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# Shift, Suppress, Sever

## Systemic Strategies for Dealing With Dark Leadership

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**Abstract:** Leaders with dark personalities are notorious for their destructive influences at work. Yet, it may not be enough for organizations to solely focus their interventions on leaders exhibiting dark personalities. Instead, we argue that systemic interventions that rely on levers at multiple organizational levels may be more fruitful in tackling destructive leadership. Specifically, we propose that interventions accounting for the individual characteristics of leaders and followers, as well as the organizational contexts in which destructive leadership is allowed to occur, are more likely to be effective and sustainable. By integrating literature from management, psychology, and educational sciences, we propose a framework that could serve as a guideline for organizational interventions and spur future research on how to mitigate destructive leadership processes.

**Keywords:** dark triad, destructive leadership, confidential advisor, HR practices

Recent instances of corporate misconduct have rekindled interest in leader dark personality traits as sources of negative behavior in the workplace, such as abusive supervision, sexual harassment, and bullying (LeBreton et al., 2018). Indeed, dark leader traits (most prominently narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy) have been shown to lead to negative outcomes for organizations, teams, and individual followers (LeBreton et al., 2018). These traits share a common core in that they denote “the general tendency to maximize one’s individual utility – disregarding, accepting, or malevolently provoking disutility for others–, accompanied by beliefs that serve as justifications” (Moshagen et al., 2018, p. 656). Leaders scoring high on these traits not only pursue their self-interest at the expense of others but also trigger a host of dysfunctional processes in their teams by playing favorites and promoting distrust or conflict. Their teams tend to be marked by turmoil, high turnover rates, a dearth of independent high-flyers, and a climate of silence and fear. Additionally, individual employees may feel victimized and reach out for help from confidential advisors, HR professionals, or senior management. Thus, organizations may benefit from guidelines on how to tackle destructive leadership processes.

Yet, our understanding of how to intervene and mitigate these negative outcomes is limited and, we argue, unidimensional. The few suggestions that have been made have mainly focused on interventions aimed at the dark leaders themselves. However, destructive leadership processes are rarely the result of individual leaders alone. Specifically, the holistic perspective on destructive leadership (Tho-

roughgood et al., 2018) contends that leader characteristics, such as dark personality traits, can only translate into negative outcomes if followers assist (for personal gain or because of shared values) or are unable to resist (due to fear, lack of care or courage, normative commitment, or the need to be accepted) destructive leader behaviors, and if the organizational environment is conducive (i.e., enables or supports these behaviors). As such, destructive leadership processes are complex, dynamic, and unfold over time. Moreover, they may also include constructive elements (e.g., supervision is abusive, but profit is made).

Thus, if negative outcomes are the result of the interplay between elements in these three domains (i.e., leaders, followers, and the context), organizations intervening solely at the leader-level will inevitably miss out on successful intervention opportunities. Therefore, we argue that it is critical to take a systemic approach and consider interventions aimed at elements in all three domains. A systemic approach not only affords organizations multiple levers to address destructive leadership processes but may also lead to more effective and sustainable solutions (bearing in mind that some time may be needed for interventions to manifest positive effects). Indeed, similar multi-faceted, socio-ecological approaches have been advocated and successfully applied in intervention programs aimed at tackling bullying in schools (William & Cliff, 2011). These approaches assume that bullying behavior is the combined outcome of bullies’ own traits and their interactions with others in a specific context. Recent meta-analytic results indeed suggest that programs focusing on the bullies, the victims, the

bystanders (peers and parents), and the school context (climate, rules, and regulations) tend to be the most effective (Gaffney et al., 2021).

In the following, we take a systemic perspective and highlight possible interventions at the leader, follower, and organizational level to tackle destructive leadership processes (see Figure 1). Moreover, we propose that interventions at these different levels can be aimed at achieving three distinct goals: (1) shifting behavior or dynamics (by reinforcing elements that support constructive processes); (2) suppressing behavior or dynamics (by containing elements that support destructive processes); or (3) severing ties (by taking an element out of the equation). We hope that our framework spurs future research on systemic interventions and, ultimately, provides a broader intervention toolkit for employees dealing with the fallout of dark personalities at work (confidential advisors, ombudspersons, HR professionals).

## Interventions at the Leader Level

At the leader level, organizations could implement three different types of interventions aimed at either: (1) shifting behavior; (2) suppressing current and potential future scope of influence; or (3) severing them from the organization. First, *shifting* behavior via one-on-one consultation or executive coaching could be more effective than general training programs (Nelson & Hogan, 2009) as coaches can use insight in client-specific dark characteristics to better target behavioral changes. For instance, encouraging behaviors aimed at building perceptions of trust might be more fruitful than discouraging self-promotion. Additionally, the behavior could be shifted by channeling dark leaders' desire for power into pro-social actions via transformational leadership training and mindfulness interventions (Schattke & Marion-Jetten, 2021). Second, interventions could be aimed at *suppressing* or containing the dark leaders' current and potential future scope of influence. Organizations could either limit leaders' current power via demotions or "promotions" into positions where they can do less harm (Wisse et al., 2019), or limit their prospects of progressing on the hierarchical ladder. With regard to the latter, assessment tools should not only be used to select people into leadership roles (by focusing on bright side traits such as conscientiousness) but also to select them out (by focusing on dark traits or by accounting for the fact that there are optimal and dysfunctional levels of both dark and bright traits; cf., LeBreton et al., 2018). Also, since dark traits have been linked to increased self-promotion, faking, and socially desirable responding, organizations would benefit from employing assessment tools that are less vulnerable to faking such as implicit measure-

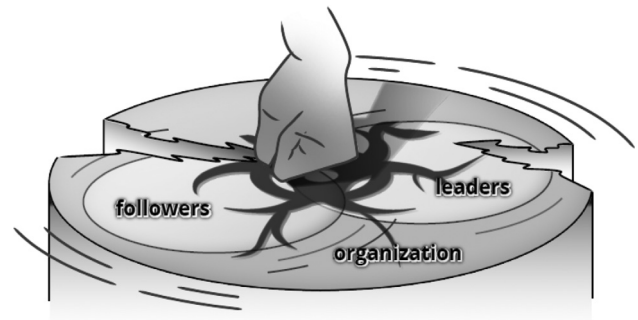


Figure 1. Systemic strategies for dealing with dark leadership

ment techniques, case-based scenarios, or ethical dilemmas (LeBreton et al., 2018); and from conducting thorough background checks (e.g., interviewing subordinates, checking HR files). Note that these selection-related measures would also help to stop dark personalities at the organizational gates. Third, if all else fails or the behavioral transgressions are particularly egregious (e.g., sexual harassment, embezzlement), organizations should not shy away from *severing* their ties with these individuals. One "bad apple," especially a powerful one, can indeed "spoil the whole barrel" (Felps et al., 2006) and catalyze a downward spiral of organizational dysfunctionality. Therefore, removing these individuals from the organization is likely to have a host of positive effects (e.g., improved team dynamics, well-being).

## Interventions at the Follower Level

At the follower level, interventions could also focus on shifting behavior, suppressing the condonement of destructive leaders, or severing ties. First, *shifting* follower behavior could start by increasing awareness of destructive processes (Barelds et al., 2018). This would prevent team members from getting psychologically comfortable with destructive dynamics and instead help them redirect their behaviors toward positive outcomes. Additionally, institutionalizing support networks and means of voicing concerns could help vulnerable employees to lift the cloak of silence surrounding destructive leadership. Second, *suppressing* the condonement of destructive leaders could be achieved by training geared at increasing self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-efficacy, which could help susceptible employees become more resilient to the influence of destructive leaders. Moreover, organizations could benefit from carefully considering team composition and taking the number of followers scoring high on susceptibility to negative leader influences into account (Schyns et al., 2019). Third, organizations could also consider *severing* team members who incite destructive tendencies (i.e., henchmen) from the team or even *severe*

ties completely by firing them if they actively supported or co-engaged in severe misconduct. Additionally, organizations should not shy away from dismantling entire teams if destructive leadership processes have permeated the team and have led to major problems (e.g., abuse, unethical practices, harassment). This may sometimes be necessary, especially for teams that have a dense configuration of interpersonal ties (Balkundi & Harrison, 2006) which perpetuate and reinforce (dys)functional processes.

## Interventions at the Organizational Level

At the organizational level, interventions could also be focused on shifting behavioral norms, suppressing destructive behaviors and dynamics, and – perhaps – severing certain parts of the organization. Organizational-level interventions are most likely to be effective if they simultaneously address organizational values, culture, systems, and procedures (Schein, 2017). First, although *shifting* behavioral norms (by changing organizational values and culture) is notoriously slow and difficult, organizations could focus on highlighting expected leadership behavior (Erickson et al., 2015); providing clear ethical behavior guidelines; and anchoring espoused values by showcasing how senior leaders actively live and reinforce them (Decoster et al., 2021). Moreover, performance management, reward, and incentive systems would need to be aligned with these values. For instance, performance management should not only focus on results but also on how these results have been achieved, thus allowing for learning and development rather than promoting a “winner take all” mentality. Finally, promotion strategies whereby high potentials are rigorously selected (via a diverse set of raters) should include the extent to which leaders develop their followers. Second, in terms of *suppressing* destructive behaviors and dynamics, institutionalized social control systems are particularly effective in reducing a variety of antisocial behaviors, including bullying (Gaffney et al., 2021). These could include the creation of structural opportunities for raising red flags, instituting complaint mechanisms guaranteeing confidentiality (e.g., ethics hotlines, the presence of an ombudsperson), or establishing informal peer networks to discuss destructive leadership processes. Additionally, establishing systems of checks and balances, such as strong governing boards, fraud control, and monitoring systems, creating compliance departments, or at least hiring compliance officers, can also decrease dysfunctional leader behaviors (Thoroughgood et al., 2018). Moreover, increased transparency and accountability in decision-making processes (Rus et al., 2012), decision-making safeguards (e.g.,

the four-eyes principle for making sensitive decisions), and flatter organizational structures can all curb undesirable behaviors. Finally, apart from having clear rules, organizations need to be willing to “nip bad behavior in the bud” by sanctioning rule violations and by making these sanctions highly visible (Krasikova et al., 2013). Third, although *severing* certain parts of the organization seems to be a less viable option, as it would include the discontinuation of certain organizational functions, it could be considered if certain units or subsidiaries have engaged in criminal activities.

## Discussion

Destructive leadership processes are part and parcel of organizational dynamics, yet our understanding of how to mitigate their negative effects is scant. We have argued that a systemic approach could broaden the practitioner intervention toolkit by moving beyond a unidimensional, leader-centric approach to mitigation. To this end, we have proposed a number of interventions at the leader, follower, and organizational levels aimed at shifting, suppressing, and severing destructive dynamics. Clearly, the list of provided interventions is not meant to be comprehensive. Rather, our intent was to (1) provide a general framework for practitioners dealing with destructive leadership processes and (2) stimulate research on organizational interventions.

Although practitioners are faced daily with tackling destructive leadership processes, and some have developed (via trial-and-error) their own sets of best practices, theory-driven models on guiding intervention strategies are sorely missing. Therefore, there is a clear need for theoretical frameworks that can provide guidelines for practice and also be empirically tested to create solid evidence based on (in)effective interventions. We hope that our proposed framework can serve as such a starting point for holistic interventions targeting different organizational levels. For instance, practitioner-academic collaborations could focus on identifying which types of strategies (e.g., focused on shifting, suppressing, or severing) might be more effective in different organizational contexts. Moreover, the research could aim to identify the types or combinations of interventions at different levels that would deliver the most impact while simultaneously taking resource constraints (e.g., time, financial) and potential unintended consequences into account. Identifying effective “low-hanging fruit” interventions (that require minimal effort but have a relatively large impact across the organization) could be particularly helpful for practitioners in internally building the business case for tackling destructive leadership processes and garnering senior management support.

Granted, the complexity and multi-level nature of destructive leadership processes coupled with the need for interventions aimed at multiple levels renders research daunting, to say the least. However, we believe that leadership researchers could learn from some of the best practices that have emerged from work on tackling bullying in schools. First, although not very common in leadership research, exploratory qualitative approaches (e.g., interviews, case studies, panel studies) could provide us with the much-needed level of detail and richness necessary for developing multi-level theoretical intervention models. Second, once interventions have been developed, their effectiveness should be rigorously tested by, for instance, using randomized experimental designs, intervention-control comparisons including pre- and post-intervention measures, comparisons across different interventions, and longitudinal designs (cf. Gaffney et al., 2021). For instance, organizations could implement certain interventions (e.g., awareness programs, training) in some units or divisions but not in others and assess employees' perceptions of destructive leadership processes both before and after implementing the interventions. Researchers should be mindful that destructive leadership processes differ from bullying not only in scope but also in context. Therefore, a substantial adaptation of any "borrowed" intervention designs would be necessary. That is, while it makes sense to include parents in interventions aimed at reducing bullying, it would be more useful to include top management in interventions aiming to address destructive leadership. Moreover, researchers and practitioners alike would need to be mindful of the fact that interventions across different levels would need to be aligned and that patience will be needed as it will take time for interventions to show measurable results.

All in all, we argue that organizations may benefit from a shift in how we think about mitigating destructive leadership. Effective measures aimed at promoting healthier organizations must take the complexities of nefarious human behavior into account by addressing both leader and follower individual characteristics as well as the contexts that facilitate the development of negative dynamics. We hope to have sparked hope among practitioners and researchers that thinking in a more holistic fashion about destructive leadership interventions might help us shed some light.

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