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1 **Advancing leadership in sport: Time to ‘actually’**
2 **take the blinkers off?**

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6 **Key points**

- 7 1. When assessing socially undesirable attitudes such as dark leadership
8 traits, we urge scholars to avoid relying on qualitative accounts alone and
9 encourage the use of indirect methods, and theory-driven empirical research.
- 10 2. Sports leadership research should move beyond assessing behavioural
11 outcomes alone and instead assess cognition alongside behaviour.
- 12 3. We strongly question the ‘ends justify the means’ attitude suggested in
13 Cruickshank and Collins’ work and suggest that practitioners consider the
14 longer term ramifications associated with such an approach.

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Abstract

In a recent article entitled *Advancing Leadership in Sport: Time to Take off the Blinkers?* published in *Sports Medicine*, Cruickshank and Collins presented what they deemed to be a critical analysis of extant leadership research in sport, attempting to establish a rationale for a greater emphasis on both the cognitive and ‘darker’ (i.e., socially undesirable) sides of leadership. The purpose of the present article is to challenge and clarify a number of misrepresentations in the arguments made in the foundation article, and to question some of the resultant recommendations made. Specifically, the present response will focus on Cruickshank and Collins’ (a) lack of specificity regarding the actual ‘dark’ traits they are apparently purporting to be effective leadership traits, (b) the dearth of theoretical and empirical support for their claims relating to the benefits of ‘dark’ leadership (c) misrepresentation of transformational leadership theory, (d) decision to ignore other relevant theoretical frameworks when presenting their arguments, and (e) apparent confirmation bias in the selective use of literature to support their arguments. Leadership research in sport may well benefit from new directions and methodological advancements and on this level we concur with the aims of Cruickshank and Collins’ article. However, we believe their misrepresentations and inappropriate recommendations do little to advance this area of research, and potentially serve to take it backwards not forwards.

1 Introduction

Discussions around the bright (i.e., socially desirable) and dark (i.e., socially undesirable) sides of sports leadership have resurfaced recently [1,2,3]. While discussing both the bright and dark side of leadership has its merits, it is important not to glorify behaviours and traits that can potentially be harmful. As such, the present article aims to clarify a range of theoretical misconceptions of both dark and transformational leadership, as discussed within Cruickshank and Collins [1,2]. Specific attention is paid to the following arguments.

First, Cruickshank and Collins [2] (p.4) argue that leaders are not necessarily more effective should they “have a more complete, brighter, or stronger set of ‘gold standard’ behaviours”, suggesting that both bright and dark traits can work in tandem. Second, they suggest that the findings from their recent research encourage an ‘it depends’ approach to the study of leadership. Rather than behaving in an authentic manner, Cruickshank and Collins [2] (p.4) appear to suggest that those who can manage the impressions of others and present the impression of multiple competencies will ultimately achieve greater success: “...it is those who can use a host of different methods in a host of different ways for a host of different purposes in an optimum fashion who will achieve expertise and outperform others”. Finally, Cruickshank and Collins [2] criticise transformational leadership; particularly focusing on the attribution of labels and their impression that the approach cannot inform day-to-day practice.

2 Conceptual concerns related to dark leadership.

While Cruickshank and Collins [2] fail to define the specific traits they are referring to when discussing dark leadership, given their previous work [1, 4] it is likely that narcissism, Machiavelianism, hubris, and social dominance will be the focus [5]. First, narcissism can be characterised, within non-clinical settings, as arrogance, self-absorption, entitlement, and hostility [6]. Individuals high in narcissistic tendencies exhibit a grandiose view of self, often perceiving themselves as unique and worthy of admiration [5]. They are often viewed as self-confident (i.e., hubris), which helps them to rise to positions of power. However, these same traits may result in their eventual downfall [6]. Ong et al. [7] (p.1) provide an amusing analogy of the process of following a leader that possesses highly narcissistic traits:

“Relationships with narcissistic leaders can be a paradoxical experience, much like eating chocolate cake. The first bite is usually rich in flavor and texture, and extremely gratifying. After a while, however, the richness of this flavour makes one feel increasingly nauseous. Being led by a narcissist could be a similar experience.”

Consistent with the deleterious aspects of narcissistic leadership alluded to through this analogy, recent research has linked coach narcissism with increased dominance, reduced empathy, increased frequency of controlling coach

78 behaviours and reduced frequency of autonomy-supportive coach behaviours
79 [8]. If Cruickshank and Collins [2] were indeed including narcissism within
80 their categorisation of dark leadership, the outcomes associated with more
81 narcissistic coaches in the work of Matosic and colleagues [8] are not ones we
82 would consider to be representative of advanced leadership.

83 Second, Machiavellianism is characterised as the manipulation and ex-
84 ploitation of others. Those who present Machavellian tendencies are considered
85 cunning and possess a willingness to deceive for their own gains. Leaders de-
86 scribed as Machiavellian seek control over followers and are driven by a need
87 for power [9]. They tactically self-present and use their skill in impression
88 management to coerce others into behaving as they desire [10]. Third, hubris
89 is categorised as excessive pride and an inflated sense of self-confidence [5].
90 Leaders high in hubristic tendencies over value their own contributions and
91 downplay the achievements of others. Likewise, because hubristic leaders have
92 a distorted view of their self-worth, they tend to discount information that
93 conflicts with this self-perception [11]. Lastly, social dominance is categorised
94 as an individual's preference for stable hierarchical systems [12]. Leaders high
95 in social dominance tend to place high demands on others, which often results
96 in the leader creating a pressurised, unsupportive, inconsiderate, and unfair
97 environment [5].

98 While Cruickshank and Collins [1,2] assert that supposed dark traits such
99 as Machiavellianism, narcissism, hubris and dominance may be effective, there
100 is little empirical evidence to support such a claim. Further and like many
101 before them, they fail to define what they mean by 'effective'. While effec-
102 tiveness is often gauged from a leader's performance, the latter is susceptible
103 to a range of extraneous influences and this approach takes a narrow view of
104 the processes involved [5]. Further, much of the dark leadership literature is ei-
105 ther qualitative self-reports from leaders or cross-sectional surveys of followers.
106 Given the socially-sensitive nature of the topic, self-reports may be fallible to
107 recall error and in particular, social desirability bias [31]. Furthermore, given
108 the lack of longitudinal research [7, 37], cross-sectional data may be skewed
109 towards short-term snapshots of a moment in time before the influence of dark
110 leadership traits and behaviours can truly become apparent.

111 As Dasborough and Ashkanasey [13] suggest, the relationship between
112 leader and follower is likely to suffer if the follower perceives their leader to
113 be demonstrating characteristics associated with dark leadership. Once the
114 followers realise that their leader has been manipulative, controlling, and ego-
115 istic it is likely their satisfaction with the leader will suffer [14,15,16,13,17].
116 Within sport, such an approach is unlikely to produce long-term relationships.
117 Athletes may tolerate such selfish, manipulative, and dominant coaches in the
118 short-term pursuit of their goals, but once results suffer, as they inevitably
119 will, it is unlikely that the relationship will endure [21,22].

120 For contemporary sport leadership scholars such as Arthur et al. [29] and
121 Ong et al. [7] the issue is less around the traits possessed by leaders and
122 more about examining the outcomes associated with the characteristic. Using

123 narcissism¹ as an example, Ong et al. [7] examined whether individuals higher
124 in narcissism have leader emergent tendencies and also whether perceptions
125 of such leadership qualities are stable over time. Based on two samples (i.e.,
126 $N = 112$ and $N = 152$), Ong et al. [7] reported narcissism was positively
127 associated with peer-rated leadership during initial group formation, but that
128 these perceptions were not stable over time. While Cruickshank and Collins
129 [2] (p. 3) acknowledge that identifying the outcomes of such behaviours has
130 done much to advance the literature, they argue that little has been done to
131 examine how and when these behaviours should be selected and utilised:

132 “behaviour-focused work has done much to identify possible leadership
133 ‘tools’ (i.e., behaviours) but little for how and why they may be suc-
134 cessfully selected, combined and deployed; issues which lie at the true
135 heart of leader effectiveness in applied settings.”

136 Like Cruickshank and Collins [2] (p.3), we agree that leadership scholars could
137 broaden their horizons beyond behavioural outcomes alone. We disagree, how-
138 ever, that the focus should now turn to how behaviours can be “successfully se-
139 lected, combined and deployed”. Rather than encouraging spurious behaviours
140 and self-presentation, scholars should attempt to find ways of examining the
141 antecedent motives behind the behaviour and examine the prior mental rep-
142 resentations, which form the character. While followers may not initially see
143 through false idols using scripted behaviours, when they do, trust is inevitably
144 damaged [16]. Should followers be manipulated to work for the leader’s self-
145 interest, once the motive for the manipulation becomes apparent, it is likely
146 that the relationship will be annulled [16]. We would like to propose that,
147 rather than examining the outcomes of behaviour and leadership training,
148 scholarly attention should be directed at examining the effects of value con-
149 gruence and group dynamics. Like Cruickshank and Collins [2] we agree that
150 context is key in the perceived effectiveness of the leader, but argue that the
151 notion of a proverbial toolbox of disingenuous behaviours is flawed. Until we
152 have a greater empirical understanding of the mechanisms involved within the
153 leader-follower dynamic, it is unlikely that meaningful change will be achieved.

154 **3 Conceptual clarifications related to transformational leadership.**

155 We also believe there are some misinterpretations of the transformational lead-
156 ership literature present to Cruickshank and Collins [2]. First, Cruickshank and
157 Collins [2] (p.4) argue that it is unhelpful and arguably pointless for Bass and
158 Steidlmeier [17] to “try and classify leaders with general labels”. While the
159 point Cruickshank and Collins [2] make regarding labelling leaders is arguably
160 valid, Bass and Steidlmeier [17] do not do this. We believe the inherent sug-
161 gestion that an archetypal transformational leader exists represents a common

¹ Narcissism, in this instance, refers to extreme selfishness, a grandiose view of one’s own ability and a craving for admiration [6].

162 misinterpretation of transformational leadership theory. A more critical exam-
163 ination of relevant theory reveals there is no such thing as a transformational
164 leader, merely those who display transformational qualities [30]. Our issue with
165 this particular assertion of Cruickshank and Collins ([2]) is further highlighted
166 by the fact there is currently no universally accepted definition for the number
167 of qualities or behaviours that need to be demonstrated by a leader in order
168 to be classified as transformational. As such, Bass and Steidlmeier's [17] are
169 no different to Cruickshank and Collins in using overarching terms to discuss
170 behaviours and traits (i.e., authentic and pseudo-transformational leadership,
171 and bright and dark leadership).

172 Next, Cruickshank and Collins [2] question whether transformational lead-
173 ership is able to inform day-to-day interaction – suggesting that transforma-
174 tional leadership is sub-optimal. While we agree that transformational lead-
175 ership is sub-optimal, for us, all theories and models are sub-optimal to some
176 degree. As the first reviewer of this manuscript notes “Throwing a theory away
177 because it is sub-optimal is like throwing a good car away because it has a
178 puncture. If all the sub-optimal theories in psychology were thrown away, in
179 my opinion, there would be no theories left.” Further, were transformational
180 leadership behaviour unable to inform day-to-day interaction, as Cruickshank
181 and Collins [2] suggest, then the question we pose in response is how else can
182 the results of the many intervention studies [32,33,34,35,36] that have been
183 conducted be explained?

184 They then go on to question how to deploy transformational leadership be-
185 haviours such as intellectual stimulation and high performance expectations.
186 Like much of their manuscript, the examples Cruickshank and Collins [2] pro-
187 vide regarding the use of such behaviour unfortunately demonstrate their mis-
188 understanding of what transformational leadership is and the research litera-
189 ture that surrounds it. In their first example, Cruickshank and Collins [2] offer
190 the example of high performance expectations being achieved through the ma-
191 nipulated sacking of an underperforming colleague. This is not and can never
192 be considered an example of high performance expectations from the trans-
193 formational leadership literature. It may (or may not) be some other method
194 of achieving high performance, but it is unquestionably not transformational.
195 Again, to imply this clearly demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding
196 of the very basic theoretical premise of transformational leadership. Instead
197 of being transformational in nature, such an example is a clear example of a
198 transactional behaviour, thus it cannot represent transformational leadership.
199 Further, we are unclear why manipulation is required given that the colleague
200 is underperforming, but this is a secondary point. Further, a subtlety that the
201 authors are perhaps missing is that a transformational leader may of course
202 use transactional leadership (e.g., reprimanding, sacking, rewarding, praising)
203 behaviour within their practice. Indeed, Bass [25] clearly states that transac-
204 tional leadership (appropriately administered) will serve as the foundation by
205 which transformational leadership operates.

206 Next, Cruickshank and Collins [2] (p.4) argue that Bass and Steidlmeier
207 [17] (p. 186) contradict themselves when stating “authentic transformational

208 leaders may have to be manipulative at times for what they judge to be the
209 common good, but [this] manipulation is ... an infrequent practice”. We believe
210 this represents another common misconception within the transformational
211 leadership literature. While the term authentic transformational leadership’
212 implies authenticity (i.e., genuine), it actually means ‘true’ [13]. Although au-
213 thentic or ‘true’ transformational leadership qualities are proposed to include
214 integrity, moral and ethical principles and authenticity [18,19,23], these qual-
215 ities are not requirements of transformational leadership [17]. While leaders
216 may have to, at times, be manipulative, according to Bass and Steidlmeier [17]
217 if the manipulation is not for the common good, the behaviour can no longer
218 be considered truly transformational. Alas, this is not a contradiction. It would
219 only be contradictory were Bass and Steidlmeier [17] to state that manipula-
220 tion for selfish gains was acceptable for those displaying truly transformational
221 qualities.

222 As Cruickshank and Collins [2] point out, there were some initial disagree-
223 ments around whether leaders using supposed dark behaviours could be trans-
224 formational. Burns [24] and Bass [25] disagreed over whether immoral lead-
225 ers could induce positive outcomes in followers while demonstrating the be-
226 haviours and qualities associated with transformational leadership. Burns [24]
227 proposed, broadly, that only leaders of moral virtue could advance followers
228 towards self-sacrifice for the greater good. For Burns [24] (p.36) “leadership is
229 a process of morality to the degree that leaders engage with followers on the
230 basis of shared motives and values and goals”. In contrast, Bass [25] argued
231 that leaders should not be distinguished based on the behaviours they present,
232 but rather on their intentions.

233 Herein lies the crux of the problem, in that traits and behaviours are, in the
234 main, value neutral [17]. As such, labelling them without context is futile. The
235 characteristic and subsequent behaviour are arguably unimportant. What is
236 important, however, is the individual and the motive behind the presentation
237 of the behaviour. Should leaders present supposed dark traits or behaviours
238 in the interest of the group, as Cruickshank and Collins [2] suggest, then
239 arguably, they are no longer dark. For example, while manipulation is generally
240 considered a dark behaviour, should the manipulation be for the greater good
241 and not in the self-interest of the leader, then the behaviour should not be
242 considered dark. Leaders do not use these behaviours in silos and are rarely
243 all ‘dark’ or all ‘bright’. As discussed within the transformational leadership
244 literature, leaders use both bright and dark behaviours and are often two sides
245 of the same coin [13]. What differentiates the leader is not the behaviour itself,
246 but rather whether the behaviour is adopted for egoistic or altruistic reasons.

247 **4 Broader methodological concerns**

248 Alas, it seems that there may be an element of confirmation bias, either im-
249 plicitly or explicitly, within Cruickshank and Collins’ [1,2] work. Evidence that
250 supports their position appears to be favoured, methodologies selectively used,

and participants purposely sampled (i.e., qualitative interviews with suspected leaders who display dark leadership behaviours). Further, 25% of the total references within their [2] article were self-citations (i.e., 14/56). That said, we appreciate that there are few sport-based manuscripts examining the issues discussed within this article. We should not, however, jump to conclusions based on research that tends to be somewhat limited in its design.

It is also worth noting that the basis for the assertions within Cruickshank and Collins [1,2] also appear fundamentally flawed. According to Cruickshank and Collins [2] (p. 3):

“...leaders of British Olympic and professional sports teams selectively used Machiavellian, ruthless, dominant and sceptical behaviours as defined by Hogan and Hogan (2001) and Judge, Piccolo, and Kosalka [5] to further their own agendas and/or shape, block or derail the agendas of others. Significantly, these behaviours were also felt to be effective parts of their approach [1], with some reporting that they would have been more successful if they had used these behaviours more often in relevant scenarios.”

However, such misguided beliefs are not uncommon within self-report research. Many perpetrators of immoral acts throughout history have justified, sanitised and cognitively reduced the effects of their actions [27]. However, rationalising behaviours based upon purportedly desirable outcomes, does not make them any less harmful. For us, arguing that ‘the end justifies the means’ is a potentially dangerous rhetoric, especially when it is largely supported by qualitative evidence from people who appear to already hold such beliefs. While this may appeal to those who hold similar beliefs, it may be the case that they are looking for evidence that supports their own distorted position, rather than considering the impact their actions have on those who follow. Like Cruickshank and Collins [2], we agree that greater focus on leader cognition would be beneficial to the field. However, given the socially undesirable nature of dark leadership traits and the aforementioned methodological issues when conducting such research, we suggest that a greater emphasis be placed on the use of indirect/ implicit² measures in future research rather than relying on interview data or explicit measures of deliberate attitudes alone.

5 Conclusion

In sum, like Cruickshank and Collins [2], we agree that leadership scholars could broaden their horizons beyond behavioural outcomes alone. However, rather than focusing on explicit cognitive processes (i.e., decision making) or behaviours, we suggest a third way where implicit and explicit attitudes are collected in tandem with their behavioural outcomes. We do not, however,

² Note that there is some linguistic ambiguity within the literature regarding the term ‘implicit’. For the purposes of this review the term implicit refers to an indirect measure of assessment [26]

290 suggest a 'toolbox' based approach, whereby behaviours are selected based
291 on their perceived effectiveness. Like Gardner and Avolio [10], Luthans and
292 Avolio [19], and Banks et al. [20] we believe authenticity to be an important
293 characteristic of leadership and would discourage the use of tactical impres-
294 sion management. Furthermore, we would also discourage an 'ends justify the
295 means' type attitude. While the participants recruited within Cruickshank and
296 Collins [1,2] may have justified their use of darker behaviours in the name of
297 effectiveness, such an approach only tells one side of the story. In fairness,
298 Cruickshank and Collins [1] acknowledge this as a limitation of their research
299 and it is hoped that this will be addressed in future studies. As a reviewer
300 of this manuscript commented "It is time for us to stop "preaching from the
301 bleachers, roll up our sleeves, and conduct some theory-driven empirical re-
302 search in this area".

303 Future research should, therefore, at a minimum, include athlete percep-
304 tions and preferably, be conducted over multiple time points. While we do not
305 in anyway discredit qualitative leadership research (we have conducted similar
306 research ourselves; see Mills and Boardley [28]), we urge caution when draw-
307 ing assumptions from skewed (i.e., all middle aged male) samples offering self-
308 reported data. Finally, we question why Cruickshank and Collins have focused
309 on transformational leadership alone when criticising the leadership literature.
310 While we clearly see overlaps between bright and dark leadership and the au-
311 thentic and pseudo-transformational leadership, it appears that Cruickshank
312 and Collins have failed to fully immerse themselves within the literature. Their
313 work has attempted to set a new agenda for sports based leadership research,
314 yet the literature they have reviewed fails to cover a range of seemingly rel-
315 evant theories and models (e.g., path-goal-theory, servant leader, sacrificial
316 leadership, leader-member-exchange, charismatic leadership, visionary leader-
317 ship, authentic leadership, implicit leadership theories, sceptical leadership,
318 contingency theory, situational approaches, narcissistic leadership, to name a
319 few). While we agree that transformational leadership has its flaws, no theory
320 is perfect and we see no benefit in attempting to discredit the theory through
321 misinterpretation. Finally, we hope that this response is accepted with the
322 spirit of collegiality that is intended. We commend Cruickshank and Collins
323 for their effort and hope that our comments go some way in clarifying the
324 misrepresentations made.

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328 Conflicts of Interest

329 John Mills and Ian Boardley declare that they have no conflicts of interest
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