AOSIS

Insights into leadership practices in South African Higher Education

CrossMark
click for updates

Authors:
Beverly G. Venter[1,2]
Marieta du Plessis[3]
Marius W. Stander[1,2]

Affiliations:
[1]Industrial Psychology, Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, North-West University, Vanderbijlpark, South Africa

[2]Optentia Research Focus Area, Faculty of Humanities, North-West University, Vanderbijlpark, South Africa

[3]Industrial Psychology, Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, University of the Western Cape, Bellville, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Marieta du Plessis,
mduplessis@uwc.ac.za

Orientation: The complexity of higher education highlights leadership's significance. Effective leadership ensures quality education and institutional survival, with senior academics (specifically, professors and associate professors) greatly influencing reputation and research. Exploring senior academics' leadership experiences is therefore crucial.

Research purpose: This study aimed to explore senior academics' experiences of leadership behaviours at a South African higher education institution, extracting their experiences of positive and negative behaviours.

Motivation for the study: Senior academics play significant roles, with vital teaching, research, and reputation contributions to the quality of the university's educational service. Despite numerous leadership studies, none have explored senior academics' experiences in South Africa.

Research approach/design and method: In this study, a qualitative descriptive design was employed to investigate the experiences and perspectives of 14 senior academics. The participants were selected using stratified random and snowball sampling techniques.

Main findings: Participants experienced positive, effective behaviours and negative, destructive behaviours, highlighting the complexity of leadership experiences through contrasting experiences. Positive, effective leadership behaviours include constructive engagement, compassionate support, psychological safety and enabling growth. Negative, destructive leadership behaviours include poor communication and collaboration, eroding integrity and regard, unresolved issues, depersonalisation and toxic practices.

Practical/managerial implications: Understanding experiences and implementing recommendations could incorporate positive leadership behaviours into competency frameworks for human resources practices. Awareness of the leadership ethos dichotomy can potentially establish a unique and characteristic leadership culture.

Contribution/value-add: This study provides senior academics' leadership behaviour perspectives and produces lists of positive and negative leadership practices.

Keywords: leadership; leadership behaviours; academic leadership; positive leadership; destructive leadership; higher education.

Introduction

Orientation

From within and beyond academia, leaders in higher education (HE) have experienced escalating demands amid progressively more complex transformations and challenges (Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2016; Du Plessis et al., 2022). These demands include a multitude of government-defined standards and targets, which have a negative impact on several domains, including teaching and learning, academic leadership, and institutional policies (Smyth, 2017). The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has invoked further upheaval in the HE environment by creating an urgency for innovation and the use of alternative approaches to education and evaluation (Kaup et al., 2020; Mhlanga et al., 2022). It has also caused extensive disruption and anxiety in academics' and students' private and work lives (Hardman et al., 2022).

In the South African HE context, academic employees associate an absence of positive practices with perceived overwork, inadequate resources, role ambiguity, lacking personal growth, person-environment misfit, unsatisfactory relationships with supervisors and colleagues, and

decreased mental, emotional, and social well-being (Barkhuizen et al., 2014; Van Rensburg & Rothmann, 2020). On the other hand, positive leadership practices such as supportive resources, clear strategy and vision, ethical conduct, open communication, and performance feedback are deemed critical to enhancing academics' engagement, performance, and well-being (Bryman, 2007; Parrish, 2015).

While some studies have focussed on sustainability leadership practices in higher education institutions (HEIs) (Aung & Hallinger, 2022), research focused explicitly on developing positive leadership practices in HE is limited (Crevani et al., 2010). In addition, few studies have examined the leadership experiences of senior academics who play a vital role in South African HEIs' reputation, research outputs, and academics' success (Dopson et al., 2019). Given the benefits of positive leadership amid challenges, and senior academics' significance, research into their leadership experiences at South African HEIs is needed.

Research purpose and objectives

This study aimed, firstly, to explore senior academics' (specifically, professors and/or associate professors) experiences of leadership behaviours, and secondly, to extract from the data their experiences of positive and negative leadership behaviours.

The findings will create awareness and inform recommendations regarding leadership behaviours to potentially improve senior academics' working experiences, well-being, and productivity.

Literature review

Leadership research has expanded extensively, covering a spectrum from positive to toxic approaches (Dinh et al., 2014). Positive leadership promotes performance, well-being, and thriving organisational cultures (Malinga et al., 2019; Stander & Coxen, 2017). Key positive leadership styles include authentic, ethical, empowering, engaging, and servant leadership (Blanch et al., 2016). These approaches overlap, focusing on honesty, morality, enabling followers, and inspiring a sense of purpose (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Liden et al., 2008; Schaufeli, 2015). 'Positive leadership' subsequently became a comprehensive term for the many leadership styles that are positive in nature (Nel et al., 2015) and for numerous positive practices which enable exceptional accomplishments at individual and organisational levels (Cameron, 2013). An integrated definition of positive leadership posited by Malinga et al. (2019) suggests a leadership approach, which reflects proven leadership qualities and behaviours, including optimism, humanitarianism, a high-spirited attitude, solid ethical principles, motivational abilities, being results-focused, establishing a positive work atmosphere, interacting positively with followers, and cultivating positive relationships.

Positive practices foster strengths-use, respect, trust, transparent communication, and follower growth and engagement (Arakawa & Greenberg, 2007; Chen & Sriphon, 2022). In education, positive leadership develops people-centred, supportive cultures (Benito et al., 2019; Coetzer et al., 2019). This study focuses on senior academics' experiences with positive leadership practices amid South African HE challenges.

The dark side of leadership, also referred to as destructive, deviant, abusive, unhealthy or toxic leadership, has been extensively researched (Henriques et al., 2019; Smith & Fredricks-Lowman, 2019). Destructive leadership harms organisations and followers through intentional behaviours such as self-interest, unethical practices, marginalisation, hostility, bullying, and maladministration (Krasikova et al., 2013; Samier, 2008; Schmidt, 2008). The costs of such destructive practices are reduced employee motivation, well-being, performance and retention (Einarsen et al., 2007).

In academia, toxic leadership manifests itself as bullying, abuse of power, mobbing, nepotism, and marginalisation (Einarsen et al., 2011; Samier, 2008; Veldsman, 2016). This study explores whether senior academics experience such destructive leadership behaviours amid South African higher education challenges. Understanding negative practices could inform recommendations to improve leadership. This study will explore positive and negative leader experiences.

Research design
Research approach and strategy

An interpretivist philosophy guided the exploration of senior academics' leadership behaviour perspectives within their work context (Dudovskiy, 2019). A qualitative descriptive design involved directly obtaining information from participants through semi-structured interviews to provide rich, accessible descriptions (Bradshaw et al., 2017; Sandelowski, 2010). Data analysis progressed from literal accounts to a comprehensively interpreted meaning of individuals' ascribed experiences. This interactive approach appreciated participants' differing viewpoints, enabling the researchers to reflect holistically on the topic by integrating aspects from across perspectives. Ultimately, the strategy aimed to extract key themes representing the essence of senior academics' experiences of leadership in higher education. Utilising an interpretive frame throughout data gathering and analysis facilitated nuanced insight into the range of positive and negative behaviours shaping the leadership landscape for senior academics.

Research method
Research setting

This study is focused on senior academics, specifically professors of various ranks, including associate professors and full professors. These professors are collectively referred to as 'followers' and are all employed by a distinguished South African public university that is nationally ranked and globally recognised. In this study, the term 'leader' is used

for individuals holding a leadership or managerial position within the institutional hierarchy, as defined by Gulseren et al. (2019). Through their managerial roles, leaders have the authority to influence individuals or groups within the academic setting. The term 'experiences' refers to the various aspects of participants' life worlds, including how they live, feel, undergo, make sense of, and accomplish their academic pursuits, as articulated by Schwandt (2007). The concept of 'behaviours' explores the actions and conduct of leaders from the perspective and experience of the followers. This includes observable actions that have an impact on the academic community. The term 'practices' in this study refers to leaders' repetitive behaviours and activities that become characteristic or the norm (Dutton & Spreitzer, 2014; Samier & Milley, 2018).

Entrée and researcher roles

Ethical clearance was secured from the university authorities of a large public university before the researchers initiated the study. The Deputy Registrar of the institution distributed invitations to senior academics, who, if interested, voluntarily reached out to the first author to schedule virtual interviews. Before finalising the interviews, participants received relevant documents, including a participant information sheet, informed consent form, and proof of gatekeeper approval, and had the chance to seek clarification on any study-related queries. Written consent, received via e-mail, was required from each participant prior to the commencement of the interview.

Research participants and sampling methods

The selected stratum consisted of senior academics holding the title of Professor (including Associate Professors) and who were permanently employed at the HEI. Random sampling was applied within the stratification as all possible participants were invited to participate in the study, thereby ensuring that each member of the stratum had an equal chance of participating and presenting the likelihood that other attributes of the population would be equally distributed (Creswell, 2014). The stratified random sampling was followed by snowball sampling, whereby the initial contacts broadened the research by contacting other relevant participants (Bryman, 2012) whom they believed would present reinforcing or divergent points of view from those already offered (Mertens & Ginsberg, 2009). A final sample consisting of 14 senior academics was obtained. The sample size was determined according to the accepted principle of data saturation, which occurred when no new data arose from the study participants, and enabled rich, comprehensive, and contextual data to be obtained (Bradshaw et al., 2017; Coyne, 1997). In this study, data saturation was reached after the 11th participant. The last three transcriptions were used to check for any new themes.

Six individuals were designated as associate professors, complemented by eight occupying the position of full professors. These participants were drawn from diverse backgrounds, representing five distinct faculties and 11 departments. The sample comprised 10 female ($n = 10$) and four male ($n = 4$) participants. During the data collection phase, it was observed that the average length of service at the university stood at 17.43 years. Noteworthy is the demographic breakdown, with nine participants identifying as white (64%), four as black (29%) and one individual holding foreign nationality (7%), highlighting the diverse representation within the cohort. Importantly, it should be underscored that race categorisation aligns with the definitions outlined in the *Employment Equity Act, 55 of 1998 (EE Act)* of South Africa.

Data collection method

Semi-structured interviews asked participants to describe general leadership experiences in their context, expectations of leaders, and behaviours exhibited by their direct manager. Follow-up questions probed emerging viewpoints. The interview schedule was therefore used more as a guide than a directive (Kallio et al., 2016; Smith & Osborn, 2007). Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The interview commenced with the question: 'I would like to hear your views on how you experience leadership in this HE context', followed by additional questions to gain deeper insight, such as 'What are your expectations of your direct line manager in terms of leadership behaviours?', and 'How would you describe the leadership behaviours of your direct line manager?'

Strategies employed to ensure data quality and integrity

Credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability were established through member checks, audit trails, reflexivity regarding researcher positioning, rich descriptions, and additional verification procedures. To prevent bias and obtain a permanent record of all details of the interviews, audio-recordings were made and transcribed verbatim (Gill et al., 2008; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). The recordings, transcriptions, and other related information were anonymised and stored in a password-protected folder on the author's computer and an online backup system.

Data analysis and interpretation

Transcripts underwent iterative thematic analysis to identify leadership patterns and interpret meanings related to the research questions. This entailed following a six-phase, non-linear, iterative process (Clarke & Braun, 2013), including data familiarisation, initial code generation, theme searching, theme review, theme definition and naming, and reporting. A co-coder independently coded all the anonymised transcripts and all areas of agreement and disagreement were discussed.

Findings

The findings revealed that senior academics experience a complex dichotomy regarding leadership behaviours in their institution. Although the study aimed to extract discrete positive and negative practices, participants' perspectives highlighted fluid, contrasting portrayals depending on

context. Their descriptions wove threads of inconsistency across leadership levels, and individuals.

Some noticed shifting leadership ethos under different senior administrators, feeling previously supported versus presently abandoned to 'muddle through'. For instance:

'It was very heartening to have a [*senior leader*] who you thought was on your side and was there to help you solve problems. At the moment we feel very much that we sort of have to muddle through on our own.' (P2, male, Professor, 26 years tenure)

Others indicated direct leaders differed starkly from higher-level responsiveness. Within the same faculty, (de)centralisation and (in)consistency emerged, suggesting fragmented subcultures coexist despite overarching institutional mission:

'Our new dean... he's open to listening to new things... being fair, you know, just doing the right thing... He's pretty good at that. Our previous dean didn't meet any of that.' (P5, female, Associate Professor, 10 years tenure)

'I would make very clear differences between different groupings and different individuals, even inside leadership.' (P2, male, Professor, 26 years tenure)

These complexities caution definitive categorisation of leadership as entirely positive or negative. Nevertheless, some patterns did emerge that can inform recommendations. The intricacy underscores the situational, relational essence of leadership. Universal behaviours counting as constructive for all cannot be prescribed. Enabling leadership to manifest positively requires contextual attunement and cultural cohesion throughout the organisational fabric.

Table 1 summarises the key themes reflecting poles on the leadership continuum that surfaced. Not as absolute truths, but as tendencies culled from the collected narratives, these patterns provide a preliminary roadmap. While the interplay remains complex, overarching areas for potential development can guide enhanced understanding and evolutionary progress.

Theme 1: Positive, effective leadership behaviours

Positive, effective leadership behaviours involve constructive engagement, support, growth and advancement, and the creation of a psychologically safe environment.

Constructive engagement

Constructive engagement refers to behaviours through which leaders demonstrate openness and facilitate active engagement.

Constructive experiences regarding *openness*, as demonstrated in leaders' behaviours such as collegiality and approachability, as well as transparency in interaction were noticed. For instance:

'He also had a incredibly humble and collegial style. He was a very approachable, warm person.' (P1, female, Associate Professor, 10 years tenure)

TABLE 1: A summary of themes, sub-themes and behaviours and/or practices.

Theme	Subtheme	Behaviours and/or Practices
Positive, effective leadership behaviours	Constructive engagement	Openness Active engagement
	Caring, compassionate support	Leader authenticity Supportive relationships Ethic of care
	Psychological safety	Taking ownership Fostering inclusive clarity Staying calm and objective Inclusivity
	Facilitating advancement, growth, and development	Enabling continuous learning Supportive of development Role model for self-development
Negative, destructive leadership behaviours	Poor communication and collaboration	Unresponsive, Unapproachable Instructing Detached Withholding information
	Eroding integrity and regard	Blame shifting Deceitfulness Disrespectful
	Failure to address issues	Passivity Conflict avoidance Indecisiveness
	Depersonalised and adrift	Disregard Indifference Lack of understanding Not showing interest
	Toxic or abusive practices	Bullying Marginalisation Self-serving behaviour Hostility Favouritism

'So, it's that openness, that transparency, that open door policy; "If you've got a problem, come chat to me, I'll try and help you find a solution".' (P10, female, Professor, 17 years tenure)

Participants underlined the importance of *active engagement* where leaders communicate clearly and create a collaborative environment where people feel included and valued, as illustrated:

'I actually think they've done exceptionally well, to be honest, on a high level, on the decision making, on the clear, concise communication.' (P4, female, Associate Professor, 8 years tenure)

'We have a new dean that's more open, that's more engaging, that will listen to ideas ... er, new ideas ... you actually feel like you're being heard.' (P5, female, Associate Professor, 10 years tenure)

Caring, compassionate support

Caring, compassionate support includes leader authenticity, fostering supportive relationships and an ethic of care.

Leaders embody *authenticity* by inspiring and paying personal attention to others. For example, participants affirmed:

'I think the [*HEI*] since I've been here, has been well led. Um, we had, er, Prof. [*Y*], and he was a extremely charismatic and a considerate leader. He really made people willing to follow him.' (P7, female, Professor, 22 years tenure)

'Professor [*Y*] was a wonderful man and a really inspirational leader … he used to walk around campus … and he would talk to people, whoever he came across, ask them, "How are things going?" "What's happening?" "How's the teaching?" "How are the studies going?", and that I think was wonderful, because people got to know who he was.' (P14, female, Professor, 29 years tenure)

Guidance and *support* are highly valued behaviours, which reflect supportive relationships and instil confidence in participants, as cited:

> 'He would walk in, sit down and ask, "How's it going, what's going on, how can I help you?" If I had a problem, I could call him … So, there was a constant engagement with how … how could they help us do our job and willingness to offer advice.' (P2, male, Professor, 26 years tenure)

Participants also appreciated leadership behaviour that showed care, consideration, and compassion. An *ethic of care* is visible, as participants relate:

> 'They're good leaders in the sense that they really want to do good. Those that are leading, they really, really want to do good.' (P12, female, Professor, 17 years tenure)

> 'There were some practices, some … emergency policies that, um, aimed to show care – not only towards the students, but also towards the other staff members.' (P1, female, Associate Professor, 10 years tenure)

Psychological safety

Psychological safety pertains to leader efficacy, ownership, and behaviours that foster inclusive clarity.

Leaders are seen to take *ownership* by showing commitment and demonstrating accountability and responsibility, as recounted in the following experiences:

> 'He's very hardworking; extremely hardworking.' (P6, male, Associate Professor, 7 years tenure)

> 'He still supervises students and so on, and I know at one point he also taught first-years because he felt everybody had to teach first-years.' (P9, female, Professor, 28 years tenure)

Leader *efficacy* is observed when leaders are deemed to be competent and people-centred, for instance:

> 'She was very empathetic and so on and very, very competent at her job and had very good innovative ideas and so on … overall, she was a good leader.' (P6, male, Associate Professor, 7 years tenure)

> 'He's also a extremely competent leader, very patient, and very diplomatic.' (P7, female, Professor, 22 years tenure)

Behaviour that *fosters inclusive clarity* was particularly valued. Participants relayed their experiences:

> 'They're quite straightforward on the global level … I think that they're honest … intellectually honest, which is extremely important.' (P12, female, Professor, 17 years tenure)

> 'She's a person who handles conflicts in a clear and clean manner.' (P2, male, Professor, 26 years tenure)

Trust is enhanced when leaders are responsive and provide clarity and certainty, as described:

> 'I think, um, the response was quite strong … and there was very, very adequate direction given.' (P11, male, Associate Professor, 13 years tenure)

> 'I always know where I stand, umm … with my dean … there's quite a lot of clarity around what can be done, what could be done, where we stand, what expectations are ….' (P2, male, Professor, 26 years tenure)

Leaders' objectivity and ability to *put things in perspective* contribute greatly to the participants' feelings of confidence in leadership, as expressed in the following experiences:

> 'For a leader to be able to stay calm and look at things objectively, is very important, and that's what she's actually able to do.' (P11, male, Associate Professor, 13 years tenure)

> 'He's really able to put everything in perspective. So, it's not yes or no, but it's yes or no for a good reason.' (P14, female, Professor, 29 years tenure)

Inclusivity and synergy through effective teamwork, especially during times of crisis, embed a strong sense of belonging, as attested by the following participants:

> 'They're a very good team … it's not a "one-person-can-do-everything".' (P9, female, Professor, 28 years tenure)

> 'At all levels, the leaders have … have pulled together and worked as a team.' (P14, female, Professor, 29 years tenure)

Facilitating advancement, growth, and development

Participants appreciated leadership behaviour that *enabled continuous learning* on individual, team, department, faculty, and institutional level, including where leaders were a *role model for self-development*, as reflected:

> 'He's a facilitator and a catalyst of supporting staff to do what they would like to do … you know, he will really work hard to try and enable staff to attend an international conference.' (P14, female, Professor, 29 years tenure)

> '…and not um, becoming comfortable with doing the "same-old, same-old", and moving people towards a better future and I think he … he was able to do that.' (P9, female, Professor, 28 years tenure)

Leaders supported development by creating a conducive environment, which is *supportive of development*, as elaborated:

> 'He provides an environment where I have a lot of freedom to explore what I want to … I don't feel confined in terms of how I should do my work.' (P13, female, Associate Professor, 2 years tenure)

Theme 1 outlines positive leadership behaviours that foster constructive engagement through openness, approachability and transparent communication; provide caring, compassionate support by building relationships, showing authenticity and care; promote psychological safety via competency, objectivity, inclusiveness and clarity; and facilitate advancement and growth by enabling continuous learning across multiple levels, role modelling self-improvement, supporting a developmental culture, and guiding people towards a better future. Overall, these leadership qualities help make staff feel valued, supported, secure and able to progress.

Theme 2: Negative, destructive leadership behaviours

Negative, destructive leadership behaviours include several dysfunctional, toxic, or abusive practices, which impact

negatively on individual participants and on interpersonal relationships. It also relates to leaders' failure to take full responsibility and ownership in the execution of their responsibilities.

Poor communication and collaboration

A resounding theme involved many leaders seeming inaccessibly distant, *unapproachable* and failing to foster perceived collaboration beyond surface levels. As one professor described feeling disconnected:

'The very high leadership is not very approachable...it's difficult to have direct communication.' (P7, female, Professor, 22 years tenure)

Behaviours such as *unresponsiveness* to calls or emails compounded barriers:

'He doesn't communicate approval because he doesn't read emails or answer calls.' (P1, female, Associate Professor, 10 years tenure)

While some leaders went through the motions of asking for input, many participants sensed a lack of authentic listening or explanation when decisions still lacked contextual understanding:

'There's not a gap necessarily in intent, there's a gap in understanding the impact on lecturers.' (P4, female, Associate Professor, 8 years tenure)

Information delivery methods were also critiqued as too top-down, infrequent, decontextualised and ineffectively conveyed for true engagement:

'Instructions very hierarchical top-down.' (P3, male, Professor, 22 years tenure)

'Should be more transparent frequent communication...it's all via email and meetings.' (P14, female, Professor, 29 years tenure)

Eroding integrity and regard

Untrustworthy behaviours such as blame-shifting, deceitfulness, and disrespect signalled a lack of integrity to participants, eroding leader legitimacy and regard. As one described initially feeling supported:

'The Dean said we have to [*add responsibility*] but when you check with her, she never said that.' (P1, female, Associate Professor, 10 years tenure)

The *deceit* and finger-pointing coming from both sides bred mistrust and disillusionment in the administration-faculty relationship. Another highlighted offloading unpopular duties through deception about who was accountable:

'They dump duties on administrators or lecturers then later lie and pretend the work is by them.' (P3, male, Professor, 22 years tenure)

Disrespect also dissolves faculty trust, through actions discounting people's time and commitments:

'People at high levels feel they can drop meetings, be late, or not show up at all...I've had a few of those incidents.' (P8, female, Professor, 33 years tenure)

Failure to address issues

Participants complained that important issues are often not addressed, which they generally attributed to leader passivity, indecisiveness, and conflict avoidance. Participants often need to escalate matters to higher authority before they are addressed, whereafter matters are still not always resolved.

Conflict avoidance through sugarcoating harsh realities or refusing reasonable requests were preferred:

'Leadership was never comfortable making any decision that could seem harsh or "No".' (P4, female, Associate Professor, 8 years tenure)

'No confrontation whatsoever, at any level.' (P12, female, Professor, 17 years tenure)

Seeking easy, broad fixes prevailed over nuanced, *decisive* solutions tailored through contextual listening:

'Leadership never goes down to a granular level in trying to address issues, it's always these broad strokes at the top; and I'm not talking about micro-managing ....' (P6, male, Associate Professor, 7 years tenure)

An unaddressed issue that was frequently raised is leadership's *passivity* to ensure accountability, performance, and equal workload distribution:

'[*What's*] missing at the moment … is more performance management and keeping people accountable.' (P1, female, Associate Professor, 10 years tenure)

'… the fact that people are absolutely accountable for nothing.' (P12, female, Professor, 17 years tenure)

Depersonalised and adrift

Loneliness and disconnection permeated the findings despite physical proximity. Many leaders seemed relationally unavailable and uncaring, leaving participants feeling personally invalidated. As one put it:

'[*We*] exist... in a way, we... it used to be called benign neglect.' (P2, male, Professor, 26 years tenure)

'[*Many academics are*] not getting support because they are being considered not being within … that field of research which the other person values more … it often happens.' (P8, female, Professor, 33 years tenure)

With well-being low priority, engagement remained superficial and agendas eclipsed people:

'They don't really consider staff well-being.' (P6, male, Associate Professor, 7 years tenure)

' … you don't really feel that they understand you or they really care about you.' (P10, female, Professor, 17 years tenure)

Leadership's perceived *indifference* and neglect of followers' personal growth and development by not providing opportunities, mentorship, or guidance, not allocating resources to support development, not following through on development commitments, and not acknowledging

contributions, especially pertaining to research. Participants shared:

> 'Not many people were given much opportunity.' (P5, female, Associate Professor, 10 years tenure)

> 'There's a complete absence of … of guidance and sound boarding.' (P2, male, Professor, 26 years tenure)

Toxic or abusive practices

Leaders are experienced to be either committing or allowing toxic or abusive behaviours and practices.

Bullying and the *marginalisation* of staff and their contributions are toxic or abusive practices that were shared:

> 'The HOD … was throwing her weight around … I had to resolve that through the dean … else I'm pretty sure I would have been booted out of that department.' (P7, female, Professor, 22 years tenure)

> 'My Head of Department decided that he does not want me to supervise … for no reason whatsoever. … So, by taking that away from you, they actually minimise your contribution.' (P8, female, Professor, 33 years tenure)

Cliquish factions exclude people based on their allegiance, preventing change through obstinate superiority. Examples of favouritism that were mentioned, include:

> 'There's a leadership clique who … who get on very well with each other, um, and who don't react very well to when their assumptions are being challenged.' (P2, male, Professor, 26 years tenure)

> 'The clique manages to get the ear of the Head of Department and the ear of the faculty and the ear of the hierarchy up top.' (P7, female, Professor, 22 years tenure)

Self-serving agendas prevailing over integrity enable toxicity:

> 'They've got their own agendas or their own ideas of what they want to get out of the deal. It's not for the greater good.' (P10, female, Professor, 17 years tenure)

> '… very obstructive and condescending attitudes … and they disrupt things… They have their own agenda.' (P5, female, Associate Professor, 10 years tenure)

Hostility is another form of toxic behaviour encountered, for example:

> 'It felt to be at times antagonism, umm … towards [*us*] and our problems.' (P2, male, Professor, 26 years tenure)

In conclusion of theme 2, this theme outlines various negative leadership behaviours including poor communication and collaboration because of leaders being distant, unapproachable, and failing to authentically listen or explain decisions; eroding integrity and regard through deceit, finger-pointing, blame-shifting, and disrespecting people's time; failure to decisively address issues because of passivity, indecisiveness, sugarcoating, conflict avoidance, and lack of accountability; depersonalisation and neglect of staff well-being, growth, and development; and contributions leading to feelings of disconnection and invalidation; as well as permitting or engaging in toxic abusive practices such as bullying, marginalisation, cliquish factions, self-serving agendas, hostility and antagonism. Overall, these dysfunctional leadership behaviours were found to negatively impact staff morale, performance, dignity and trust.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore senior academics' experiences of leadership behaviours and to extract from the data their experiences of positive and negative leadership behaviours.

Outline of the results

Findings reveal that participants of this study experienced positive, effective behaviours (four sub-themes), and negative, destructive behaviours (five sub-themes), based on their experiences of leadership behaviours. Key positive themes centred on open engagement, caring support, psychological safety for idea sharing, and advancement opportunities. Destructive patterns involved poor communication and collaboration, untrustworthiness, unaddressed issues, interpersonal disconnection, and outright abusive behaviours (Krasikova et al., 2013; Schmidt, 2008; Shaw et al., 2011).

Constructive engagement was essential, with participants responding well to leaders who were open, approachable, transparent, communicative, and collaborative (Arnold et al., 2000; Walumba et al., 2008). Participants indicated the need for feedback, and even more importantly, they want leaders to listen to their ideas. This reflects the need for empowering behaviours such as information sharing and inclusive decision-making.

Caring, compassionate support was also impactful, aligning with ethical leadership principles (Dutton & Spreitzer, 2014) and satisfying the human need to belong through meaningful relationships (Huyghebaert et al., 2018). The participants' focus on the importance of care and compassionate support concerned not only themselves but also extended to other staff, students, and the broader community.

Safe psychological spaces facilitated the sharing of ideas and opinions. As intellectual leaders, senior academics rely on intellectual reasoning to make a difference (MacFarlane, 2012). They need to feel confident, comfortable and safe to be innovative, generate new thinking, share and challenge thoughts and ideas, voice opinions, and have challenging discussions and debates. This links to balanced processing and self-awareness in authentic leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005), building confidence and trust.

Another component of positive leadership experienced by participants is the team effort, where strengths are optimised, and weaknesses are countered. Inclusivity and teamwork likewise provided a sense of connectedness, enabling better collaboration (Schaufeli, 2015). This was especially evident during crises.

Finally, continual growth and development was paramount, achieved through coaching, skills building (De Klerk & Stander, 2014), and inspirational role modelling (Schaufeli, 2015). Freedom and flexibility, supported by the versatility of the academic environment, enable exploration, growth and development.

This study revealed considerable toxic and abusive behaviours either perpetrated or permitted by leaders. These include bullying, marginalisation, self-interest, hostility, favouritism, and cliquish factions that resist input (as explained by Krasikova et al., 2013; Schmidt, 2008). Such dysfunction reflects passive-avoidant leadership (Harold & Holtz, 2015) and contradicts the psychological safety valued by staff.

The failure to provide development opportunities and recognition also contrasts with the strong desire for growth expressed by participants. This developmental neglect constitutes passive and destructive leadership (Shaw et al., 2011; Skogstad et al., 2007). Prioritising staff advancement is critical.

Excessive administrative burdens and bureaucracy were also cited as hampering progress and wasting expertise – 'creeping bureaucracy' being a noted toxic practice (Samier & Milley, 2018). Specifically, individuals at HOD level, who are highly skilled and knowledgeable, are tied up with an enormous load of mindless administrative tasks, and progress is severely hampered by adherence to bureaucratic processes and 'red tape'. Leaders must fulfil operational duties but equally build rapport and draw the best from people through engaging leadership (Schaufeli, 2015).

In summary, while positive leadership behaviours cultivate healthy working environments, abusive, uncaring and bureaucratic leadership fails to meet staff needs. A better balance is required between task and relational leadership. The leaders should pursue developmental approaches, engaging approaches and empowering approaches to sustain staff performance and dignity.

Practical implications

While sympathetic to institutional challenges, participants still defined leadership by impact on human potential (Samier, 2008). Over-attention to compliance risks forfeiting a people-focus that propels advancement. Although it is daunting to address issues such as bureaucracy, courageous confrontation balanced with care is essential to model integrity (Bryson & Barnes, 2000). By upholding positive practices at all levels, unity of vision and culture can transcend subcultures plagued by favouritism and fear-based self-preservation.

The next sub-sections are practices that are advised for leading and managing academics.

Prioritise personal and professional growth in leadership development

Design leadership development initiatives that nurture university leaders' personal qualities and professional capabilities. Equip leaders with relationship-building skills, ethical decision-making frameworks, and growth mindsets that positively shape the academic community.

Strive for a balanced approach to compliance

Encourage university leaders to balance meeting regulatory requirements and maintain a people-centric focus. This involves ensuring compliance without losing sight of staff's well-being and professional development.

Address challenges with courage and compassion

Guide university leaders to address institutional challenges, such as bureaucratic issues, with a blend of courageous confrontation and genuine care. This blend of resolute confrontation and care for people's dignity models integrity and earns staff trust.

Embed positive leadership at every level

Extend positive leadership training, coaching and mentoring across all levels of university management. Nurture inclusive, supportive cultures that empower both top-tier and ground-level leaders to uplift others.

Unify towards a shared vision and inclusive culture

Work towards creating a shared vision and inclusive culture within the university. Encourage leaders to transcend subcultures, mitigate issues such as favouritism, and promote unity. This helps in building a cohesive academic community with shared values and goals.

Limitations and recommendations for future research

The general objective of this study was to explore senior academics' experiences of leadership behaviours at an HEI in South Africa. The relatively small sample size of 14 participants from one South African university limits the generalisability of findings to senior academics in other cultural or institutional contexts. While the sampling method focused on greater diversity in academic ranks and disciplines, the sample still comprised 73% females, which may neglect some male experiences. It should also be noticed that the institutional type, that is, a traditional research university may differ from private HEIs and other tertiary institutions in leadership dynamics or faculty interpretations.

Qualitative self-reported descriptions provide depth but not objective observational evidence on behaviours or impact on outcomes such as retention or well-being. Therefore, the potential for exaggeration or response bias exists. Furthermore, the data analysis failed to quantify behaviour frequency or correlate experiences with individual differences in personalities, tenures, and demographics that may affect perceptions beyond the institution.

From a conceptual perspective, the study was limited to exploring formal hierarchical relationships, while peer and

informal leadership among senior level may play an unaccounted role. Furthermore, while it was not the purpose of the study, the findings are not cross-validated perspectives on the reported behaviours through 360 evaluations or observations. Instead, the findings rely on the interpretation and perceptions of the respondents.

Addressing these limitations can augment this line of research through expanded diversity sampling, mixed methodology triangulation, honing leadership definitions, and incorporating additional stakeholder data on the same phenomena interpreted through multiple lenses. Consolidating the findings of recommendations could lead to creating a coordinated and agreed leadership ethos to benefit the institution's leaders and staff.

Conclusion

This study explored senior academics' leadership experiences, revealing a complex dichotomy between behaviours fostering engagement versus toxicity. While positive practices built trust and inclusion, negative behaviours bred distrust and exclusion. The contrasting portrayals underscore leadership's situational essence, cautioning universal categorisation. Nevertheless, the findings provide a preliminary roadmap of leadership practices that can guide institutional improvement. The university can optimise human potential by incorporating positive practices into competency models and striving for cultural cohesion.

Acknowledgements

The hosting higher education institution (HEI) is acknowledged for allowing the research to take place and for providing access to participants.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this research article.

Authors' contributions

All authors collectively conceptualised the study. B.G.V. conducted the interviews and wrote the first draft of the research report. M.D.P. and M.W.S. assisted with the analysis of the data, critical review and finalisation of the article for publication.

Ethical considerations

An application for full ethical approval was made to the North-West University and ethics consent was received on 20 March 2020 and extended to 05 October 2020. The ethics approval number is NWU000553-20-A4. Written informed consent was obtained from all individual participants involved in the study. The gatekeeper role was fulfilled by the Deputy Registrar of the HEI. No participant was pressured to participate or to sign the consent form. Inducements were not offered to study participants to influence or convince them to participate.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, M.d.P., upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency, or that of the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings, and content.

References

Arakawa, D., & Greenberg, M. (2007). Optimistic managers and their influence on productivity and employee engagement in a technology organization: Implications for coaching psychologists. *International Coaching Psychology Review, 2*(1), 78–89. https://doi.org/10.53841/bpsicpr.2007.2.1.78

Arnold, J.A., Arad, S., Rhoades, J.A., & Drasgow, F. (2000). The empowering leadership questionnaire: The construction and validation of a new scale for measuring leader behaviors. *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 21*(3), 249–269. https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1099-1379(200005)21:3<249::AID-JOB10>3.0.CO;2-#

Aung, P.N., & Hallinger, P. (2022). Research on sustainability leadership in higher education: A scoping review. *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education, 24*(3), 517–534. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSHE-09-2021-0367

Avolio, B.J., & Gardner, W.L. (2005). Authentic leadership development: Getting to the root of positive forms of leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly, 16*(3), 315–338. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2005.03.001

Barkhuizen, N., Rothmann, S., & Van de Vijver, F.J.R. (2014). Burnout and work engagement of academics in higher education institutions: Effects of dispositional optimism. *Stress and Health, 30*(4), 322–332. https://doi.org/10.1002/smi.2520

Benito, A., Srinivasan, B., Yadav, R., Paul, N., Majithia, R., Mahajan, S., & Abraham, N. (2019). Improving learning in higher education: Case study of the effects of positive leadership on students and faculty. *International Journal of Arts and Social Science, 2*(1), 36–45. Retrieved from http://www.ijassjournal.com/2019/V2I1/414657277.pdf

Blanch, J., Gil, F., Antino, M., & Rodríguez-Muñoz, A. (2016). Positive leadership models: Theoretical framework and research. *Psychologist Papers, 37*(3), 170–176. Retrieved from https://www.redalyc.org/pdf/778/77847916003_2.pdf

Bradshaw, C., Atkinson, S., & Doody, O. (2017). Employing a qualitative description approach in health care research. *Global Qualitative Nursing Research, 4*, 1–8. https://doi.org/10.1177/2333393617742282

Bryman, A. (2007). Effective leadership in higher education: A literature review. *Studies in Higher Education, 32*(6), 693–710. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070701685114

Bryman, A. (2012). *Social research methods* (4th ed.). Oxford University Press.

Bryson, C., & Barnes, N. (2000). Working in higher education in the United Kingdom. In M. Tight (Ed.), *Academic work and life: What it is to be an academic, and how this is changing* (pp. 147–185). Emerald Group Publishing Limited.

Bryson, C. & Barnes, N. (2000). Working in higher education in the United Kingdom. In M. Tight (Ed.), *Academic Work and Life: What it is to be an Academic, and How this is Changing* (International Perspectives on Higher Education Research, Vol. 1), Emerald Group Publishing Limited, Leeds, pp. 147-185. https://doi.org/10.1016/S1479-3628(00)80101-X

Cameron, K.S. (2013). *Practicing positive leadership: Tools and techniques that create extraordinary results*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Chen, J.K., & Sriphon, T. (2022). Authentic leadership, trust, and social exchange relationships under the influence of leader behavior. *Sustainability, 14*(10), 5883. https://doi.org/10.3390/su14105883

Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2013). Teaching thematic analysis: Overcoming challenges and developing strategies for effective learning. *The Psychologist, 26*(2), 120–123. Retrieved from https://uwe-repository.worktribe.com/OutputFile/937606

Council on Higher Education (CHE). (2016). *Reflections of South African university leaders: 1981 to 2014*. Retrieved from http://www.africanminds.co.za/dd-product/reflections-of-south-african-university-leaders-1981-to-2014/

Coyne, I.T. (1997). Sampling in qualitative research. Purposeful and theoretical sampling; merging or clear boundaries. *Journal of Advanced Nursing, 26*(3), 623–630. https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1365-2648.1997.t01-25-00999.x

Creswell, J.W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Sage.

Crevani, L., Lindgren, M., & Packendorff, J. (2010). Leadership, not leaders: On the study of leadership as practices and interactions. *Scandinavian Journal of Management, 26*(1), 77–86. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scaman.2009.12.003

De Klerk, S., & Stander, M.W. (2014) Leadership empowerment behaviour, work engagement and turnover intention: The role of psychological empowerment. *Journal of Positive Management, 5*(3), 28–45. https://doi.org/10.12775/JPM.2014.018

Dinh, J.E., Lord, R.G., Gardner, W.L., Meuser, J.D., Liden, R.C., & Hu, J. (2014). Leadership theory and research in the new millennium: Current theoretical trends and changing perspectives. *The Leadership Quarterly, 25*(1), 36–62. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2013.11.005

Dopson, S., Ferlie, E., McGivern, G., Fischer, M.D., Mitra, M., Ledger, J., & Behrens, S. (2019). Leadership development in higher education: A literature review and implications for programme redesign. *Higher Education Quarterly, 73*(2), 218–234. https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12194

Du Plessis, M., Jansen van Vuuren, C. J., Simons, A., Frantz, J., Roman, N. V., & Andipatin, M. (2022). 'South African higher education institutions at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic: *Sense-making and lessons learnt. Frontiers in Education*, 6, 740016. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2021.740016

Dutton, J.E., & Spreitzer, G.M. (2014). *How to be a positive leader: Small actions, big impact*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Dudovskiy, J. (2019). Interpretivism (interpretivist) research philosophy. *Business Research Methodology*. Retrieved from https://research-methodology.net/research-philosophy/interpretivism/

Einarsen, S., Aasland, M.S., & Skogstad, A. (2007). Destructive leadership behaviour: A definition and conceptual model. *The Leadership Quarterly, 18*(3), 207–216. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2007.03.002

Einarsen, S., Hoel, H., Zapf, D., & Cooper, C.L. (2011). The concept of bullying and harassment at work: The European tradition. In S. Einarsen, H. Hoel, D. Zapf, & C.L. Cooper (Eds.). *Bullying and harassment in the workplace: Developments in theory, research, and practice* (2nd edn. pp. 3–39). CRC Press.

Gill, P., Stewart, K., Treasure, E., & Chadwick, B. (2008). Methods of data collection in qualitative research: Interviews and focus groups. *British Dental Journal, 204*(6), 291–295. https://doi.org/10.1038/bdj.2008.192

Gulseren, D.B., Thibault, T., & Kelloway, E.K. (2019). The role and importance of leadership in creating psychologically healthy workplaces. In R.J. Burke, & A.M. Richardsen (Eds.), *Creating Psychologically healthy workplaces* (pp. 197–214). Edward Elgar Publishing.

Hardman, J., Shankar, K., Crick, T., McGaughey, F., Watermeyer, R., Suri, V.R., Crick, T., Knight, K., McGaughey, F., & Chung, R. (2022). 'Does anyone even notice us?' COVID-19's impact on academics' well-being in a developing country. *South African Journal of Higher Education, 36(*1), 1–19. https://doi.org/10.20853/36-1-4844

Harold, C.M., & Holtz, B.C. (2015). The effect of passive leadership on workplace incivility. *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 36*(1), 16–38. https://doi.org/10.1002/job.1926

Henriques, P.L., Curado, C., Jerónimo, H.M., & Martins, J. (2019). Facing the dark side: How leadership destroys organisational innovation. *Journal of Technology Management & Innovation, 14*(1), 18–24. https://doi.org/10.4067/S0718-27242019000100018

Huyghebaert, T., Gillet, N., Lahiani, F.J., Dubois-Fleury, A., & Fouquereau, E. (2018). Psychological safety climate as a human resource development target: Effects on workers functioning through need satisfaction and thwarting. *Advances in Developing Human Resources, 20*(2), 169–181. https://doi.org/10.1177/1523422318756955

Kallio, H., Pietilä, A.M., Johnson, M., & Kangasniemi, M. (2016). Systematic methodological review: Developing a framework for a qualitative semi-structured interview guide. *Journal of Advanced Nursing, 72*(12), 2954–2965. https://doi.org/10.1111/jan.13031

Kaup, S., Jain, R., Shivalli, S., Pandey, S., & Kaup, S. (2020). Sustaining academics during COVID-19 pandemic: The role of online teaching-learning. *Indian Journal of Ophthalmology, 68*(6), 1220–1221. https://doi.org/10.4103/ijo.IJO_1241_20

Krasikova, D.V., Green, S.G., & LeBreton, J.M. (2013). Destructive leadership: A theoretical review, integration, and future research agenda. *Journal of Management, 39*(5), 1308–1338. https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206312471388

Liden, R.C., Wayne, S.J., Zhao, H., & Henderson, D. (2008). Servant leadership: Development of a multidimensional measure and multi-level assessment. *The Leadership Quarterly, 19*, 161–177. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2008.01.006

MacFarlane, B. (2012). *Intellectual leadership in higher education: Renewing the role of the university professor*. Taylor & Francis.

Malinga, K.S., Stander, M.W, & Nell, W. (2019). Positive leadership: Moving towards an integrated definition and interventions. In L. Van Zyl, & S. Rothmann Sr. (Eds.), *Theoretical approaches to multi-cultural positive psychological interventions* (pp. 201–228). Springer.

Mertens, D.M., & Ginsberg, P.E. (2009). *The handbook of social research ethics*. Sage.

Mhlanga, D., Denhere, V., & Moloi, T. (2022). COVID-19 and the key digital transformation lessons for higher education institutions in South Africa. *Education Sciences, 12*(7), 464. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci12070464

Nel, T., Stander, M.W., & Latif, J. (2015). Investigating positive leadership, psychological empowerment, work engagement and satisfaction with life in a chemical industry. *South African Journal of Industrial Psychology, 41*(1), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.4102/sajip.v41i1.1243

Parrish, D. (2015). The relevance of emotional intelligence for leadership in a higher education context. *Studies in Higher Education, 40*(5), 821–837. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2013.842225

Ritchie, J., & Lewis, J. (2003). *Qualitative research practice: A guide for social science students and researchers*. Sage Publications.

Samier, E. (2008). The problem of passive evil in educational administration: Moral implications of doing nothing. *International Studies in Educational Administration, 36*(1), 2–21.

Samier, E.A., & Milley, P. (Eds.). (2018). *International perspectives on maladministration in education*. Routledge.

Sandelowski, M. (2010). What's in a name? Qualitative description revisited. *Research in Nursing & Health, 33*(1), 77–84. https://doi.org/10.1002/nur.20362

Schaufeli, W.B. (2015). Engaging leadership in the job demands-resources model. *Career Development International, 20*(5), 446–463. https://doi.org/10.1108/CDI-02-2015-0025

Schmidt, A.A. (2008). *Development and validation of the toxic leadership scale*. Master's thesis, University of Maryland]. Retrieved from http://hdl.handle.net/1903/8176

Schwandt, T.A. (2007). *The SAGE dictionary of qualitative inquiry*. Sage.

Shaw, J.B., Erickson, A., & Harvey, M. (2011). A method for measuring destructive leadership and identifying types of destructive leaders in organizations. *The Leadership Quarterly, 22*(4), 575–590. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2011.05.001

Skogstad, A., Einarsen, S., Torsheim, T., Aasland, M. S., & Hetland, H. (2007). The destructiveness of laissez-faire leadership behavior. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology, 12*(1), 80–92. https://doi.org/10.1037/1076-8998.12.1.80

Smith, N. & Fredricks-Lowman, I. (2019): Conflict in the workplace: A 10-year review of toxic leadership in higher education. *International Journal of Leadership in Education, 23*(5), 538–551. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2019.1591512

Smith, J.A., & Osborn, M. (2007). Pain as an assault on the self: An interpretative phenomenological analysis of the psychological impact of chronic benign low back pain. *Psychology and Health, 22*(5), 517–534. https://doi.org/10.1080/14768320600941756

Smyth, J. (2017). *The toxic University: Zombie leadership, academic rock stars and neoliberal ideology*. Springer Nature.

South African Government (1998). *Employment Equity Act 55 of 1998*. Retrieved from https://www.gov.za/documents/employment-equity-act.

Stander, M.W., & Coxen, L. (2017). A review of the relationship between positive leadership styles and psychological ownership. In C. Olckers, L.E. Van Zyl & L. Van der Vaart (Eds.), *Theoretical orientations and practical applications of psychological ownership* (pp. 37–60). Springer International Publishing.

Van Rensburg, C.J., & Rothmann, S. (2020). Towards positive institutions: Positive practices and employees' experiences in higher education institutions. *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology, 46*(1), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.4102/sajip.v46i0.1733

Veldsman, T. (2016). How toxic leaders destroy people as well as organisations. *The Conversation*. Retrieved from https://theconversation.com/how-toxic-leaders-destroy-people-as-well-as-organisations-51951

Walumba, F.O., Avolio, B.J., Gardner, W.L., Wernsing, T.S., & Peterson, S.J. (2008). Authentic leadership: Development and validation of a theory-based measure. *Journal of Management, 34*(1), 89–126. https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206307308913