2007). The three elements required for destructive leadership are (1) destructive leaders, (2) susceptible followers and (3) a conducive environment (see Figure 1). According to the toxic triangle framework, a destructive leader, without susceptible followers and a conducive environment, is less likely to produce destructive leadership (Padilla et al., 2007).

### Figure 1

*The Toxic Triangle (Padilla et al., 2007)*



### ***Destructive Leaders***

Destructive leaders exhibit certain characteristics and Padilla et al. (2007) found five characteristics to be associated with destructive leaders: charisma, personalized power, narcissism, negative life themes, and an ideology of hate.

### ***Susceptible Followers***

Susceptible followers are people who follow the destructive leader for two separate reasons: there are conformers, or those who follow out of fear, and there are colluders, or those who follow in order to reap personal benefits (Padilla et al., 2007).

### ***Conducive Environments***

A conducive environment provides the ideal situational factors for destructive leadership to develop and flourish. According to Padilla et al. (2007), the four factors in an environment that support the development of destructive leadership include instability, perceived threat, questionable cultural values and standards, and a lack of checks and balances.

### **Significance of Study**

This research is valuable because destructive leadership is more than destructive behaviors exhibited by those in positions of authority within an organization; it involves a destructive leader, susceptible followers and a conducive environment. The lack of research on the experiences of followers, especially in public higher education, reveals a gap in the literature on destructive leadership. This research will be an attempt to fill this gap in knowledge in the literature on destructive leadership by providing accounts of destructive leadership situations at institutions of public higher education from the viewpoint of followers. In order to better understand the interactive effects of the environment and followers, this research will provide

details of the context in which the destructive leadership occurred as well as the impact the destructive leadership had on followers.

### **Definitions**

**Destructive leadership behavior.** Destructive leadership behavior is also referred to as toxic leadership and abusive leadership in the literature. For the purposes of this research study, destructive leadership behavior will be defined using the definition provided by Krasikova, Green and LeBreton (2013):

Volitional behavior by a leader that can harm or intends to harm a leader's organization and/or followers by a) encouraging followers to pursue goals that contravene the legitimate interest of the organization and/or b) employing a leadership style that involves the use of harmful methods of influence with followers, regardless of justifications for such behavior. (p. 1310)

**Leader.** For the purposes of this study, a leader is someone who is in a leadership position (position of authority) within an institution of public higher education in the United States.

**Follower.** For the purposes of this study, a follower is someone whom a leader either had positional authority over or for whom a leader provided work direction within an institution of public higher education in the United States. The term 'follower' is being used because there is not a suitable alternative term to describe individuals upon whom leadership attempts are directed. While this term may imply weakness or dependency, it is not intended to do so in this study.

**Public Higher Education Institutions in the United States.** For the purposes of this study, a public higher education institution is a college or university that is funded (partially or entirely) by the public through the government of the state in which the institution is located. These

institutions are typically governed by a board who oversees the senior executive officer, typically bearing the title President or Chancellor, of the institution or a system of institutions. Institutions of higher education in the United States engage in faculty shared governance, a process by which faculty have shared responsibility with institutional leaders in the governing of the institution on such things as administrative personnel decisions, policies, and budget preparation.

### **Summary**

There are six chapters in this master's thesis, including this introduction. The second chapter provides a review of the literature related to destructive leadership and to the extent possible, destructive leadership within institutions of public higher education. The third chapter provides an in-depth description of the research method, data collection, and data analysis process. The fourth chapter provides a detailed report of the results of the data collection process. The fifth chapter provides a discussion of the findings, implications of the research in the context of existing literature, and discusses the limitations of the study, as well as areas for further research. The sixth and final chapter provides a conclusion.

### **Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

This literature review begins by analyzing existing definitions of destructive leadership, explaining the toxic triangle framework and clarifying the differences between destructive leadership and destructive leadership behavior. It discusses destructive leaders and the role of followers and the environment in the destructive leadership process, as well as the impact destructive leaders have on followers. In addition, it identifies gaps in the literature.

### **Defining Destructive Leadership**

In order to study destructive leadership, it must first be defined. There are numerous definitions of destructive leadership, ranging from those that focus on the behaviors of the leader



(i.e., the means for achieving destructive leadership), incorporate destructive outcomes (i.e., the ends of destructive leadership), and take a more holistic or systems-approach. The more holistic definitions incorporate the leader's behaviors, outcomes produced, and impacts on followers and organizational environment. One reason for this variation in definitions is the difficulty in defining not only what constitutes destructive leadership, but leadership itself (Schyns & Schilling, 2013).

Einarsen, Aasland, and Skogstad (2007) and Krasikova et al. (2013) provide definitions of destructive leadership that focus on the leaders' pursuit of destructive goals through destructive means. These definitions prove useful in identifying the types of leader behaviors that can be labeled as destructive as well as the undesirable outcomes these leader behaviors can cause. By accounting for both the behavior of the leader and the negative outcomes produced, these definitions provide clarification between instances of destructive leadership and instances where, especially in times of crisis, people want a take-charge leader who may exhibit behaviors that are considered destructive but that pursue and produce constructive outcomes for people and organizations. While these definitions account for both the leaders' behavior and the outcomes produced, they are less useful in understanding the complex phenomena called destructive leadership because they do not incorporate additional factors (such as followers and the environment) that contribute to the manifestation of destructive leadership within an organization.

In their extensive review of the term "destructive leadership", Padilla et al. (2007) reach the conclusion that little consensus or clarity exists in the literature regarding a definition of destructive leadership. However, what Padilla et al. (2007) did find to be consistent across definitions was that destructive leadership creates undesirable results for constituents and

organizations. In response to this lack of clarity, Padilla et al. (2007) proposed the toxic triangle framework and a comprehensive set of five features to describe destructive leadership: (a) mostly produces destructive outcomes, (b) uses control and coercion rather than persuasion and commitment, (c) focuses on the leader's goals rather than goals of the stakeholders and organization, (d) produces outcomes that compromise the quality of life for constituents, and (e) depends on susceptible followers and conducive environments. The fifth element is what separates this definition from past definitions because it specifically recognizes the responsibility of followers and the environment in the creation of destructive leadership. In the toxic triangle framework, a destructive leader is only one of three elements that makes destructive leadership possible. A destructive leader, without susceptible followers and a conducive environment, is less likely to produce destructive leadership. This is similar to the viewpoint expressed by Thoroughgood, Padilla, Hunter, and Tate (2012, p. 901) that "No matter how clever or devious, leaders alone cannot achieve toxic results." Thus leaders still require considerable assistance to accomplish their ends and this assistance, according to Padilla et al. (2007), is provided by susceptible followers and a conducive environment.

In an effort to build on Padilla et al.'s (2007) proposed definition of destructive leadership, and to move even further away from defining destructive leadership based on the traits of leaders and towards defining destructive leadership as a complex process, Sparks, Wolf, and Zurick (2015) provide a definition of destructive leadership that incorporates (a) the co-dependence between leaders and followers (the susceptible followers) and (b) an environment ripe for leaders' to prioritize their goals over those of the organization (the conducive environment). Additionally, they acknowledge that destructive leaders may believe they are working on behalf of the best interests of the organization even though others perceive them as

prioritizing their own self-interests over those of the organization. This highlights the importance of the co-creation of leadership between leaders and followers in the destructive leadership process.

Because the traits and behaviors of leaders alone do not guarantee destructive leadership outcomes, Thoroughgood et al. (2018) posit that definitions of destructive leadership based on traits of the leader do not accurately describe destructive leadership from a systems perspective. They provide the following definition of destructive leadership in an effort to include what they consider to be essential features of destructive leadership (group processes, group outcomes, and a dynamic timeframe):

A complex process of influence between flawed, toxic or ineffective leaders, susceptible followers, and conducive environments, which unfolds over time and, on balance, culminates in destructive group or organizational outcomes that compromise the quality of life for internal and external constituents and detract from their group-focused goals or purposes. (p. 633)

If susceptible followers and a conducive environment are absent from the destructive leadership process, destructive behavior by a leader is not likely to produce destructive outcomes for individuals or the organization. One example of this situation is provided by Wright (2015) in describing the leadership of Major Stolz in the U.S. Army. According to Wright (2015), Major Stolz exhibited controlling and micromanaging behaviors and was motivated by self-interest. In response to his behavior, the lieutenants and officers in his squadron banded together to prevent destructive outcomes for the squadron. They enhanced the performance of their squadron by increasing their own professional aptitude and were later recognized for outstanding performance. In this situation, the toxic triangle did not exist due to the absence of susceptible

followers, and thus the destructive leadership behaviors of Major Stolz did not result in destructive outcomes for the squadron.

For the purposes of this research, *destructive leadership* will be defined, using the definition provided by Thoroughgood et al. (2018), as a process. This process incorporates the toxic triangle framework and accounts for the consequent negative outcomes for individuals, groups, and organizations. Additionally, destructive leadership *behavior* (not to be confused with destructive leadership) will be defined using the definition proposed by Krasikova et al. (2013), which focuses on the destructive leader's behaviors while leading and specifies that the leader (1) deliberately leads others to goals that are not in the organization's best interest and/or (2) intentionally uses a harmful style of leadership. By including both of these criteria in the definition, Krasikova et al. (2013) intentionally differentiates destructive leadership from ineffective leadership, with the latter being a situation where the leader guides followers towards goals that align with the organization's interests but produces ineffective results. Krasikova et al. (2013) define destructive leadership behavior as:

Volitional behavior by a leader that can harm or intends to harm a leader's organization and/or followers by a) encouraging followers to pursue goals that contravene the legitimate interest of the organization and/or b) employing a leadership style that involves the use of harmful methods of influence with follower, regardless of justifications for such behavior. (p. 1310)

### **Destructive Leaders**

In addition to defining destructive leadership and destructive leadership behavior, it's also important to identify the values, characteristics, and specific observable behaviors of destructive leaders.

Rather than sacrifice their own self-interests for the good of the organization, destructive leaders are motivated to prioritize their own self-interest above any collective interest (Ovidia et al., 2016). One of the factors that contributes to destructive leadership is the idea that these leaders feel their personal goals can't be achieved in organizations using legitimate means and thus they turn to destructive leadership to achieve their personal goals (Krasikova et al., 2013). Destructive leaders, as opposed to constructive leaders, are more likely to engage in destructive responses when they believe the achievement of their own personal goals are at risk (Krasikova et al., 2013). With self-interest as their motive, destructive leaders make decisions that are not in the best interest of employees, shareholders, customers, and other stakeholders of the organization. Self-interest is a leadership characteristic that is associated with ineffective leadership throughout multiple cultures. Research conducted by House, Hanges, Javidian, Dorfman and Gupta (2004, as cited in Northouse, 2016) found leaders who are focused on self-interest were considered to be ineffective by people from all cultures, not only by people from Anglo culture clusters (Canada, United States, Australia, Ireland, England, South Africa-white sample, and New Zealand). Overall, the researchers found the following set of universal attributes to be related to ineffective leadership: asocial behavior, malevolence, and being self-focused (House et al., 2004 as cited by Northouse, 2016).

In addition to engaging in self-serving behaviors that result in ineffective leadership, destructive leaders also engage in behaviors that are considered toxic. Toxic leadership behaviors include intimidation, bullying, manipulation, micromanaging, arrogance, and abusive or unethical behavior (Webster, Brough, & Daly, 2016). The most prevalent toxic leader behaviors reported in a survey of 76 individuals who had worked or were working for a toxic leader included: manipulating behaviors, intimidating and bullying behaviors, abusive or emotionally

volatile behaviors, narcissistic behaviors, micromanaging behaviors, and passive aggressive behaviors. Additionally, in a separate survey of individuals who had either been targets of destructive leadership behavior or witnessed destructive leadership behavior, respondents indicated the behaviors most frequently exhibited by destructive leaders included making significant decisions without information, playing favorites, micromanaging and over controlling, and being ineffective at coordinating and managing (Erickson et al., 2015). Survey respondents also indicated that these destructive leadership behaviors increased over time during the duration of the relationship between the destructive leader and follower (Erickson et al., 2015).

### **The Role of Followers and the Environment**

Destructive leadership behavior itself is not the whole story in situations of destructive leadership; followers and the environment play a crucial role in the process. Therefore, it is essential to better understand the experiences of followers and their environment in order to better understand the destructive leadership process. In a statement highlighting the necessity of followers and the environment, Thoroughgood et al. (2012, p. 899), assert “Destructive leaders, like leaders in general, do not operate in a vacuum. Followers must consent to, or be able to resist, a destructive leader, while the environment provides the ground for the seeds of destructive leadership to grow.” Why would followers go along with destructive leaders? According to Lipman-Blumen (2005), humans do more than tolerate destructive leaders, humans in all types of industries, including public non-profit education, are prone to support and favor destructive leaders who ease our innate human fears and anxiety and seem to offer us security. In other words, individuals give up their freedom in exchange for the perceived security offered by these destructive leaders.

But it's not just the psychological appeal of destructive leaders that contributes to the manifestation of destructive leadership in organizations; the environment also matters. The environment can either discourage or encourage destructive leadership depending on what type of environment exists within the organization. According to Jennings (2006, as cited in Sparks et al., 2015), the seven characteristics of environments that lead to ethical collapse in organizations include: (1) pressure to maintain numbers, (2) fear and silence, (3) young 'uns and a bigger than life CEO, (4) weak board (or non-existent board that can't talk to employees), (5) conflicts, (6) innovation like no other, and (7) goodness in some areas atoning for evil in others (philanthropy making up for the badness). These characteristics are similar to those identified by Padilla et al. (2007) in environments conducive to destructive leadership: lack of checks and balances, instability, perception of threat, and questionable cultural values.

Evidence for the importance of the environment and susceptible followers in destructive leadership within public higher education was found by Pelletier et al. (2019) in their case study of destructive leadership at a public university. In examining three critical events, the authors attributed the reasons why employees, after engaging in resistance and fearing retribution, did not take action and/or engaged in ineffective action, to be organizational miasma, rationalizations, and the control myth that it's not right to challenge the President. They concluded the environment was the lynchpin in this case of destructive leadership due to the lack of board oversight, increasing erosion of faculty shared governance and academic freedom, and the creation of a culture of fear, which lead to the lack of action by employees (Pelletier et al., 2019).

The importance of the interaction between the environment and followers in co-contributing to the process of destructive leadership was also evident in Fraher's (2016) case

study of a parliamentary inquiry of Bristol Royal Infirmary. In this study, Fraher (2016) found followers were unlikely to question the decisions of important medical professionals and, due to increasing level of discord, the environment became full of cliques organized by professions, which ultimately led to a breakdown of performance among operating room teams and a higher than expected death rate of infants. In essence, by not questioning those in leadership roles, the followers created an environment that was conducive to destructive leadership and tragic outcomes.

However, there is also evidence that followers moderate their behaviors in response to destructive leaders and can temper, or even prevent, the harmful effects and undesirable outcomes of destructive leadership. Evidence of followers' engaging in moderating behaviors in response to destructive leaders was found by Milosevic et al. (2020) when they examined multiple case studies of companies with the highest level of instability, change, and lack of checks and balances (i.e., conducive environments). They found followers exhibited agency in their response to toxic leaders and engaged in activities to moderate the effects of the toxic leader on their work. These activities included building relationships with other leaders and co-workers, so they would have support systems to rely on for assistance, as well as engaging in professional development opportunities designed to build knowledge and skills for challenging the behaviors of the toxic leader. The authors state, "Understanding followers and their readiness to be influenced by a leader, as well as their contribution to the leadership process, are critical in understanding effectiveness of a leader" (Milosevic et al., 2020, p. 131).

Further evidence of followers engaging in moderating behaviors in response to destructive leaders was found by Schyns and Schilling (2013) except that their findings also suggest followers' behavior is influenced by the perceived risk associated with the specific



behavior. In their meta-analysis based on 57 articles examining the relationship between destructive leadership and its outcomes on followers, Schyns and Schilling (2013) found destructive leader behavior is directly related to follower's attitudes toward the leader and, to a lesser extent, general counterproductive work behavior. Surprisingly, resistance by the follower is less directly related to destructive leader behavior than other concepts measured. Schyns and Schilling (2013) speculate this finding is the result of followers viewing engaging in resistance as riskier than engaging in counterproductive work behavior and having a negative attitude toward the leader.

In a meta-analysis designed to examine the relationship between destructive leadership behavior and follower job performance, follower engagement in organizational citizenship behaviors, and workplace deviance, Mackey, McAllister, Maher, and Wang (2019) expected to find a curvilinear rather than linear relationship. For example, they expected as a leader's behavior became more and more destructive, overall job performance would decline rapidly at first but then would flatten out because followers would not allow their job performance to go below a certain level even though the behavior of the leader continued to get more destructive. Their results supported the existence of linear relationships and, to a lesser extent, curvilinear relationships between the variables studied. But what's interesting is that these results suggest followers are not blindly reacting to the destructive leader but are moderating their own behaviors in terms of job performance, organizational citizenship behaviors, and workplace deviance in response to increasing levels of destructive leader behavior. This finding begs the question, how do followers moderate their own behavior and find ways to keep their job performance functioning despite leaders' destructive behaviors? Lipman-Blumen (2005) poses a

similar question: what forces or combination of circumstances move followers to change from accepting a destructive leader to not accepting them or even challenging them and taking action?

In a survey designed to identify the methods followers use to cope with toxic leaders, Webster et al. (2016) found the methods used most by followers included seeking social support, leaving the organization or taking leave, ruminating, and challenging the leader. One-third of survey respondents also indicated the stress they experienced was not only due to the toxic leader but equally attributable to the lack of support from their organizations, so it's not surprising that respondents indicated they sought support from sources not affiliated with the organization, such as external experts (Webster et al., 2016).

Thus, leadership and destructive leadership is a co-creational process involving leaders, followers and the environment. Because these elements are interdependent, it is essential to better understand the experiences of followers within their environment in order to better understand the destructive leadership process.

### **The Impact of Destructive Leaders on Followers**

By its very definition, destructive leadership produces adverse results for both organizations and stakeholders (Padilla et al., 2007; Thoroughgood et al., 2018). Thus, in studying destructive leadership, it's important to understand the impact it has on organizational performance and employees. Studies have shown that destructive leadership adversely affects followers, both personally and professionally. In a study by Schmid, Verdorfer, and Peus (2018), different types of destructive leadership behavior were found to have different impacts on followers but all types of destructive leadership behavior had a positive relationship with employee general turnover intention and negative follower affect.

Additionally, Erickson et al. (2015) found destructive leadership is associated with the following impacts to followers: lower levels of job satisfaction, increased likelihood of resigning, increased psychological stress leading to declines in well-being and job performance, devaluing their organization, insomnia, bad dreams, general fatigue, loss of concentration, feeling depressed about their work, feeling as if work consumes all of their thoughts and personal time, harm to their family and personal relationships and activities outside of work, fear which leads to instability and decreases in cohesion among work groups, and fear of making mistakes leading to risk avoidance and limited innovation.

Further evidence of the adverse effects of toxic leadership on followers was found by Webster et al. (2016) when they surveyed individuals who had experienced toxic leadership. Survey respondents reported the toxic leadership impacted them psychologically by increasing their self-doubt and stress levels, exhibited by anxiety and depression; it impacted them emotionally by generating feelings of mistrust, anger, and fear; lastly it impacted their physical health causing symptoms such as fatigue and insomnia. Similar findings were reported by Hershcovis and Barling (2010) after they conducted a meta-analysis of 66 samples of destructive leadership. They found statistically significant correlations (of varying strengths) between supervisor aggression (a proxy for destructive leader behavior) and ten outcome variables: organizational deviance, job satisfaction, emotional exhaustion, interpersonal deviance, intent to turnover, psychological distress, affective commitment, depression, physical well-being, and performance.

In addition to harming followers, destructive leaders also impact the overall effectiveness of an organization, through behaviors that are associated with increased employee absenteeism, decreased productivity, increased employee dissatisfaction, decreased brand equity and increased

legal costs (Ovidia et al., 2016). The harm caused by destructive leadership is comparable to cancer within an organization, according to Erickson et al. (2015, p. 271):

Destructive leadership is a serious cancer within any organization. It ruins the lives of employees and destroys their commitment to the organization and its objectives. It reduces the effectiveness of workgroups. It leads to a toxic organizational culture that can spiral any firm into an ever-decreasing ability to meet the challenges of a competitive environment.

Lastly, there are some who believe leadership, by definition, produces only effective outcomes and therefore destructive leadership should not be labeled as a type of leadership (Padilla et al., 2007). However, as this search of the literature has shown, the phenomenon of destructive leadership exists and its consequences are damaging to both individuals and organizations.

### **Gaps in Literature**

Despite researchers' understanding of destructive leadership as a process involving leaders, followers, and the environment, research continues to focus on the bad leaders instead of the impact/experience of destructive leadership on followers (Thoroughgood et al., 2018). Because the environment and followers interact with and influence the behaviors of the leader, the focal point of research on destructive leadership should not be the leader (Pelletier et al., 2019).

There are numerous studies examining the relationships between destructive leadership behaviors and the impact on both followers and organizations; however, these studies do not take into consideration the role of the followers and their environment in the manifestation of destructive leadership. Followers and their agency in the destructive leadership process have

been left out of destructive leadership research and are, therefore, not well understood (Milosevic et al., 2020). Few studies, except for the extensive work of Lipman-Blumen (2005), focus on the experiences of followers in destructive leadership. But Even Lipman-Blumen's (2005) work is focused on understanding the underlying reasons why individuals follow destructive leaders rather than how followers react in these situations.

In addition to the lack of studies on the role of followers and the environment in the destructive leadership process, there is a lack of research on destructive leadership within institutions of public higher education in the United States, let alone studies that focus on the experiences of followers in instances of destructive leadership in public higher education institutions. Pelletier et al.'s (2019) case study of destructive leadership at a public university is the only research study that focusses on destructive leadership and the experience of followers in a case of destructive leadership within an institution of public higher education in the United States.

## **Summary**

There are many definitions of destructive leadership in the literature but the most comprehensive definitions of destructive leadership use a systems-approach to defining it. In doing so, these definitions recognize that destructive leadership is not solely the destructive behavior of a leader; these definitions account for the role of followers and the environment in the manifestation of destructive leadership. Regardless of how it is defined, destructive leadership has been shown to have adverse effects on followers and organizations.

There is minimal research on destructive leadership in institutions of public higher education and most of the existing research on destructive leadership in organizations has focused on the leader. This qualitative study will explore destructive leadership within

institutions of public higher education from the perspective of followers, particularly focusing on the environment, the followers' reactions, and the impact of destructive leadership on followers.

### **Method**

This chapter explains the research questions and the research method, and provides specific details to describe the sources of data (research subjects), the data collection method, and data validity methods.

#### **Research Questions**

This study was designed to address one main research question and two sub-questions. The main research question was (1) How do followers respond to destructive leadership behaviors at institutions of public higher education? The sub-questions were (2) How does the environment shape this response? and (3) How are followers impacted by destructive leadership?

#### **Research Method**

Interviews were selected as the data collection method for this research because this form of qualitative data-gathering is suitable for examining the reactions of followers in situations of destructive leadership (Schmid, Verdorfer, & Peus, 2018). Interviews are more suitable for discovering why people act the way they do because the researcher gathers information about the participants' whole self by conversing with them in-person rather than capturing a sound bite in a survey response (Brinkman & Kvale, 2018). Because leadership is a process involving interactions among many individuals, it is suitable to utilize interview questions to understand these complex relationships and the contexts in which they occur (Thoroughgood et al., 2018).

#### **Research Subjects**

The source of data collected in this research study was ten individuals who self-identified as previously experiencing destructive leadership while working for an institution of public

higher education in the United States. Primary potential research participants were recruited through email invitations and included seven current/former colleagues. Using a snowball technique where primary participants were asked to recommend additional potential participants, three additional participants were included.

All participants received an email invitation to participate in the research study (see Appendix C). The email included the purpose of the study, the participant requirements, and the list of seventeen interview questions (see Appendix F). Additionally, the email invitation asked the potential recipient if they would like to participate in the study and if they would provide a recommendation of an additional person to invite to participate in the study. Upon receipt of a return email expressing interest in participating, participants received a second email (see Appendix D) that included a statement of appreciation for their willingness to participate, a description of the research protocol requiring all participants to sign and return a consent form, and an attached consent form (see Appendix E). All participants were required to sign and return the consent form prior to participating in this research. At the beginning of the interview session, participants were reminded they could end their participation in the study at any time and participants were asked if they had any questions about the consent form.

### **Data Collection**

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting mandates for social distancing, as of September 1, 2020 the St. Catherine University Institutional Review Board requires that all research projects involving face-to-face interaction with participants continue to be conducted remotely, with exceptions granted for interactions that meet specific requirements. This research project did not meet any of the three exception criteria provided by the IRB and therefore data was collected through remote personal interview sessions via Google Meets and Zoom between

January 7, and February 10, 2021. Participants were asked to answer seventeen questions, and when necessary, follow-up questions were asked for clarification purposes.

Interview sessions were recorded on a digital voice recorder and then transcribed. Interview participant names, names of individuals mentioned in the interview, and the name of the institution of public higher education were removed from the data during the transcription process and were replaced with pseudo names and a generic description of the organization to ensure research participant confidentiality.

### **Data Analysis**

An inductive process of qualitative data analysis provided by Cresswell (2016) was utilized to analyze the data collected in this study. This process included the following steps: (1) prepare the data for analysis, (2) read the data, (3) develop codes and code data, (4) identify themes, (5) interrelate themes, and (6) validate information (Cresswell, 2016, pp.152-165).

#### ***Prepare the Data for Analysis***

The recorded interviews were transcribed by the researcher. The transcriptions were validated for accuracy by listening to the recorded interview while reading the transcription. Corrections were made to the transcriptions as they were noticed during this process.

#### ***Read the Data***

Each transcribed interview was read from start to finish without taking any notes to focus on the overall experience of the participant. Then, each transcribed interview was read again and notes were made in the margins of the printed transcriptions to note possible codes. Segments of text were bracketed as evidence of codes or possible quotes to include. Notes of possible evidence of the presence of the components of the toxic triangle framework were also made in the margins of the printed transcripts.



### ***Code the Data***

After codes had been noted in the margins on each transcript interview, all codes were put into a list. Then, the transcripts were read again and coded using the codes from the list in case earlier readings missed codes that were assigned to other interviews later on in the process.

### ***Identify Themes***

After all of the codes were put into a list, the list was analyzed to identify codes that could be grouped into themes and according to the toxic triangle framework. The major themes that arose from the list of codes included: descriptions of the destructive leader behavior, descriptions of the environment at the institution, follower reactions to the destructive leadership, and descriptions of the impact the destructive leader had on followers. A codebook was created for each theme which lists the codes, the descriptions provided by interviewees, and the participant number who mentioned each code. These codebooks are included in Appendix G.

After the codebooks were created, a table was created (see Appendix H) to succinctly convey each participant's experience with the destructive leader according to each of the themes identified. In addition, this table includes the position of the destructive leader described by the participant.

### ***Interrelate Themes***

Deductive logic was used to identify implications of these themes on the research question and the toxic triangle framework. Concepts that were not in alignment with the toxic triangle framework were identified. For these outliers, the literature was reengaged to search for meaning and possible explanation.

### ***Validate Information***

I've worked in public higher education for nearly twelve years and to ensure that my own experiences did not influence this research project, I followed all St. Catherine University Institutional Review Board protocols for conducting research involving human subjects. I based my interview questions on concepts included in the literature review. I used the six-point method of data analysis provided by Cresswell (2016) to analyze interview transcripts, I supported my research findings with findings from other research studies on destructive leadership, and I noted instances where my data was not in alignment with other research findings.

The following assumptions were made regarding this research project: (1) all research subjects were, to the best of their abilities, honest in answering the interview questions, (2) all research subjects answered the interview questions based on their own lived experience, (3) research subjects shared as much information as they were comfortable sharing with me, the researcher, and (4) all research subjects read and understood the consent form.

This study was conducted under the guidance of faculty advisors in the Master of Organizational Leadership program at St. Catherine University. In preparation for this research study, I completed the Collaborative Institutions Training Initiative's Social and Behavioral Research – Basic/Refresher Program course certification (see appendix B); applied for and received approval from the St. Catherine University Institutional Review Board (see Appendix A), and utilized a research participant consent form that was created from a consent form template provided by the Master of Organization Leadership program (see Appendix E). The consent form outlines the purpose of the research, acknowledges the interviewee is competently and autonomously agreeing to participate, acknowledges the interviewee has the ability to end participation in the study at any time, informs the participant of the risks and benefits of

participation, informs the participant they will not be compensated for their participation, describes how the participants' information will be protected and stored securely, and informs participants that the researcher would need to obtain their approval to use their data in subsequent studies.

To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, only the researcher had access to the data that were collected from participants and temporarily stored on a portable audio recording device and only the researcher had access to the de-identified transcribed interviews. The audio recordings of the interviews were used by the researcher for transcription purposes only and will be destroyed within one year of completing the data analysis.

### **Summary**

This chapter described the research questions and method, research subjects, data collection and analysis, and validity methods. The next chapter describes the findings of this research organized by the themes that were identified during data analysis.

### **Findings**

This chapter describes the lived experiences of ten research participants who self-identified as having experienced destructive leadership while they worked for an institution of public higher education in the United States. As noted in the method chapter, this data was collected through remote personal interview sessions via Google Meets and Zoom. As stated in the introduction and literature review, for the purposes of this research study, destructive leader behavior was defined using the definition provided by Krasikova et al. (2013).

## Participants

The first interview question asked participants to identify the position within the institution of public higher education that was held by the destructive leader the participant would be referencing throughout the interview. Four participants indicated the destructive leader was the President of the institution, another four indicated the destructive leader was a senior-level administrator of the institution, and two participants indicated the destructive leader was a director of a department. Six participants indicated they were a direct report to the destructive leader and four participants indicated they were not a direct report to the destructive leader. This information is displayed by participant number in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Participants*

Participant	Role/Position of Destructive Leader	Participant's Role in relation to the Destructive Leader
P1	Department Director	Not Direct Report
P2	Department Director	Direct Report
P3	President	Not Direct Report
P4	President	Direct Report
P5	Department Director	Direct Report
P6	Senior Administrator	Not Direct Report
P7	Senior Administrator	Direct Report
P8	Senior Administrator	Direct report
P9	President	Direct Report
P10	President	Not Direct Report

## Results

The results of the data collection are organized by the four major themes that emerged throughout the data analysis process: destructive leader behavior, environment at the institution, follower reactions to the destructive leadership, and impact on followers (see Table 2 Major Themes).

**Table 2**

*Major Themes*

Themes	Participant Descriptions
Destructive leader behavior	Unethical, Absent, Incompetent, Intimidating, Condescending, Passive, Micromanage, Not inclusive, Not supportive of subordinates, Put personal interests before those of the institution/employees/students, Produced negative results for the institution
Environment at the institution	Instability, Dysfunction, Culture of low morale, culture of distrust, Culture of fear/perceived threat, Lack of checks and balances/No accountability, Division of followers, Loyalty to Destructive Leader Rewarded, Complicity
Follower reactions	Formed alliances, Mitigated impact of destructive leader, Confronted destructive leader, Confronted destructive leader's superior, Avoided destructive leader
Impact on followers	Inability to perform duties, Desire to leave the institution/Shortened tenure, Harmed personal mental health, Strained relationships outside work, Compromised my values, Relationships with colleagues harmed/enhanced, Commitment to the institution strengthened/weakened, Motivation

### ***Theme 1: Destructive Leader Behavior***

Eight of the ten research participants indicated the destructive leader employed a leadership style that utilized harmful methods of influence with followers, such as being unethical, intimidating and condescending.

**Unethical.** Participants indicated they experienced destructive leaders who engaged in the unethical behaviors of lying, replacing ethical leaders with unethical leaders who would do the destructive leader's bidding, off-ramping several women's careers, and overall lacking integrity and trustworthiness. One example of lying was provided by participant 10 in this reflection on the behaviors of the President of the institution:

P10: [President] came in with some very set ideas about what she wanted to do and she brought in a consultant with her and they lied about the purpose of what the consultant's role was going to be and what [the consultant] was going to have to report back to the President. And so some of us were led to believe these were confidential conversations with the consultant when they were not, they were going directly back to the President and the President was directing the consultant what to ask us.

Participant 9 also provided an example of a President who engaged in lying to employees of the institution.

P9: I think the longer I was there the more I saw, that he had some incredibly self-destructive tendencies, and I think what I realized over time was that there was no way that the situation was going to get better. That there was no outcome where there could be a repair between him and faculty and some of the other bargaining units partially because they didn't trust him. And it was an interesting, meaning uncomfortable, position to hear some of the complaints that would come from [faculty], and be like, in my head, you are

totally right not to trust him, he is lying to you, what you think is happening behind the scenes is happening behind the scenes.

**Intimidating.** Intimidating behaviors described by participants included using threats, using intimidation tactics, abusing power, being mean, instilling fear, policing others, using coercion to get their way, creating a culture of fear and fear of retribution, publicly disparaging and shaming other leaders, yelling at staff, burning bridges with other stakeholders, and being abusive.

Participant 7 described how a destructive senior administrator used intimidating behaviors in this way: “She had really created an atmosphere of fear and intimidation and paranoia and just a lot of people were very scared of her and sort of some of the unethical practices she used and intimidation tactics when she would meet with people about [department] issues.”

Participant 10 provided an example of a destructive leader who threatened a follower with retribution: “[The President] told me when I was leaving, after she terminated me, if I spoke about any of it to anyone out of the organization, I would never work in this system again.”

**Condescending.** Another harmful behavior described by followers was condescending behavior towards followers, such as not treating people well or with respect, belittling people, yelling at colleagues in public, and being unpleasant to interact with due to the condescending tone of the destructive leader.

Participant 2 described how the director of the department in which she worked behaved condescendingly towards a coworker on the participants’ first day of work: “Literally, I almost didn’t come back for day two of my job. Yeah, my first day on the job I watched her berate a coworker and so I almost didn’t return on day two. It was really only through the encouragement

of my husband saying ‘well there might be things here you don’t know so you might want to give her the benefit of the doubt’ ...So I did go back. But my initial reaction was flight.”

Participants also identified several leadership behaviors (micromanaging, being absent, incompetent, passive, not inclusive, not supportive of subordinates) that may not appear to be intentionally harmful to followers because they may not be considered to be malicious, but did result in harm to followers. These types of behaviors were identified by all ten participants.

**Micromanaging.** Micromanaging behaviors described by participants included examples of destructive leaders who policed others’ behavior, honed into every detail of every project, had to be involved in every conversation subordinates had, controlled who subordinates could talk to and when they could get up from their desks, and did not allow staff to have autonomy over their own work.

In an example of a destructive department leader micromanaging who her staff could talk to, participant 2 recounted a specific interaction with the destructive leader where participant 2 was instructed not to talk to others in the office:

P2: At one point in time when I was very new, my coworker asked me if there were any bike racks because she biked to work. And I was like I don’t know. So I knew that my boss’s boss biked sometimes so I thought I’ll go ask her. So I got up and went to ask her and this person told me ‘oh yeah, there’s a bike rack here and here’. So I go back to my cube and my boss comes over to me and says ‘if you have those types of questions make sure you come to me. Don’t be bothering this person with these kinds of things’. So like, there was an expectation that we don’t talk to anyone or have relationships with anyone. That was the whole situation.



**Being Absent.** Another behavior that may not be considered to be malicious but does cause harm to followers is being absent. This was described by participants as leaders who are never present on campus, continuously late to meetings, disrespectful of others' time, and dismissive of others.

Participant 7 said the senior administrator he reported to was absent because she was "always late to meetings and was disrespectful of others people's time by cancelling appointments all the time and not being available to employees." Participant 9, who reported directly to the President, described the President of the institution as being physically absent from campus because "[He] was on campus 10% of the time. Like, I would go literally weeks without seeing him face to face. I would never talk to him on the phone. I think in the whole time we worked together, he was physically in my office twice."

**Incompetence.** On the surface, an incompetent leader may not appear to be harmful to followers but for participant 8, the incompetence of the senior administrator he worked for greatly contributed to participant 8 being terminated. The action for which participant 8 was terminated was a direct result of the work direction the destructive leader gave him. Other participants described incompetent leaders as not being curious about learning, not listening to others, only wanting to do it their way, lacking interpersonal skills and the ability to repair relationships, being unable to provide effective advice to direct reports, and being emotionally unintelligent.

**Passivity.** Similar to incompetence, passive behavior on the part of a leader may not appear to be harmful to followers, but for participant 5, the passive behavior of the director of the department in which she worked "created an atmosphere where people didn't know who was responsible for what", and this impacted the department's reputation on campus, and ultimately

created a dysfunctional work environment in the department. Participant 5 described this leader as someone who “cared about people but who had a leadership style that enabled whatever” and did not address any problems. Additional passive behaviors described by participants included being non-confrontational, not addressing issues, not holding people accountable, and lacking commitment to leadership duties.

Participant 3 interpreted the passive behavior of the destructive leader as a lack of care for the institution and the people in it when she gave the following example of a specific interaction she had with the President.

P3: At one point, [President told me] that when they left the college campus, that they didn't think about it, like they could leave it on Friday afternoon and not think about it until he walked into his office on Monday morning, and I think he was serious when he said that. And I was like, really? I have a strong work ethic so regardless of who I'm working for or where I am working, I think about my work almost all of the time. Like, I have a hard time separating it. So when I heard that, I was really demotivated and I almost became resentful. I was like you are in charge of this entire organization, all of these staff, faculty, students and you don't care about it enough to even be thinking about or for these things to be weighing on you and yet I am multiple steps below you and it's weighing on me heavily and your actions and what you're doing and your behaviors and its impact are weighing on me and you don't seem to care.”

**Exclusionary.** Not being inclusive is harmful to those followers who are not being included and it was pointed out by participant 6 that the individuals who were being included likely thought the leader was effective because they couldn't see what was happening to those in the department who were not being included.

Other participants described non-inclusive behavior as choosing people to be part of an inner circle of advisers, not sharing information or resources widely, having one very small group of people who the leader regularly worked with and only shared information with this group, not being inclusive in decision-making, and over-promoting certain people. Participant 9 indicated she worked for a President who intentionally chose certain people to promote and who moved people into positions without conducting searches because those were the people he wanted in his inner circle.

**Unsupportive.** Participants described their experience with this behavior as working for a leader who was never satisfied with the work of others, was not genuine in their compliments, assumed staff completed their work incorrectly, and demoralized staff. Participant 4 gave an example of this unsupportive behavior by saying “[The task] had to be done before he asked for it to be done. It was an impossible standard. If you got an ‘at a boy’ or ‘good job’ it wasn’t genuine because you knew he wasn’t really super excited about it.”

The next set of leader behaviors described by participants were harmful because they contravened the legitimate interests of the organization by putting the leaders’ personal interests before those of the institution/employees/students and by producing negative results for the institution. Seven of the ten participants mentioned these types of behaviors.

**Narcissistic Interests.** Participants described destructive leaders’ behavior as narcissistic, not wanting to do what was in the best interest of students, protecting their career rather than doing what’s right for students, and being more focused on personal interests and not the organization.

Participant 6 experienced this type of behavior from a destructive leader and made this comment: “Unfortunately this person was more focused on herself and not the organization so a lot of what she did was internally focused and for her, and not the organization.”

**Negative Outcomes.** Participants mentioned several negative results that were associated with the leader’s behavior such as “the college started losing money and enrollment dropped”, “left a legacy of destruction that continued after destructive leader was removed”, “left the college worse than it was before”, “damaged reputation of department”, “negatively impacted the college’s legacy”, “slowed down workflow in the department”, and “impaired the ability to deliver necessary information to end-users.”

In summary, participants reported that destructive leaders in public institutions of higher education used harmful methods of influence and engaged in behaviors that caused harm to both individuals and the institution, and that were in opposition to the interests of the institution.

### ***Theme 2: Environment at the Institution***

The environment in which the destructive leadership occurred was mentioned by all ten participants when they recounted their experiences. Participants described the environment in two ways: (1) the culture or norms at the institution and (2) how they saw people operating in this environment or operating norms. The institutional culture, or norms, described by participants included a lack of accountability, instability, dysfunction, and a culture of fear, distrust and low morale. Descriptions of how people operated in the environment consisted of a division of followers, complicity and/or collusion with the destructive leader, and loyalty to the destructive leader being rewarded.

**Lack of Accountability.** The lack of accountability described by participants ranged from the belief that no institutional policies existed to address destructive leadership, to

acknowledging policies were in place but the process was controlled by the destructive leader so no one used it, to acknowledging policies were in place but leaders and others with power were unwilling to enforce them. Participant 2 described this scenario in the following way:

P2: Any piece of paper that attempts to address these [policies] doesn't matter. Because, and that's not even trying to say that I'm like cynical, it really just is the fact of the matter. People, there's a power differential and any policy is only as good as the people who are enforcing it and if there's no attempt to enforce it, and or the goal or primary objective is apathy or minimizing legal liability, like those policies don't matter. The policies that are in place today were in place back then, with the exception of the respectful workplace policy that was adopted three or four years ago. But none of it matters. I mean the behavior can persist and does persist despite those policies and is often times the people in positions of power that can change it are informed and let it persist.

Participant 4 commented on the difficulty of addressing destructive leadership through formal policies by saying "it's difficult to describe and actually define in a written policy" and therefore, "you cannot make it against policy to do something you can't describe."

Additional examples of a lack of accountability in the environment were described by participants as situations where individuals in leadership positions did not seek input or formal feedback from staff when making decisions that would impact staff. For example, at the institution where participant 2 was employed, the leadership decided to change the employment status of the destructive leader of the department in which participant 2 worked from temporary to permanent without consulting participant 2 or her coworker. Had they been consulted, they could have served as the check on the destructive leader and could have prevented the

destructive leader from being hired permanently. This could have prevented the harm to the department and the staff that resulted from this lack of check and balance in the institution's decision-making process.

Overall, participants described a general sense of discontentment with the lack of accountability. Participant 7 described this frustration in the following way:

P7: My feeling like totally exasperated with how destructive leaders can just continue to go on without any accountability. I don't understand it. Even when you go through proper channels and get a giant petition and nothing happens. It just makes people feel completely helpless and hopeless that nothing will ever change and they just have to resign themselves to their circumstances and a lot of people don't have the privilege that I had to switch jobs. And a lot of people are still there, figuring out ways to make it bearable, but it's just really too bad these things just don't change.

**Instability and Dysfunction.** Another aspect of the culture (or norms) described by participants included patterns of instability and dysfunction within the institution. Participants described this type of environment as “a sense of unrest at the institution”, “a revolving door”, “lack of communication about changes”, “significant turnover”, “vote of no confidence from faculty”, “an unhealthy environment to employee mental health”, and “a stressful and hostile environment.” Participant 6 described the dysfunction within the institution she worked for in this way:

P6: I think that was just, again, distrust of what was going on at a higher level that perhaps created tension between departments because, again, nobody knew what was going on, and nobody knew what other people knew or what other people were doing that

might impact them and so it was kind of, it made people become more protective of their own units.

**Culture of Fear, Distrust and Low Morale.** In addition to instability and dysfunction, participants described their environments as having a culture of fear, distrust, and low morale.

A culture of fear was described as “fear of retribution”, “fear of losing your job if anything was said against the destructive leader”, “fear of impact on career”, “people not feeling safe psychologically”, “nervousness due to lack of information and intimidation”, “paranoia”, and “dysfunctional communication channels (rumors, gossip) in place of transparent communication.”

A culture of distrust was described as “not knowing who to trust”, “the erosion of trust due to inconsistent communication”, “tension between leaders created division”, and “no trust between destructive leader and staff, faculty and some other leaders.” Participant 4 indicated the distrustful environment created stress because “even amongst my peers and team I didn’t know who to trust and that was stressful.” Not only did participants talk about the distrust they had in their own teams, participant 6 described the distrust that permeated the entire campus due to the destructive leader:

P6: This person kind of had three people that was like her team, who were not all her direct reports, so it created this distrust and this divisiveness between departments and between colleagues and eventually when that happens for so long it starts to impact the layers, it goes down through the deans, the directors, the staff. And after a year and a half things were so bad, everyone was screaming, especially the staff. And people did use the human resources processes, people were talking to academic affairs and the president, I think a lot of people went as groups to the president to explain what was happening.

Lastly, low morale was mentioned by two participants and was described as people feeling bad about the work they were doing and not being recognized for good work.

In addition to describing the norms or culture that existed, the environment described by participants also included the people within the environment and how they interacted with each other and the destructive leader. Three participants indicated there was a division in the environment between followers who supported the destructive leader and those who did not. Seven participants indicated they worked in an environment where collusion with the destructive leader existed and loyalty to the destructive leader was rewarded.

**Division of Followers.** The division of followers was described by participants as “people choosing sides and being either with the destructive leader or not”, “people identifying certain individuals as traitors for their actions related to the destructive leader”, “destructive leader’s little birdies would tell on other people”, “the team was terrified of the destructive leader”, and people feeling their own values and integrity were being compromised by associating themselves with the destructive leader and wanting to dissociate themselves from the leader.

**Complicity/Collusion.** Several participants described the environment as one in which complicity existed. Examples of complicity include the following descriptions from participants: “Senior leaders aware of destructive leader and were complicit”, “to be effective, you had to engage in unethical behavior”, “other senior leaders were powerless with this destructive leader”, “I feared taking action against the destructive leader because of what happened to someone else who tried this”, “I kept making the destructive leader look good to help the organization”, and “the superior of the destructive leader seemed oblivious to the destructive leader’s behavior but



when I mentioned it to her, she acknowledged she was aware of it and she hadn't done anything to address it.”

**Rewarding Loyalty.** Several participants described the environment as one in which those who were loyal to the destructive leader were rewarded with access to resources and/or career opportunities. The following descriptions provided by participants are examples of rewards being exchanged for loyalty to the destructive leader: “the destructive leader promoted those who would do her bidding, those who were climbing the ladder”, “destructive leader had his inner circle of people who he chose (hired)”, and “she had a small circle of people to consult and share information and resources with.”

In summary, participants reported that the environment at their institution had a lack of checks and balances, instability, dysfunction, a culture of fear, low morale, distrust, and a division of followers. Additionally, participants reported the existence of complicity and rewards for loyalty to the destructive leader.

### ***Theme 3: Follower Reactions***

All ten participants explained how they reacted to the destructive leadership and their reasons for reacting the way they did. Reactions described by participants were grouped into four categories: alliances, avoidance, mitigation, and confronting.

**Alliances.** Four participants indicated one of the ways they reacted to the destructive leader was to form alliances by “talking to other people to try to cope with the situation”, “working with the labor union to get a petition to remove the destructive leader”, “forming close relationships with other leaders”, and “forming close alliances with other colleagues.” Participant 10 described how she formed an alliance with her colleagues in order to deal with the destructive

leadership: “My relationship with the other [colleagues] that were there became very strong, we became a very allied group in trying to deal with it.”

**Avoidance.** Three participants shared they reacted to the destructive leader by avoiding or distancing themselves from this person. Two participants did this so that they wouldn’t be associated with the destructive leader for fear that it would impact their own career prospects, and one participant shared that they did not address the destructive leader because the participant “didn’t believe it would have helped or that it would have been effective.”

**Mitigation.** Seven participants engaged in activities to mitigate the harmful effects of the destructive leader on others. These activities included following-up with people to help after they experienced a feeling of devastation, redirecting others to “not take it personally and focus on the great work they were doing”, mitigating the fall-out or cleaning up, “providing support to staff who were struggling with the destructive leader behaviors”, “protecting the work of the team and serving as a buffer between them and the destructive leader”, “protecting my team and the college”, and “protecting the college from the destructive leader.”

The reason for mitigating the impact of the destructive leader provided by participant 9 was to protect the team:

P9: Protecting my team was a really big priority for me and it still is. I really genuinely care about the people in my division and I think the work that they do is really important and so I wanted them to be able to do that work and so overall I think the health of the institution was a piece of that as well.

Participant 6 shared how she tried to mitigate the impact of the destructive leader by being a buffer and ensuring she shared as much information as possible to try to put people at ease:

P6: For my own staff, I served as that buffer so from that standpoint, yes. I don't know how effective I was, just being in the role I was in I could only do so much but I think serving as that buffer, making sure whatever information that I had that I was sharing and that people knew what I knew was going on and that I could talk with my staff individually about what was happening how they were feeling and in some way help them try to process through what they were feeling so people had that space to do that.

Participant 3 shared how she tried to mitigate impact of the destructive leader by coaching people after they had experienced a harmful interaction with the destructive leader:

P3: I tried to serve as a buffer and then also for the people below me, also trying to get them to redirect their focus. On the one hand I was trying to minimize the impact [the destructive leader] had, or trying to make it sound as if the impact of his leadership wouldn't be as bad as they thought, but more importantly trying to redirect their focus. Like I was constantly in conversations where I was like don't focus on that, let's focus on the good work that we're doing at the college or the good work that you're doing individually and put that person out of your mind. So I was doing that kind of serving as a buffer but then also, and I never did confront him, but when I saw or was witness to public examples of behavior, I would go to people and say don't feel bad about that or this isn't personal, don't take this personally, this decision he made or what have you. So I felt like towards the end I was constantly doing that because I was seeing like this devastation.

**Confronting.** All but two participants engaged in confronting the destructive leader or the destructive leaders' superior(s). For participant 4, this did not go well:

P4: I started confronting the behavior and it didn't go well. He took it out on me very hard and apparently my performance dramatically changed in his eyes and I was no longer probably able to fulfill the role that I had. Didn't get fired. I tried to quit and he wouldn't let me. He wasn't done with me. He wanted to put together a pretty negative performance review."

Other participants indicated they did the following to confront the destructive leader: "I tried to work with destructive leader to get him to communicate changes", "I appealed to the destructive leader to be more ethical", "I encouraged the destructive leader to be proactive in communicating but he didn't listen", "I stood up to the destructive leader and her allies when I noticed they were being unethical", and "I challenged the destructive leader and she told me my behavior was disrespectful." Participants also indicated they met with the destructive leader's supervisor to explain what was happening.

In summary, participants reacted to destructive leadership in institutions of public higher education by forming alliances, avoiding the destructive leader, mitigating the harmful impact of the destructive leader on others, and confronting the destructive leader and/or their superior(s).

#### ***Theme 4: Impact on followers***

Participants reported many aspects of their personal and professional lives were impacted by the destructive leadership. Negative impacts included an inability to perform duties, desire to leave the institution/shortened tenure, harm to their mental health, strained relationships outside of work, and compromised values of the participant. Motivation was not impacted by destructive leadership and participants reported their relationships with colleagues were harmed but also enhanced. Participants described the impact on their commitment to the institution as being weakened or simultaneously weakened and strengthened.

**Performance.** Participants provided many examples of how they were unable to perform their duties because of the destructive leader, saying “it stifled my ability to do what I needed to do”, “took time away from focusing on work duties in order to decompress”, “at first it did not impact my ability to perform my duties but then it permeated all levels of the campus and my own integrity and values were compromised”, “the destructive leader did not support my work so it was like triple the work on an already unrealistic workload”, and “impacted my ability to motivate others to perform in order to help my division improve enrollment.” In an example of not being able to perform her duties, participant 10 indicated she was being told what to do and how to treat people and, because she wouldn’t do this, she couldn’t perform the duties of her position in the way it was expected by the destructive leader.

**Desire to Leave the Institution/Shortened Tenure.** All but one participant indicated the destructive leader impacted their desire to leave the institution or shortened their tenure at the institution. Two participants indicated they were terminated by the destructive leader. Eight participants indicated they chose to leave the institution or that they would have left the institution if the destructive leader hadn’t been terminated.

Participant 9 desired to leave but chose to stay because the destructive leader was exited. Participant 9 described the impact on the desire to leave the institution in the following way:

P9: Would I still be here if [destructive leader] was still the president, no, I wouldn’t have made it this long. I was at the end of rapidly fraying rope by the time he was gone and had they not put in a leader after him that was his polar opposite in similarly important ways, yeah I would have, for self-preservation, I would have had to make a different decision.

Participant 7 chose to leave while the destructive leader was still in the senior administrator position. This is participant 7's perspective on the situation:

P7: There was a point where I was like I need to get out of here, this is an unsafe place to be and so I don't think that took very long, probably less than a year and I was already looking. And I was just like, I can't work for someone like this in any good conscious and obviously for my own mental health that was an issue.

**Mental Health.** During the interviews, nine participants mentioned, unprompted, their mental health was impacted by the destructive leader. Some participants mentioned in general that their mental health had been impacted, while others mentioned specific mental health conditions such as suffering from PTSD after the destructive leadership was over and suffering a nervous breakdown or experiencing anxiety while working for the destructive leader.

**Personal Relationships.** Three participants mentioned the destructive leadership strained their relationships outside of work, with one participant indicating she started to take her anger and anxiety out on her spouse, "At that time [when I was working for the destructive leader, my husband and I] were fighting like we'd never fought before. Because everything he did triggered this anger and frustration that I was experiencing in the workplace and were hitting my vulnerabilities." The other two participants indicated it strained their relationships with their spouses as well.

**Values.** Three participants described the impact the destructive leadership had on their values, saying "my behavior changed for the worse around this person", "my integrity was being compromised by the destructive leader", and "I don't want to be supporting or uplifting someone who was treating people this way."

**Work Relationships.** There were mixed responses from participants when they were asked what impact the destructive leadership had on their relationships with colleagues. Some participants said the destructive leader served as a common enemy around whom a team could bond and therefore this enhanced their relationships with colleagues. However, for participant 2, because the destructive leader would not let staff in the department talk to each other without the destructive leader interjecting, the destructive leader served as a wedge between colleagues.

In environments where there was a division between followers who were for or against the destructive leader, the relationships with colleagues were dependent upon which side a person was on. This also created strain and stress because these individuals sometimes didn't know whose side their colleagues were on so they couldn't trust any of their colleagues. In situations where the participant was challenging the destructive leader, their relationships with colleagues suffered due to fear of retribution for being associated with the challenger.

**Commitment to the Institution.** The responses were mixed when participants were asked what impact the destructive leadership had on their commitment to the organization. Overall, participants expressed a commitment to the mission of the organization, but not necessarily the organization. It was described as "believing in and being committed to the work the institution is doing, just not how it's doing it." Additionally, some participants said their commitment to the organization increased because they felt compelled to protect the organization from the destructive leader's harm. Participant 9 described this commitment in the following way:

P9: I often felt like there were very few people at cabinet who actually cared about our students, like in a genuine I'm going to let that guide my decision-making kind of way.

And so I felt like if I go, who's going to be that voice in this group of people who I don't

trust their motives for a lot of stuff. It kind of was both the thing that made me want to leave but it also kept me there to try to be a protective barrier.

**Motivation.** Most participants said their motivation was not impacted by the destructive leader because they still believed in the work they were doing, like in this example from participant 9, “I was motivated to protect students and do good work in spite of the destructive leader” and this example from participant 1, “I was highly motivated and the destructive leader wasn’t going to stop me so I worked around her.”

In summary, destructive leaders impact many aspects of follower’s personal and professional lives. While most areas were impacted negatively by destructive leadership, motivation was generally not impacted, relationships with colleagues were either harmed or strengthened, and commitment to the organization was either weakened or both weakened and strengthened.

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the experiences of followers in a destructive leadership process in institutions of public higher education in the United States. These experiences are multifaceted and encompass four theme-based findings: (1) followers are subjected to a wide range of harmful destructive leader behaviors, (2) followers operate in environments conducive to destructive leadership, (3) followers react to destructive leadership by trying to minimize its negative impact, and (4) followers are personally and professionally harmed by destructive leadership. This chapter contains discussion to help answer the research questions: (1) How do followers respond to destructive leadership behaviors at institutions of public higher education in the United States? (2) How does the environment shape this response? (3) How are followers impacted by destructive leadership?, and relates the findings to the



literature on destructive leadership behaviors, the role of followers and the environment in destructive leadership, and the impact of destructive leaders on followers. It connects this study and the toxic triangle framework, discusses the limitations of the study, as well as areas for further research.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

Each individual participant's experience with destructive leadership in an institution of public higher education was unique but in analyzing and synthesizing all of their experiences, four prominent themes emerged. Each theme-based finding is discussed in detail below.

#### ***Followers Are Subjected to a Wide Range of Harmful Destructive Leader Behaviors***

Consistent with existing research on behaviors exhibited by destructive, toxic, or aggressive leaders, this study found that leaders engage in behaviors that harm, or intend to harm, followers or an organization by using harmful methods of influence and/or encouraging followers to pursue goals that are not in the best interest of the organization. These behaviors include intimidation, micromanaging, unethical behavior, over controlling, being ineffective at coordinating and managing, playing favorites, making significant decisions without information, narcissism, and prioritizing personal goals or interests over those of the organization (Einarsen et al., 2007; Erickson et al., 2015; Krasikova et al., 2013; Ovidia et al., 2016; Padilla et al., 2007, Webster et al., 2016).

Narcissistic behavior can be a mental condition that's classified as a personality disorder, if certain criteria are met, according to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.; DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013). One of the key characteristics of any of the personality disorders is a lack of insight, meaning the person with the disorder rarely realizes or believes there is anything wrong with their perspective of behavior;

the person believes that other people are wrong. Thus, it's important for followers to understand that a leader with narcissistic personality disorder is unlikely to accept responsibility for their behavior and/or change their pattern of destructive and self-centered behaviors.

Additional destructive leader behaviors mentioned by participants that were not mentioned in the literature include being absent, passive, not inclusive, and not supportive of subordinates. However, some of these behaviors should be considered destructive leader behaviors because they ultimately resulted in harm, intentional or not, to followers. For one participant, passive behavior by a department director took the form of the absence of communication about a reorganization within the department. This led to dysfunction within the department because followers didn't know what their responsibilities were or where to send service requests. This caused delays in service and ultimately resulted in a bad reputation for the department at the institution.

Participants described behaviors that align with those described in the literature on destructive leadership. This suggests that the participants in this study did experience destructive leader behaviors in institutions of public higher education and were not recounting experiences that could simply be considered ineffective and/or inexperienced leadership. However, the findings of this study do not align with the destructive leader characteristics described by Padilla et al., (2007) in the toxic triangle framework. Part of the reason for this misalignment is that participants were not asked to describe the characteristics of the destructive leader but were asked to describe their experiences with the leader. Thus, participants described observable behaviors and the impact of these observable behaviors on them and the organization. Looking at the list of five destructive leader characteristics described by Padilla et al. (2007) in the toxic triangle framework, only narcissism aligns with the behaviors described by participants. The

other four are absent from descriptions provided by participants: charisma, negative life themes, ideology of hate, and personalized need for power.

Despite this misalignment, the findings do provide evidence of the existence of leaders who exhibited destructive leader behaviors and, for the purposes of this study, this is enough evidence to classify these leaders as destructive leaders. Thus, the findings of this study do provide evidence that the destructive leader component of the toxic triangle was present in the destructive leadership situations described by participants.

### ***Followers Operate in Environments Conducive to Destructive Leadership***

While each participant described their environment based on their own unique experience, across all institutions and all situations, participants described the environment as one that is conducive to producing destructive leadership. In the toxic triangle framework, a conducive environment consists of a lack of checks and balances, instability, perceived threat, and questionable cultural values (Padilla et al., 2007). Similarly, past research has found the types of environments in which destructive leadership occurs typically have weak or nonexistent board oversight, an erosion of checks on power, a culture of fear, conflict, silence and a lack of action by followers (Fraher, 2016; Pelletier et al., 2019; Sparks et al., 2015).

Almost all participants (eight out of ten) mentioned a lack of checks and balances within the institution despite, for some participants, their institution having a policy, procedure, or process designed to address destructive leader behaviors. Participants described this type of environment as one in which a policy, procedure, or process existed to address destructive leader behaviors, but followers were afraid to use them because they were controlled by the destructive leader, or followers were using them but those in charge were not enforcing them. Additionally, participants indicated the environment had instability in the form of high turnover and a sense of

unrest, dysfunction in the form of lack of communication about changes, and an overall culture of fear, distrust and low morale. A few participants in this study indicated they were silent and did not take action against the destructive leader because they feared retribution and/or harm to their own career, and they believed it would not have been an effective way to deal with the situation. However, in contrast to past research, most of the participants in this study did not remain silent and did take action in response to the destructive leader behaviors. Participant's reactions to destructive leadership will be discussed in the next theme-based finding section.

The environment was also described by participants as the ways in which they saw people operating. The people operating in these environments were described as being divided along lines of their loyalty to the destructive leader, as being complicit with the destructive leader, and as being rewarded for loyalty to the destructive leader. For participants who indicated there was a division among followers, they described the environment as one comprising two separate teams: a team who was with the destructive leader and a team who was against the destructive leader. This division created a stressful work environment where participants weren't sure who they could trust. In some environments, followers were complicit with the destructive leader and engaged in unethical behaviors in order to be effective or out of fear of what would happen if they didn't comply with the destructive leader. Participants also observed followers being rewarded for their loyalty to the destructive leader via access to resources, information, and/or career opportunities. The ways in which participants described how people operated within the environment at their institutions aligns with the susceptible follower component of Padilla et al.'s (2007) toxic triangle framework. In the toxic triangle framework, susceptible followers take two forms: (1) conformers who comply with the destructive leader out of fear and (2) colluders who follow the destructive leader to reap personal benefits (Padilla et al, 2007).

This finding suggests that susceptible followers were present in the destructive leadership situations described by participants in this study.

***Followers React to Destructive Leadership by trying to Minimize its Negative Impact***

This study's results support previous research findings that followers recognize their leaders' destructive leadership behavior and engage in behaviors intended to moderate its damaging impact to themselves, their colleagues, and/or the organization (Mackey et al., 2019; Milosevic et al., 2020; Webster et al., 2016). Participants responded to destructive leaders in multiple ways, as the destructive leadership progressed over time: they did not blindly follow destructive leaders, and they utilized their own agency to try to mitigate the harmful impact of destructive leaders. Past research has shown that followers respond to destructive leadership by seeking social support, resisting the leader, challenging the leader, leaving the organization, engaging in counterproductive workplace behaviors and workplace deviance, and seeking professional development opportunities to build their own skills (Milosevic et al., 2019; Schyns & Schilling, 2013; Webster et al., 2016).

One of the noticeable differences in the results of this study, as compared to existing studies on the reactions of followers in situations of destructive leadership, is that participants did not engage in counterproductive work behavior, workplace deviance, or seeking professional development opportunities to build skills for challenging the destructive leader (Schyns & Schilling, 2013). However, previous research by Mackey et al. (2019) did find that followers moderate their own behaviors in response to destructive leadership over time. Thus, the lack of counterproductive workplace behavior and deviance could be the result of participants considering these types of behaviors as being too risky to their own job performance and therefore choosing not to engage in them. Additionally, it's possible participants chose to not

engage in these types of behaviors because they determined other courses of action (forming alliances, avoiding the leader, mitigating impact on others, and confronting the destructive leader and/or superior) were more suitable to the situation and would produce better results.

The findings of this study also suggest that participants' reactions to the destructive leadership are shaped by the environment in which they operate.

**Avoiding the Leader.** Followers who were able to avoid the destructive leader were able to distance themselves from being harmed by the destructive leader's behavior and were able to prevent harm to their career that could be caused by associating with the destructive leader. However, this was not an option for all participants because some of them directly reported to the destructive leader.

**Forming Follower Alliances.** Some participants formed alliances with other followers who had a similar viewpoint of the destructive leader. However, this was not an option for all participants because the level of fear and distrust in their environments prevented followers from trusting each other. These participants could not determine allies from those who were colluding with the destructive leader and, therefore, the environment constrained their ability to form alliances with other followers.

**Mitigating Impact.** For participants who attempted to mitigate the impact of the destructive leader, they were limited in what they could do by the positions they were in. They could help followers cope after they had been directly harmed by the destructive leader, redirect their attention to focus on the good work of the college, and share as much information with their teams as possible. However, they were not able to mitigate the harm by removing the source of the harmfulness (i.e., the destructive leader) because this was beyond the capabilities of their position.

**Confronting Destructive Leader and/or Superiors.** Most followers reported they confronted the destructive leader or the superior(s) of the destructive leader without being constrained by factors in the environment. However, confronting the destructive leader and/or the destructive leader's superior(s) did not always lead to desired results, and for some participants, it came at a personal cost to them. One participant chose to confront the destructive leader directly about their behavior and then became the target of the leader's retaliation in the form of an attack on the participant's job performance. When the participant tried to resign, the leader would not accept the resignation and continued to put pressure on the participant to improve performance. The participant ultimately suffered a nervous breakdown and had to resign from the position. Another participant chose to confront the destructive leaders' superior(s) which resulted in the termination of the destructive leader. Those loyal to the destructive leader viewed this participant as a traitor and forced the participant to temporarily move into a position outside of the department. When the participant returned to the department, the participant's position was eliminated and the participant was laid off. Lastly, one participant chose to work with fellow colleagues to create a petition for the removal of the destructive leader. After gathering signatures, the participant's colleagues presented the petition to the destructive leaders' superiors but this did not result in the removal of the destructive leader. The participant grew increasingly frustrated with the lack of action to hold the destructive leader accountable and, seeing this as a sign that the situation was never going to change, chose to leave the institution.

Despite the culture of fear and distrust, the lack of checks and balances in the environment prompted most participants to take action to minimize the negative impact of the destructive leader. These findings suggest that in the absence of formal checks and balances and superiors holding destructive leaders accountable, participants took it upon themselves to serve

as the main check and balance in the environment. However, depending on the additional context of the environment, this did not always lead to the removal of the destructive leader and came at a great personal and professional cost to several participants.

### ***Followers Are Personally and Professionally Harmed by Destructive Leadership***

This finding is consistent with previous research that demonstrates the consequences to followers are quite severe, impacting the quality of life for followers and the effectiveness of the institution (Erickson et al., 2015; Hershcovis & Barling, 2010; Ovidia et al., 2016; Schmid et al., 2018; Schyns & Schilling, 2013; Webster et al., 2016). Impacts include: turnover/intent to turnover, harmed mental health, declines in ability to perform duties, and strained relationships outside of work (Erickson et al., 2015; Hershcovis & Barling, 2010; Ovidia et al., 2016; Schmid et al., 2018). Additional impacts on followers in situations of destructive leadership that have been found in previous research but were not reported by participants in this study included: harmed physical health, organizational deviance, interpersonal deviance, devaluing the organization, and limited innovation due to risk avoidance (Erickson et al., 2015; Hershcovis & Barling, 2010; Webster et al., 2016)

While past studies have found that followers had decreased commitment to the organization and decreased cohesion among work groups, the findings of this study show that individual participants reported both increased and decreased commitment and both strengthened and weakened relationships with colleagues (Erickson et al., 2015; Hershcovis & Barling, 2010). The impact of destructive leadership on follower's relationships with colleagues was complex. For participants in environments where there was a division of followers, this division served as a common bond among colleagues who shared the same viewpoint of the leader but this division also served as a wedge that further divided colleagues who did not share the same viewpoint of



the leader. Similarly, destructive leadership simultaneously strengthened and weakened followers' commitment to the organization. Participants explained that their commitment to the leader, and the way the organization was doing its work under this leader, was weakened, but they remained committed to the work (or mission) of the organization and to their staff. In some cases, their commitment was strengthened because they wanted to protect the good work of their department from the destructive leader. Yet for others, the way the organization was being run was enough for them to lose commitment to the organization, especially in situations where the destructive leadership had been ongoing and there was no sign of improvement on the horizon.

### **Implications for Theory and Research**

These findings provide evidence to support the toxic triangle framework and to support the notion that destructive leadership is a complex, socially-constructed process involving a destructive leader, a conducive environment and susceptible followers (Padilla et al., 2007; Thoroughgood et al., 2018). These results support, and provide additional evidence for, the argument that a more holistic understanding of destructive leadership requires acknowledging that leadership processes and their outcomes are not the product of a single factor or person, but the product of these interdependent elements (Padilla et al., 2007; Thoroughgood et al., 2018).

Padilla et al. (2007) asserts that the presence of all three elements of the toxic triangle framework is more likely to produce destructive leadership, but they do not provide details about how variations in the presence of these elements increase or decrease the likelihood of producing destructive leadership. For example, this study found evidence of the presence of susceptible followers within the institutions where participants worked, but in analyzing this finding, it wasn't clear how the number of susceptible followers and the positions they hold impacts the likelihood of destructive leadership occurring. If half of an institution's senior leadership team

are susceptible followers and the other half are not (and are actively working to mitigate the impact of the destructive leaders) does this lessen the likelihood that destructive leadership will occur, or does it at least impact the longevity of the destructive leadership? It's also not clear if the position or informal power of the susceptible followers is a factor. For example, if there are a few susceptible followers in key positions of authority (such as the director of human resources or the senior academic administrator) is this more likely to result in destructive leadership than if the followers in these positions are not susceptible followers?

The environments described by participants are in alignment with the elements of a conducive environment as described by Padilla et al. (2007). However, it's difficult to determine if these environmental elements existed prior to the arrival of the destructive leader and the susceptible followers, or if the environment was shaped over time by the presence of the destructive leader and susceptible followers. It is also unclear whether or not this impacts the likelihood of destructive leadership occurring. For example, did the instability within the environment start with the hiring of one destructive leader, who, after being hired, started replacing members of their team and making changes to procedures and organizational structure? Or was the instability in existence before the destructive leader was hired? Additionally, did the destructive leader and/or the susceptible followers enter an environment with a lack of checks and balances or did they, over time, change the environment by dismantling and/or weakening existing checks and balances?

As was stated earlier, one of the criticisms of the research on destructive leadership overall is the continued focus on the behaviors of the leader without accounting for the socially complex environment in which leadership occurs. Leadership is not solely dependent on the behaviors of the leader because the environment, or conditions in which they lead, and followers

co-create and influence the leadership process. This co-creational process was evident in the destructive leadership situations described by participants through the interdependent elements of the toxic triangle. The destructive leaders interacted with followers and impacted how followers behaved and the destructive leaders impacted the environment in which followers operated. The followers' actions were influenced by the behaviors of the destructive leader and the followers' actions shaped the environment. The environment, and especially the lack of checks and balances in the environment, influenced the behaviors of the destructive leaders and the followers. Thus, research on destructive leadership should continue to focus on better understanding the process of destructive leadership by studying the interactive effects of the leader, the followers, and the environment.

Even though these findings provide evidence to support the toxic triangle framework, these findings also contained aspects of destructive leadership that weren't fully in alignment with, or explained by, the toxic triangle. First, the only destructive leader behavior described by participants that aligns with the characteristics of destructive leaders in the toxic triangle framework is narcissism. Second, participants mentioned the division of followers as an aspect of the environment that's conducive to destructive leadership because it divides followers and leads to dysfunction, fear and distrust. The toxic triangle framework does not include the presence of a division of followers in its definition of an environment that's conducive to producing destructive leadership. Third, participants indicated susceptible followers were present in their institutions and this aligns with the toxic triangle framework but what's not addressed in the toxic triangle framework is whether or not the number and positions held by susceptible followers matters. Thus, additional research should be conducted to further understand these

aspects of destructive leadership and to explore the possibility of expanding the toxic triangle framework to account for these findings.

### **Implications for Practice**

The continued presence of destructive leadership in organizations along with the harmful impact it causes to both employees and organizations suggests that society has yet to fully comprehend how to prevent destructive leadership from occurring. The findings of this study suggest that to better understand destructive leadership, for the purposes of identifying, preventing or eradicating it, we must acknowledge that destructive leadership is a process that encompasses the interactions of a leader, followers, and the environment. For organizations seeking ways to prevent and /or address destructive leadership, each component of the toxic triangle should be addressed in organizational practices.

To address the first component of the toxic triangle, destructive leader behaviors, organizations should incorporate safe and trusted feedback mechanisms that allow followers to provide input and feedback on the performance of their leader to their leader's superior(s). Additionally, screening tools or situational scenarios that are designed to identify the natural characteristics and/or behaviors of candidates should be incorporated into the hiring process for leadership positions.

To address the second component of the toxic triangle, susceptible followers, organizations should evaluate whether or not their current systems are designed to encourage and reward conformity and complicity among followers. For example, while it might seem that the appropriate reaction of followers in all of the situations described by participants would have been to go to human resources to report the destructive leader, some participants indicated human resources was viewed as an ineffective and undesirable option because it was not trusted

and/or was viewed as a colluder with the destructive leader. Without a trusted source where behaviors of destructive leaders can be reported and addressed, followers feel frustrated and end up having to choose whether or not they are willing to continue working in this type of environment. When surveying individuals who had experienced toxic leadership, Webster et al. (2016) found 30% of respondents indicated the lack of support from within the organization was just as much a cause of stress for them as the destructive leader. Thus, support mechanisms to discourage susceptibility among followers are important.

The third component of the toxic triangle, a conducive environment, should be addressed by organizations through the examination of processes, procedures, and policies designed to serve as checks and balances. Additionally, organizations should utilize instruments designed to measure the culture within the organization for early signs of perceived fear, distrust, and low morale.

As this study has shown, the lack of checks and balances in the environment motivated participants to take action in an effort to mitigate the impact of the destructive leader and their mitigation efforts then became the check within the environment. However, depending on the additional context of the environment, this did not always lead to the removal of the destructive leader and, in some instances, it came at a great personal cost to the participant: three participants were let go from their positions and another was driven to the point of nervous breakdown and resigned. This highlights the importance of followers and their ability to provide feedback to decision makers who provide oversight for leaders. Followers are the ultimate consumers of the leader's leadership and should be given an opportunity to provide safe, upward feedback regarding leaders' behaviors without fear of retribution, harm to their own career trajectory, or harm to their psychological and physical health. Destructive leaders require assistance from a

conducive environment and susceptible followers in order to create destructive leadership for an organization; those who take action to check the behaviors of destructive leaders should be given support and treated as an asset, capable of deterring destructive leadership, to those who govern institutions of public higher education.

### **Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

The generalizability of the results of this study are limited by the small sample size and the method of selecting participants. The sample was not randomly selected from a large population; research participants were recruited from the researcher's personal network and self-selected to participate in the study. Because the sample selected was not representative of all followers in all types of organizations in all locations throughout the world, the results of the study are limited in their ability to create general knowledge. However, the results of this study are generalizable within the context of public higher education in the United States for the purpose of understanding the lived experiences of followers in situations of destructive leadership.

More credibility could be given to this study if coupled with quantitative research. For example, a data set of institutional or departmental performance metrics over time during the destructive leaders' tenure could offer stronger evidence of the existence of destructive leadership outcomes if the performance of the institution suffered during the leaders' tenure. In this study, each participant determined whether or not destructive leadership existed at their institution based on the definition of destructive leadership provided by the researcher. This could have led to variations in interpreting what constitutes destructive leadership, whereas a data set of institutional performance metrics and an established measure of declining performance would have been a more standardized way to determine the presence of destructive

leadership outcomes at each participant's institution. This statement is not in any way meant to discredit the experiences of destructive leadership described by participants; it is intended to point out how the methods of this study could be improved.

It was beyond the scope of this study to conduct a quantitative analysis to test the hypothesis that the presence of the toxic triangle is more likely to produce destructive leadership in institutions of public higher education. Additionally, it was beyond the scope of this study to research and identify best practices to address, eliminate, or prevent destructive leadership in institutions of public higher education. However, based on the findings of this study, suggestions for both quantitative analysis and ways to identify and prevent destructive leadership are provided.

Despite these limitations, the findings of this study do highlight the importance of followers and the environment in the destructive leadership process in institutions of public higher education. Additionally, these findings contribute to the growing field of research on destructive leadership that is moving away from focusing on the traits and behaviors of the leaders to focusing on the complex, systems-approach to studying destructive leadership. The findings of this study provide valid information about the lived experiences of ten followers who experienced destructive leadership at public higher education institutions in the United States. This information is highly relevant to all stakeholders of institutions of public higher education in the United States, particularly those who govern these institutions.

This study analyzed the experiences of followers in situations of destructive leadership in institutions of public higher education in the United States but it did not focus on how to prevent, reduce or eliminate it. Further research is needed that utilizes the information collected in this study to identify, and test the effectiveness of, methods to prevent destructive leadership from

occurring. This research would need to focus on more than just hiring a leader who does not exhibit destructive behavior; this research would need to account for the environment and how followers operate in the environment in order to come up with effective solutions to address the highly complex, socially-constructed, process of destructive leadership.

This study was not designed to be a quantitative analysis of the correlation between the presence of each component of the toxic triangle and negative outcomes for the institution and followers. Further research is needed to establish if there is a correlation between the presence of each component of the toxic triangle and negative outcomes for the institutions and followers. The findings of this study supported the existence of the toxic triangle but an analysis of the strength of each component, and its relative impact on producing negative or harmful results for the institution, was not included. A larger, more comprehensive study of a random selection of institutions of public higher education in the United States could generate results that are more generalizable than the results found in this study if a large enough sample was obtained to represent the population. If the data obtained in such a study were analyzed to determine if the elements of the toxic triangle existed and if negative outcomes were produced, the results would provide stronger evidence for the existence of the toxic triangle framework. If one of the three components of the toxic triangle were found to have a higher correlation than the others, this would provide data to determine which of three components should be prioritized when trying to prevent destructive leadership. Additionally, by using this method, it's possible that cases would be identified where institutions had all components of the toxic triangle but did not result in negative outcomes and harm to followers, which would not be in alignment with the toxic triangle framework and would warrant the need for additional research to better understand the destructive leadership process.



## **Summary**

The findings from this qualitative study confirmed that (1) followers were subjected to a wide range of harmful destructive leader behaviors, (2) followers were operating in environments conducive to destructive leadership (3) followers reacted to the destructive leadership by trying to minimize its negative impact on employees and the institution, and (4) followers were mostly harmed, both personally and professionally, by destructive leadership. Additionally, these findings provide evidence to support the toxic triangle framework and to support the argument that destructive leadership is a complex, socially-constructed process involving a destructive leader, a conducive environment and susceptible followers. In addition, these findings identified aspects of destructive leadership that are not covered in the toxic triangle framework.

## **Conclusion**

This research aimed to identify how followers experience, respond to, and are impacted by destructive leadership in institutions of public higher education in the United States. Participants in this study experienced a variety of harmful destructive leadership behaviors and were personally and professionally harmed by destructive leadership. The lack of checks and balances in their environments motivated participants to mitigate the harmful impacts of the destructive leader, with most participants choosing to confront the destructive leader and/or the destructive leader's superior(s) even though they were operating in environments that were conducive to the development of destructive leadership. By focusing on the experiences of followers in destructive leadership in institutions of public higher education, this thesis addressed the gap in the knowledge on the experiences of followers and their agency in the destructive leadership process within institutions of public higher education.

This research study investigated whether the experiences of participants aligned with existing literature on destructive leadership and the toxic triangle framework. Based on this qualitative analysis of interviews with ten individuals who experienced destructive leadership in institutions of public higher education in the United States, it can be concluded that the results are mostly in alignment with the existing research on destructive leadership and the toxic triangle framework. Additionally, this thesis has provided further evidence to support the argument that destructive leadership is not just the behavior of a destructive leader; destructive leadership is a complex, socially-constructed process involving a destructive leader, a conducive environment, and susceptible followers. Any attempts to address destructive leadership within an organization should take into consideration all three elements of the toxic triangle framework.

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## Appendix A

### IRB Approval Letter



ST. CATHERINE  
UNIVERSITY

2004 Randolph Avenue  
St. Paul, MN 55105  
[www.stkate.edu](http://www.stkate.edu)

St. Catherine University IRB

Approval Notification

To: Carrie Schneider  
From: David Chapman, IRB Co-Chair  
Subject: Protocol #1500  
Date: 12/11/2020

Thank you for submitting your research proposal to the St. Catherine University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for review. The primary purpose of the IRB is to safeguard and respect the rights and welfare of human subjects in scientific research. In addition, IRB review serves to promote quality research and to protect the researcher, the advisor, and the university. By submitting an IRB application to the IRB Committee you are agreeing to adhere to the [St. Catherine University Research Involving Human Subjects Policy](#).

On behalf of the IRB, I am responding to your request for approval to use human subjects in your research. Two members of the St. Kate's IRB have read and commented on your application # 1500: **The Experiences of Followers in the Destructive Leadership Process at Institutions of Public Higher Education in the United States** as an expedited level review. As a result, the project was **approved** as submitted. You may begin your research at any time.

If you have any questions, feel free to contact me or email via the Mentor messaging system. Also, please note that all research projects are subject to continuing review and approval. You must notify our IRB of any research changes that will affect the risk to your subjects. You should not initiate these changes until you receive written IRB approval. Also, you should report any adverse events to the IRB. **Please use the reference number listed above in any contact with the IRB.**

This approval is effective for one year from this date, 12/11/2020. If the research will continue beyond one year, you must submit a request for IRB renewal before the expiration date. When the project is complete, please submit a project completion form. These documents are available in the St. Catherine University Mentor IRB site.



We appreciate your attention to the appropriate treatment of research subjects. Thank you for working cooperatively with the IRB; best wishes in your research!

Sincerely,

David Chapman, PhD  
Co-Chair, Institutional Review Board  
[ddchapman@stkate.edu](mailto:ddchapman@stkate.edu)

## Appendix B

### CITI Program Course Completion Certificate



Completion Date 04-Oct-2020  
Expiration Date 03-Oct-2024  
Record ID 38802061

This is to certify that:

**Carrie Schneider**


Has completed the following CITI Program course:

**Social & Behavioral Research - Basic/Refresher**  
(Curriculum Group)  
**All IRB applicant investigators and advisors: Social and Behavioral Research**  
(Course Learner Group)  
**1 - Basic Course**  
(Stage)

Under requirements set by:

**St. Catherine University**

Not valid for renewal of certification through CME.



Verify at [www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w9b367332-38d5-4fc1-bffe-e73747b34db9-38802061](http://www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w9b367332-38d5-4fc1-bffe-e73747b34db9-38802061)

## Appendix C

### Email Invite to Potential Subjects

Hi [name of colleague who worked at an institution of public higher education in the United States]

I hope you are doing well.

I am writing to ask if you will participate, or recommend another colleague to participate, in a research study I am conducting as the final project in my master's in organizational leadership program at St. Catherine University. I thought of you because I know you've worked for institution(s) of public higher education in the United States.

My research is focused on better understanding destructive leadership in institutions of public higher education. I am recruiting participants who meet the following criteria:

1. Worked for an institution of public higher education in the United States, and
2. Experienced destructive leadership. For the purposes of this study, destructive leadership has been defined as behavior by a leader, or a person in a leadership position (i.e. a person who was responsible for providing work direction to others as defined in their position description), that intentionally or unintentionally produces negative outcomes for the organization and/or followers. Examples of destructive leadership include but are not limited to encouraging followers to pursue goals that are not in the best interest of the organization or utilizing harmful methods of influence with followers.

Are you interested in participating? If not, do you know anyone else who may be interested? Please let know by [enter timeframe].

Thanks,

Carrie



## Appendix D

### Consent Form Introduction Email

Dear Participant,

Thank you for your willingness to participate in my research study titled The Experiences of Followers in a Destructive Leadership Process at Institutions of Public Higher Education in the United States.

I am a graduate/undergraduate student at St. Catherine University under the supervision of Amy Ihljan, Ph.D., a faculty member in the Department of master of Organizational Leadership. I am completing this study as a part of my program in Master of Arts in Organizational Leadership, Strategic Management Concentration.

In order to make sure that this research is both ethical and credible, it is important that each participant be fully informed of the risks and benefits of the study, as well as of their rights as a participant. Please read the attached Informed Consent Form for this important information. I will review this information with you at the beginning of our interview session and require that you sign and return the form to me prior to asking you the interview questions.

If you have any questions about the form or the study please do not hesitate to discuss them with me.

Thank you for your support of my study,

Carrie Schneider

[csschneider@stkate.edu](mailto:csschneider@stkate.edu)

651-353-0911

## Appendix E

### Consent Form

#### ST CATHERINE UNIVERSITY

#### Informed Consent for a Research Study

**Study Title:** The Experiences of Followers in a Destructive Leadership Process at Institutions of Public Higher Education in the United States

You are invited to participate in a research study. This study is The Experiences of Followers in a Destructive Leadership Process at Institutions of Public Higher Education in the United States. The study is being done by Carrie Schneider, a Masters' candidate at St. Catherine University in St. Paul, MN. The faculty advisor for this study is Amy Jhlan, Ph.D., Associate Professor Master of Arts in Organizational Leadership at St. Catherine University. Below, you will find answers to the most commonly asked questions about participating in a research study. Please read this entire document and ask questions you have before you agree to be in the study.

#### **Why are the researchers doing this study?**

The purpose of this study is to understand the destructive leadership process from the perspective of followers within institutions of public higher education. For the purposes of this study, destructive leadership has been defined as behavior by a leader, or a person in a leadership position (i.e. a person who was responsible for providing work direction to others as defined in their position description), that intentionally or unintentionally produces negative outcomes for the organization and/or followers. Examples of destructive leadership include but are not limited to encouraging followers to pursue goals that are not in the best interest of the organization or utilizing harmful methods of influence with followers.

This study is important because it will contribute to the understanding of how followers experience, react to, and impact the destructive leadership process within institutions of public higher education in the United States. Approximately ten people are expected to participate in this research.

#### **Why have I been asked to be in this study?**

You have been selected to participate in this study because you have worked in an institution of public higher education in the United States in a position where you have confirmed that you experienced destructive leadership at this institution, based on the definition of destructive leadership being used for the purposes of this study.

**If I decide to participate, what will I be asked to do?**

If you meet the criteria and agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do these things:

- Sign the consent form
- Provide your email address and phone number to the researcher for the purposes of communication regarding this research study only
- Coordinate with the researcher to establish a date and time in December 2020 or January 2021 for a ninety minute interview via Google meets video chat or telephone
- On the established date, attend the interview session to respond to seventeen questions

In total, this study will take approximately ninety minutes over one personal interview session.

**What if I decide I don't want to be in this study?**

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you decide you do not want to participate in this study, please feel free to say so, and do not sign this form. If you decide to participate in this study, but later change your mind and want to withdraw, simply notify me and you will be removed immediately. If you decide to participate in this study, but during the interview you are asked a question you are not comfortable answering, simply tell me you are not comfortable answering the question and I will skip the question and move on to the next question. You may withdraw up until the data collected in this study is de-identified on February 6, 2021, after which time withdrawal will no longer be possible. Your decision of whether or not to participate will have no negative or positive impact on your relationship with St. Catherine University, nor with any of the students or faculty involved in the research.

**What are the risks (dangers or harms) to me if I am in this study?**

By participating in this study, you will be exposed to minimal, if any, risks. Throughout the interview, you may be asked questions that could bring up emotionally-disturbing memories of your experiences with destructive leadership and you may be asked about information that may be protected by your organization through the human resources department and organization rules and/or policies.

If you experience distress in response to the interview questions, either you or I may choose to terminate the interview at any point.

**What are the benefits (good things) that may happen if I am in this study?**

By participating in this study, you will contribute to the body of knowledge available to society to better understand the destructive leadership process from the perspective of followers within institutions of public higher education.

There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this research.

**Will I receive any compensation for participating in this study?**

You will not be compensated for participating in this study.

**What will you do with the information you get from me and how will you protect my privacy?**

The information that you provide in the interview will be collected, recorded and temporarily stored on a portable audio recording device (Olympus Digital Voice Recorder VN-541PC) and then transcribed by the researcher. In the transcription process, your name will be removed from the data and replaced with a participant number or pseudo name. Additionally, in the transcription process, the name of the public higher education institution where you worked will be removed and replaced with a generic reference, such as “a public college or university in the upper midwest United States”. If you mentioned people by name during the interview process, their names will be removed and replaced with pseudo names during the transcription process. The researcher will keep the de-identified transcribed interview conversation (which, according to St. Catherine University Research data Management Guidelines, is considered confidential data) in a Microsoft Word document stored on St. Catherine University’s secure, encrypted file storage system, BOX. Only the researcher will have access to the records while working on this project. The researcher will finish analyzing the data by June 2021 and will destroy all confidential data, original reports, and identifying information that can be linked back to you within one year of completing the data analysis (by June 2022). The audio recordings of the interview will only be accessible to the researcher for transcription purposes and will be destroyed within one year of completing the data analysis (by June 2022).

Any information that you provide will be kept confidential, which means that you will not be identified or identifiable in any written reports or publications. If it becomes useful to disclose any of your information, the researcher will seek your permission and tell you the persons or agencies to whom the information will be furnished, the nature of the information to be furnished, and the purpose of the disclosure; you will have the right to grant or deny permission for this to happen. If you do not grant permission, the information will remain confidential and will not be released.

**Could my information be used for future research?**

No, your data will not be used or distributed for future research even if de-identified without gaining further consent from you.

**Are there possible changes to the study once it gets started?**

If during the course of this research study the researcher team learns about new findings that might influence your willingness to continue participating in the study, they will inform you of these findings

**How can I get more information?**

If you have any questions, you can ask them before you sign this form. You can also feel free to contact me at 651-353-0911 or [csschneider@stkate.edu](mailto:csschneider@stkate.edu). If you have any additional questions later and would like to talk to the faculty advisor, please contact [Amy Ihlan](mailto:ajihlan@stkate.edu) at [ajihlan@stkate.edu](mailto:ajihlan@stkate.edu). If you have other questions or concerns regarding the study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), you may also contact Dr. John Schmitt, Chair of the St. Catherine University Institutional Review Board, at (651) 690-7739 or [jsschmitt@stkate.edu](mailto:jsschmitt@stkate.edu).

You may keep a copy of this form for your records.

**Statement of Consent:**

I consent to participate in the study and agree to be videotaped/audiotaped.

My signature indicates that I have read this information, my questions have been answered and I am at least 18 years of age.

---

Signature of Participant

Date

---

Printed Name of Participant

|

---

Signature of Researcher

Date

## Appendix F

### Data Collection Instrument – Interview Questions

Participants will be asked to respond to the following interview questions:

1. These first few questions are about the destructive leader and your experience with the destructive leader. What was the leader's role and/or position?
2. What was your role in relation to the leader?
3. Specifically, what about this experience makes it an example of destructive leadership rather than effective leadership?
4. How did you respond to the destructive leadership?
5. What impact, if any, did it have on your ability to perform the duties of your position?
6. What impact, if any, did it have on your relationships with colleagues?
7. What impact, if any, did it have on your commitment to the organization?
8. What impact, if any, did it have on your motivation?
9. What impact, if any, did it have on your tenure with the organization?
10. Is there anything else it impacted that I haven't mentioned but you'd like to share with me?
11. Did you take any actions to neutralize or minimize the impact of the destructive leader?
12. Why or why not? Probes: Did you do this to protect your work and/or the team and/or the organization?
13. What kind of attempts were made?
14. Were the attempts effective?
15. What formal and/or informal options, if any, existed within your organization to address the destructive leadership?
16. Were there policies, procedures, code of ethics, etc. designed to address destructive leadership?
17. Is there anything else you'd like to share with me regarding your experience as it relates to destructive leadership?

## Appendix G

### Codebooks

#### Codebook: Descriptions of Destructive Leader Behavior

Code	Description provided by Participant	Participant #
Unethical	Lying, replacing ethical leaders with unethical leaders who would do the destructive leader's bidding, lack of integrity and trustworthiness, off-ramped several women's careers	1, 3, 4, 9, 10
Intimidating	Used threats, intimidation tactics, powerful, mean, instilling fear, policing others, coercion to get her way, created culture of fear, fear of retribution, publicly disparaged/shamed another leader, berated a coworker, yelled at staff, burned bridges with other stakeholders, abusive	1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 9, 10
Condescending	Did not treat people well or with respect, belittling people, yelled at colleague in public, unpleasant to interact with	1, 9
Micromanage	Policing others behavior, honed into every detail, had to be involved in every conversation subordinates had, controlled who subordinates could talk to, when they could get up from their desks, no autonomy for staff when completing work	1, 2, 4, 7
Absent	Never present on campus, late to meetings, disrespectful of others' time, dismissive	7, 9
Incompetent	Not curious about learning, would not listen to others and only wanted to do it her way, lacked interpersonal skills and ability to repair relationships, could not provide effective advice to direct reports, emotionally unintelligent leaders	1, 8, 9, 10
Passive	Non-confrontational, would not address issues, would not hold people accountable, lack of commitment to leadership duties	3, 5
Not inclusive	Chose people to be part of an inner circle of advisers, did not share information or resources widely, had one very small group of people who she regularly worked with and only shared information with this group, not inclusive in decision-making, over-promoted certain people	3, 5, 6, 9
Not supportive of subordinates	Never satisfied with work of others, not genuine in compliments, assumed staff completed their work incorrectly, demoralized staff	1, 2, 4
Put personal interests before those of the organization/employees/students	Narcissistic, did not do what was in the best interest of students, protecting career rather than doing what's right for students, more focused on herself and not the organization	4, 6, 8, 9, 10
Produced negative results for organization/department	College started losing money and enrollment dropped, left a legacy of destruction that continued after destructive leader was removed, left the college worse than it was before destructive leader, damaged reputation of department, negatively impacted the college's legacy, slowed down workflow in the department, impaired ability to deliver necessary information to end-users	3, 5, 9, 10

## Codebook: Environment at Institution

Code	Description provided by Participant	Participant #
Lack of checks and balances – centralized power and control, no accountability	Senior leaders did not take action until damage was irreparable, no policies, procedures, code of ethics to address destructive leadership, senior leaders did not seek input from staff on decision that would impact them, policies not enforced by leaders or those in power, could not provide formal feedback at campus, no faith in those overseeing the destructive leader to address it, no accountability for DL's actions and behaviors, formal process for bringing forward concerns was controlled by DL so no one would use this process, policies procedures code of ethics were not being followed or enforced by leadership, senior leader of destructive leader oblivious to her behavior	1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 10
Instability	Unrest at the college, revolving door, lack of communication about changes, significant turnover, vote of no confidence from faculty	2, 4, 5, 9
Dysfunction	Unhealthy environment to employee mental health, relationships were strained due to the stressful and hostile environment	1, 5, 6, 9, 10
Culture (fear, low morale, distrust)	Fear of retribution, fear of losing job if anything was said against the destructive leader, fear of impact on career, people didn't feel safe and feared retribution, fear, nervousness due to lack of information, culture of fear, intimidation, paranoia, unsafe place psychologically, no transparent communication, fear, dysfunctional communication channels (rumors, gossip), fear of job loss, Low morale, people felt bad about the work they were doing, created culture of distrust, you didn't know who to trust, trust eroded due to inconsistent communication, created divisive culture, tension between leaders, no trust between destructive leader and staff, faculty and some other leaders	3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10
Division of followers	People chose sides and were either with the destructive leader or were not, seen as a traitor, destructive leader's "little birdies" would tell on other people	3, 4, 5, 7, 9, 10
Loyalty to destructive leader rewarded	Destructive leader promoted those who would do her bidding, those who were climbing the ladder, destructive leader has his inner circle of people who he chose, small circle of people to consult and share information and resources with	6, 7, 9, 10
Complicity	Senior leaders aware of destructive leader and were complicit, to be effective, you had to engage in unethical behavior, team was terrified of destructive leader, other senior leaders were powerless with this destructive leader, feared taking action against destructive leader because of what happened to someone else who tried this, senior leader followed suite with the destructive leader, kept making destructive leader look good	1, 2, 4, 7, 8, 9, 10



## Codebook: Descriptions of Follower Reactions

Code	Description provided by Participant	Participant #
Formed alliances	Talked to other people to try to cope with it, worked with the union to get a petition, formed close relationships with other leaders, formed alliances with other colleagues	1, 7, 9, 10
Mitigated impact	Followed-up with people to help after they experienced destructive leader devastation, redirect others to not take it personally and focus on the great work they were doing, mitigate the fall-out or cleaning up, provide support to staff who were struggling with DL behaviors, protect the work of the team/serve as a buffer, protect my team and the college, protect the college	1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 9, 10
Avoided destructive leader	Avoid destructive leader, distance self from destructive leader so as to not be associated with him, fear for career outweighed intervening, did not address directly with DL because it would not have helped or have been effective	3, 6, 7
Confronted destructive leader or destructive leaders' superior	I started confronting the behavior and it didn't go well, I was pretty bold in my confrontation, tried to work with destructive leader to get him to communicate changes, went to the destructive leaders superiors, large numbers of people started to complain to the destructive leaders superiors, met with destructive leader's supervisor but it didn't help, appealed to the DL to be more ethical, encouraged more communication and proactive approaches but he didn't listen, stood up to the DL and her allies, went to DL supervisor, challenged supervisor and was told it was disrespectful behavior, went to DL's supervisor	1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10

## Codebook: Impact on Followers

Code	Description provided by Participant	Participant #
Inability to perform duties	Stifled my ability to do what I needed to do, took time away from focusing on work duties in order to decompress, at first it did not impact my ability to perform my duties but then it permeated all levels of the campus and my own integrity and values were compromised, destructive leader did not support my work so it was like triple the work on an already unrealistic workload, huge impact on my ability to perform my duties, impacted my ability to motivate others to perform to help my division improve enrollment, started being told what to do and how to treat people and I wouldn't do their bidding	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 9, 10
Desire to leave/Tenure	If the destructive leader hadn't been terminated I would have left the organization, it was the behaviors of the destructive leader and all the aftermath that caused me to leave, it significantly impacted my tenure, impacted my tenure as a manager in the department, if the DL hadn't left, I would have left, there was no accountability for the destructive leader so I wasn't going to stay, destructive leader terminated me, if destructive leader were still president I would have left, I stood up to the destructive leader and I was terminated as a result	2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10
Relationships outside work	Negatively impacted relationship with husband, I had no time for my husband because I was working so many hours, strained relationship with my partner	2, 4, 8
Mental health	Self and co-worker both suffered PTSD after destructive leader terminated, suffered nervous breakdown, nervous breakdown, huge impact on my mental health, I had to leave for my own sanity and health, depression, trauma and anxiety as a result of the destructive leader	1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10
Compromised own values	My behavior changed for the worse around this person, my integrity was being compromised by the destructive leader, didn't want to support destructive leader due to the conflict with my own values	1, 3, 7
Relationships with colleagues	Made me closer to her staff but made me lose respect of senior leaders who hired the destructive leader, difficult to form alliance with coworkers because destructive leader wouldn't allow us to talk to each other or anyone else in the office without interjecting, we formed a bond over a common enemy but I also didn't know who I could really trust amongst my colleagues, negatively impacted my relationship with every co-worker in department, it created tension in the department and distrust of each other, closer to some and further from others depending on their view of the destructive leader, close colleagues were afraid to stand up for me for fear of retribution, closer to colleagues who saw things the same way as me and was a wedge with colleagues who didn't, strengthened some relationships but harmed others	1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10
Commitment to organization	Made my commitment stronger, remained committed to protect the organization from the destructive leader but also concerned staying at the institution would impact my career prospects, increase commitment to org. because I took a huge risk for the betterment of organization, later it weakened my commitment because felt hung out to dry, not as much fun and don't feel valued you don't have same level of commitment to the org. similar to abusive relationship in that you don't see it until you're out, I lost my commitment due to the destructive leader, remain committed to the profession but not that institution or that leader, made my commitment to protecting the organization and students stronger	3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10
Motivation	Negative impact, motivated to protect students and do good work in spite of the destructive leader	3, 5, 7, 9

## Appendix H

**Participant's Experience with Destructive Leadership**

Participant	DL	Destructive Leader (DL) Behaviors	Environment at Institution	Follower (Participant) Reaction	Impact on Followers
1	Department Director	Unethical, Intimidating, Condescending, Micromanage, Incompetent, Not supportive of subordinates	Lack of checks and balances/Centralized power and control/No accountability, Complicity	Formed alliances, Mitigated impact, Confronted destructive leader or destructive leaders' superior	Inability to perform duties, Mental health, Compromised own values, Relationships with colleagues - enhanced
2	Department Director	Intimidating, Micromanage, Not supportive of subordinates	Lack of checks and balances/Centralized power and control/No accountability, Instability, Complicity	Mitigated impact, Confronted destructive leader or destructive leaders' superior	Inability to perform duties, Desire to leave/Tenure, Relationships outside work, Mental health, Relationships with colleagues – harmed and enhanced
3	President	Unethical, Intimidating, Passive Not inclusive, Produced negative results for organization/ department	Lack of checks and balances/Centralized power and control/No accountability, Culture (fear, low morale, distrust), Division of followers	Mitigated impact, Avoided destructive leader	Inability to perform duties, Desire to leave/Tenure, Compromised own values, Motivation – negative impact, Commitment to organization- strengthened and weakened,
4	President	Unethical, Intimidating, Micromanage, Not supportive of subordinates, Put personal interests before those of the organization/employees/students	Lack of checks and balances/Centralized power and control/No accountability, Instability, Culture (fear, low morale, distrust), Division of followers, Complicity	Mitigated impact, Confronted destructive leader or destructive leaders' superior	Inability to perform duties, Desire to leave/Tenure, Relationships outside work, Mental health, Relationships with colleagues – harmed and enhanced
5	Department Director	Passive, Not inclusive, Produced negative results for organization/department	Instability, Dysfunction, Culture (fear, low morale, distrust), Division of followers	Confronted destructive leader or destructive leaders' superior	Inability to perform duties, Desire to leave/Tenure, Mental health, Motivation – negative impact, Commitment to organization- strengthened and weakened, Relationships with colleagues – harmed
6	Sr. Admin.	Not inclusive, Put personal interests before those of the organization/employees/students	Lack of checks and balances/Centralized power and control/No accountability, Dysfunction, Culture (fear, low morale, distrust), Loyalty rewarded	Mitigated impact, Avoided destructive leader	Desire to leave/Tenure, Mental health, Commitment to organization- weakened, Relationships with colleagues – harmed
7	Sr. Admin.	Intimidating, Micromanage, Absent	Lack of checks and balances/Centralized power and control/No accountability, Culture (fear, low morale, distrust), Division of Followers, Complicity, Loyalty Rewarded	Formed alliances, Avoided destructive leader, Confronted destructive leader or destructive leaders' superior	Desire to leave/Tenure, Mental health Compromised own values, Motivation – negative impact, Commitment to organization-weakened, Relationships with colleagues – harmed and enhanced
8	Sr. Admin.	Incompetent, Put personal interests before those of the organization/employees/students	Culture (fear, low morale, distrust), Complicity	Confronted destructive leader or destructive leaders' superior	Desire to leave/Tenure, Relationships outside work, Mental health, Commitment to organization-weakened, Relationships with colleagues –enhanced
9	President	Unethical, Intimidating, Condescending, Absent, Incompetent, Not inclusive, Put personal interests before those of the organization/employees/students, Produced negative results for organization/ department	Lack of checks and balances/Centralized power and control/No accountability, Instability, Dysfunction, Culture (fear, low morale, distrust), Division of followers Complicity, Loyalty Rewarded	Formed alliances, Mitigated impact, Confronted destructive leader or destructive leaders' superior	Inability to perform duties, Desire to leave/Tenure, Mental health, Motivation – positive impact, Commitment to organization- strengthened and weakened, Relationships with colleagues – harmed and enhanced
10	President	Unethical, Intimidating, Incompetent, Put personal interests before those of the organization/employees/students, Produced negative results for organization/department	Lack of checks and balances/Centralized power and control/No accountability, Dysfunction, Culture (fear, low morale, distrust), Division of followers, Complicity, Loyalty Rewarded	Formed alliances, Mitigated impact, Confronted destructive leader or destructive leaders' superior	Inability to perform duties, Desire to leave/Tenure, Mental health, Relationships with colleagues – harmed and enhanced, Commitment to organization- strengthened