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Follower Responses to Destructive Leadership

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Abstract

Follower responses to leaders' destructive behaviors have received a substantial amount of researchers' attention. However, research on this topic has largely ignored a possibility that followers do not only comply with, retaliate for, or resist destructive leader actions, but may also like, respect and enthusiastically support destructive leaders to help them achieve goals that followers believe are worth achieving. In this paper, I propose a framework delineating how followers' responses to leader abuse transpire depending on what goals their leaders intend to achieve using destructive methods of influence.

Keywords: leadership, follower responses to leadership,

JEL Classification Code: M1 Business Administration – M12 Personnel Management

Follower Responses to Destructive Leadership

Destructive leadership (DL) is “volitional behavior by a leader that can harm or intends to harm a leader’s organization and/or followers by (a) encouraging followers to pursue goals that contravene the legitimate interests of the organization and/or (b) employing a leadership style that involves the use of harmful methods of influence with followers, regardless of justifications for such behavior” (Krasikova, Green & LeBreton, 2013, p. 1310). These authors emphasize that DL as a form of leading is an act of influence directed at the achievement of some desired end-state (cf. Yukl, 2013) and suggest that leaders may use destructive methods of influence to achieve either constructive goals (goals that are aligned with the legitimate interests of the organization and its members; e.g., yell at followers to make them improve job performance) or destructive goals (goals that contravene the legitimate interests of the organization and its members, e.g., yell at followers to make them fudge the numbers on the annual report). Although abuse is harmful regardless of its justification, there is evidence that followers may react to it differently, depending on what the leader strives to achieve using abusive methods. Some followers resist destructive leader influence (Tepper, Duffy, & Shaw, 2001), while others justify abuse and remain loyal to such leaders (Lipman-Blumen, 2006). In The purpose of this study is to understand how followers’ perception of what goals their leader strives to achieve using destructive methods affects their responses to abuse.

It is important to note that it is follower interpretation (that may or may not be accurate) rather than the actual leader goal that will likely affect follower reactions to abuse. Also, leaders may pursue multiple goals, some of which may be perceived as constructive and others as destructive. Although a detailed analysis of a multiple goal pursuit via destructive actions is beyond the scope of the current analysis, I suggest that in such cases a leader goal

interpreted as destructive will have a stronger impact on follower response to abuse, given that negative information tends to outweigh positive (Baumeister et al., 2001).

Similar destructive behaviors, such as abuse, can be used to achieve quite different outcomes. Leaders may abuse followers to achieve destructive goals (DG) or constructive goals (CG; Krasikova et al., 2013). We turn to the DL literature to determine what goals destructive leaders may pursue as goal content will bear on follower responses to DL. The literature suggests that leaders may pursue harmful goals that are purely selfish (i.e., intended to benefit leaders only; Barling, Christie, & Turner, 2008; Ferris, Zinko, Brouer, Buckley, & Harvey, 2007), or may act against organizational interests in a way that also benefits followers at the organization's expense (Einarsen et al., 2007). For example, a leader may verbally abuse followers to make them fudge numbers on the report (DG) for the leader to receive a performance bonus. In this case, a leader is the sole beneficiary of the DL act. Alternatively, a leader may verbally abuse followers to make them fudge numbers on the report (DG) for the entire group to receive a performance bonus. In this case, followers are among the beneficiaries of the DL act. The first type of goals will be referred to as egoistic DG and the second type will be referred to as pro-follower DG.

Further, leaders may abuse followers to exploit them and achieve organizationally-valued outcomes (Einarsen et al., 2007; Ferris et al., 2007), or act as strict parents who use destructive actions to bring follower behavior in line with organizational requirements and ultimately have followers benefit from it (McAdams, Albaugh, Farber, Daniels, Logan, & Olson, 2008). For, example, a leader may verbally abuse followers to make them work longer hours and complete a project on time (CG) without providing overtime bonus (i.e., organization is the sole beneficiary of the DL act). Alternatively, a leader may verbally abuse

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followers to make them work overtime for them to complete a project on time and receive a bonus (i.e., followers are among the beneficiaries of the DL act). The first type of goals will be referred to as exploitative CG and the second type will be referred to as disciplining CG. As shown below, goal type will affect follower evaluation of goals.

Given that leadership is an act of influence over followers (Yukl, 2013) and DL is a special form of leading, its primary outcome is whether followers yield to leader influence and how it changes their subsequent actions. To explicate pathways to different responses to destructive leader influence, I rely on the work by Nail (1986). Nail's model of responses to influence suggests that followers may choose the following responses. Conversion occurs when followers align their private position with the leader's position and change their behavior accordingly. Anti-compliance occurs when followers align their private position with the leader's, but do not display the change required by the leader. Compliance occurs when followers do not align their private position with the leader's, but do what the leader requires to stop the abuse or out of fear of the leader. Independence occurs when followers neither change their private position nor display any public changes in response to leader influence.

Each of these responses involves a combination of two components—private and public change in followers. So, the question is: when will followers align their private position with the leader's position and when will they demonstrate actual, or at least attempted, change? Social identity theory (Ellemers, 1993; Mummendey, Kessler, Klink, & Mielke, 1999; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) suggests that the choice of follower response to abuse may depend on their assessment of whether abuse they experienced is justified by the leader's goal, and whether they are able to change their status from victim to non-victim. That is, followers will evaluate leaders' goals (Krasikova et al., 2013) and their efficacy to enact the change required by the

leader (Van Zomeren, Spears, Fischer, & Leach, 2004). Below, I outline how follower acceptance of leader goals and efficacy to change are formed and affect their responses to DL.

Leaders use destructive methods of influence to make followers achieve goals that benefit leaders, followers, and/or the organization. Followers pre-occupied with self-interest may support goals pursued by destructive leaders if it benefits them, while followers who care about the organization may reject such leader goals. Because the focus on self- vs. other-interest is enrooted in chronic identities, followers' identities will likely serve as a frame of reference guiding their evaluation of leader goals. Brewer and Gardner (1996) distinguished among three levels of identity that have distinct implications for self-evaluation, sense-making, and social motivation. Personal identity involves the aspects of the self that differentiate it from others. At this level, individuals evaluate themselves in terms of their unique characteristics, derive the sense of self-worth from how well they compare to others, and are motivated by personal goals and norms. Relational identity involves the aspects of the self that are derived from dyadic connections with others. At this level, individuals evaluate themselves based on their role-appropriate behavior, derive the sense of self-worth from how well they fulfil their roles, and are motivated by the interest of their dyadic partners. Collective identity involves features of the self that are representative of a given social category. At this level, the self is evaluated based on the intergroup comparisons, the sense of self-worth is derived from how well the in-group compares to out-groups, and behaviors are motivated by the in-group goals and norms. Follower identities will influence their assessments of leader goals.

Followers with stronger chronic personal identities have a strong self-enhancement motive (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995; Cooper & Thatcher, 2010). Due to their overpowering concern with self-interest, these followers will likely find attractive and enthusiastically

support leader goals that will benefit them personally—pro-follower DG and disciplining CG. Further, these followers may show less enthusiastic support (i.e., acceptance) of exploitative CG intended to benefit the organization. Although these followers are generally not concerned with organizational interests, they accept exploitative CG for calculative reasons—to stop abuse or because acting against the leader that defends organizational interests is risky. Finally, followers with personal identity are likely to reject selfish DG because they do not bring personal benefits and may even incur costs.

Followers with stronger relational identities have strong motives for personalized belongingness, self-expansion, and uncertainty reduction (Cooper & Thatcher, 2010). Thus, when evaluating leader goals, these followers will care about maintaining relationships with the leader and attend to the leader's perspective to understand and justify the leader's goal choice. Also, due to their concern about preserving relationships, these followers will do their best to perform behaviors prescribed by their role-relationship with the leader (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). In addition, because of their need for structure, these followers will turn to the leader for structuring their roles and abide by the leader-set standards. Therefore, these followers are unlikely to reject any of the leader's goals. However, followers with relational identities also have a moderately strong depersonalized belongingness motive (Cooper & Thatcher, 2010) and care about the interests of their collectives (e.g., organization). Thus, when evaluating leader goals, followers with stronger relational identities will likely commit to CG and accept DG, and unlikely to reject leader's goals.

Followers with stronger chronic collective identities have strong motives for depersonalized belongingness and uncertainty reduction (Cooper & Thatcher, 2010) and, thus, care about organizational interests and abide by the organization-approved behavioral

standards. These followers' concern with other-interest can be so powerful that they may sacrifice their own well-being for the greater good of other people or collectives (Swann et al., 2014). This suggests that followers with collective identities will support leader CG intended to benefit the organization, and reject leader DG even if doing so will prolong their suffering from abuse.

Self-efficacy is formed through the assessment of task requirements, attributional analysis of experience, and the evaluation of resources and constraints (Gist & Mitchell, 1992). Thus, when estimating efficacy to change in line with leader expectations, victim followers, first, consider how much their behavior deviates from the leader expectation to determine what it will take to close this gap. The greater the gap between the abused employee behavior and leader-approved standard, the lower the employee efficacy to bring their behavior in line with the leader expectation. Second, followers will perform an attributional analysis of experience. Efficacy will be higher when a follower believes their behavior leading to abuse was caused by internal and variable factors, than external factors and factors that are internal but relatively stable. Third, followers will consider whether they have resources to enact the change required by the leader and whether there are situational constraints that may prevent them from enacting change, with efficacy being higher when resources are available and constraints are low. Thus, victim followers will have greater efficacy to change in line with leader expectations when the discrepancy between their behavior and leader expectation is lower, they attribute their behavior that led to abuse to internal and variable factors, and there are sufficient personal resources to enact change and low situational constraints that prevent its enactment.

Taking together all arguments above, I propose that when victim followers commit to

the leader's goal, they will likely respond to destructive influence with convergence if they have high efficacy to change, and anti-compliance if they have low efficacy to change (Nail, 1986). Further, when followers accept the leader's goal and have the efficacy to enact the change required by the leader, they will likely respond with compliance. Finally, when they either reject the leader's goal, or accept it and have low efficacy to change, they will respond with independence.

Conclusion

Most studies on DL focused on leader's use of destructive actions without considering what outcomes the leader aims to achieve. This study supplements prior research by analyzing how follower reactions to abuse may change as a function of follower assessment of goals leaders may pursue using destructive influence. Future research can explore the effects of leader goals on follower responses by examining goal content from the leader's perspective, studying the effects of leader multi-goal pursuits, and examining the effects of organizational factors (e.g., values, mission) on what leader goals are considered destructive and constructive.

This study offers implications for practice. By yielding to destructive influence through convergence, compliance or anti-compliance, followers act as partners in crime by assisting destructive leaders, help them achieve their goals, and may contribute to the perpetuation of abuse. The current analysis suggests strategies to foster follower non-compliance and break the cycle of abuse. For example, this analysis demonstrates that priming followers' collective identities will help them resist leader influence. Also, this analysis suggests that followers need to know what constitutes organizational interest to judge whether their leaders' goal pursuit is in line with or contradicts organizational goals. If followers are familiarized with

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organizational values and goals, it will equip them with clearer lens to identify leader actions that violate organizational interests and make them feel that their non-compliance will be supported by the organization.

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Acknowledgements

This research is supported by the UTSA College of Business Summer grant program and the UTSA Office of Vice President for Research.

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