South African Journal of Business Management
ISSN: (Online) 2078-5976, (Print) 2078-5585

The influence of self-awareness on effective leadership outcomes in South Africa

Authors:
Sharon Da Fonseca[1]
Hugh Myres[1]
Karl Hofmeyr[1]

Affiliations:
[1]Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria, Sandton, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Karl Hofmeyr,
hofmeyrk@gibs.co.za

Dates:
Received: 21 May 2021
Accepted: 12 May 2022
Published: 17 Oct. 2022

How to cite this article:
Da Fonseca, S., Myres, H., & Hofmeyr, K. (2022). The influence of self-awareness on effective leadership outcomes in South Africa. *South African Journal of Business Management, 53*(1), a2720. https://doi.org/10.4102/sajbm.v53i1.2720

Copyright:
© 2022. The Authors. Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

Read online:
Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

Purpose: Leadership research demands an understanding of what constitutes effective leadership. Self-awareness is described as critical for effective leadership, yet there is little research dealing with the link between a lack of self-awareness in leaders and destructive leadership. The prevalence of destructive leadership is surprisingly common and bears a high cost to organisations in terms of employee turnover, absenteeism and decreased productivity. The emotional toll it takes on employees is severe and affects their well-being and identification with the organisation.

Design/methodology/approach: A qualitative, exploratory approach was used to gain insights into the role that self-awareness plays in effective leadership and how a lack thereof affects employee engagement and behaviour. Data were collected through semi structured interviews with executives who had experience of working for a manager with low self-awareness. Thematic analysis was then conducted to identify the main themes found in the data.

Findings/results: This study found that leaders with low self-awareness exhibit behaviours consistent with toxic and destructive leadership. Negative effects on subordinates were felt in terms of employee engagement and increased resistance to the leader occurred. Subordinates then engaged in retaliatory and deviant work behaviour as a result.

Practical implications: A model for conceptualising how self-awareness results in destructive leadership and its influence on followers' behaviours and attitudes emerged, enabling an improved understanding of this organisational behavioural phenomenon.

Originality/value: Literature is limited on self-awareness even though more research is being carried out on destructive leadership. The research has implications for how talent management is conducted within organisations.

Keywords: self-awareness; destructive leadership; leadership processes; followers; toxic reactions.

Introduction

Self-awareness is critical for effective leadership and has been identified as the cornerstone of authentic, servant, empowering, resonant and transformational leadership amongst others (Amundsen & Martinsen, 2014; Boyatzis, 2008; Sturm, Taylor, Atwater, & Braddy, 2014; Suri & Prasad, 2011). Leaders must learn how to master themselves through self-awareness and self-regulation (Crossan & Mazutis, 2008). Caldwell (2010) postulated that the most important aspect of self-awareness is how leaders can respond to and apply knowledge about emotions in building trust and meaningful relationships with followers.

Various theoretical perspectives such as authentic leadership and emotional intelligence have been used to represent the behavioural domains thought to constitute effective leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Avoliom, Wernsing, & Gardner, 2018; Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008). Self-awareness is a critical component of emotional intelligence, where leaders are able to show empathy, understand their strengths and weaknesses and have the ability to manage their emotions (Goleman, 2017).

An important factor in leadership success is self-awareness, but despite this, much existing leadership research has focused on leadership of others and largely ignored leadership of self (Crossan & Mazutis, 2008; Sturm et al., 2014). There is, however, consensus that self-awareness is an important antecedent and focal component in many positive forms of leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Crossan, Vera, & Nanjad, 2008).

Research purpose and objectives

The topic of inauthentic, ineffective, destructive, toxic and despotic leadership has been generating increased interest in both practitioner and academic literature (Erickson, Shaw, Murray, & Branch, 2015; Krasikova, Green & Lebretson, 2013; Naseer, Raja, Syed, Donia, & Darr, 2016; Padilla, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2007; Schyns, 2015; Thoroughgood, Sawyer, Padilla, & Lunsford, 2018). Despite this interest, the topic is nascent and studies have focused on understanding negative leader behaviours and identifying their consequences (Krasikova et al., 2013). The research into destructive leadership suffers from the lack of an integrated theoretical framework and disagreement over a comprehensive definition (Krasikova et al., 2013). Despite self-awareness being considered essential for positive leadership outcomes, it is mentioned peripherally, if at all, in the destructive leadership discourse.

Destructive leadership can result in a significant cost to companies in terms of employee turnover, absenteeism and decreased productivity (Schyns & Schilling, 2013). The emotional toll it takes on employees is severe and affects their well-being, job satisfaction, commitment, loyalty and identification with the organisation (Hogg, 2001; Kumar & Pansari, 2015; Padilla et al., 2007; Schyns & Schilling, 2013). The high cost and prevalence of destructive leadership underlines the importance of further research. Thoroughgood et al. (2018) suggested that inductive qualitative research would add to a more comprehensive view of destructive leadership processes by understanding more deeply the personal experiences of subordinates.

This article explores the behaviours associated with low self-awareness in leaders, the effects of these behaviours on their followers and the reactions of followers to these leaders. The results inform a framework of inauthentic, destructive leadership and how that relates to subordinates' attitudes and behaviours. This should assist organisations to identify and manage potentially destructive leaders before damaging consequences occur (Schyns, 2015; Schyns & Schilling, 2013; Thoroughgood et al., 2018).

Literature review

Authentic leadership stresses the importance of self-awareness, and Goleman (1995), in his book *Emotional Intelligence*, was one of the first to suggest that being emotionally intelligent was a more important measure than intelligence quotient (IQ) in predicting employee career success and performance. Emotional intelligence was defined by Goleman (1998, p. 7) as 'managing feelings so that they are expressed appropriately and effectively, enabling people to work together smoothly towards their common goals'.

Self-awareness is described as a competency under the construct of emotional intelligence and as the foundational competency upon which the others are built. Goleman later wrote that self-awareness comprised the core capabilities of emotional self-awareness, accurate self-assessment and self-confidence (Goleman, 2017). Self-management, social awareness and social skill were the other factors of emotional intelligence identified (Goleman, 2017). These different elements, he believed, were the foundation for the six leadership styles employed by leaders across the world (Goleman, 2017). The most successful leaders can apply these different styles to different business contexts as needed.

Selecting the most appropriate responses for working with others depends largely on the degree to which leaders are self-aware (Caldwell & Hayes, 2016). Authenticity in that personal response is demonstrated through an ability to understand the needs of others and the context of a situation (Goleman, 2017). Self-awareness requires that leaders also demonstrate an understanding of their strengths and weaknesses, as well as the impact they have on others (Caldwell & Hayes, 2016).

Empirical evidence links a leader's emotional intelligence and their professional success, whilst simultaneously explaining career derailment potential (Braddy, Gooty, Fleenor, & Yammarino, 2014; Rubens, Schoenfeld, Schaffer, & Leah, 2018). The ability to build effective teams, take initiative, maintain successful relationships with others and communicate effectively links self-awareness and these so-called 'soft skills' to leadership effectiveness (Hurrell, 2017; Rubens et al., 2018). To develop leadership skill requires self-motivation, collaboration with others through understanding context and self-regulation (Day et al., 2014). Emotional intelligence has gained popularity in leadership research and studies link emotional intelligence with career success (Cherniss & Goleman, 2001) and ideal leadership practices (Kouzes & Posner, 2016).

Self–other agreement is often used as a measure of self-awareness (Day et al., 2014). Amundsen and Martinsen (2014) found that leaders who overestimated their leadership skills had followers who were more likely to leave their jobs and reported lower job satisfaction compared with those subordinates with in-agreement leaders. The possibility exists that overestimators have narcissistic and arrogant tendencies, negatively impacting followers as a result (Amundsen & Martinsen, 2014). Decreased work performance and an increase in affected employees' turnover can result, causing the organisation to decline (Amundsen & Martinsen, 2014).

Caldwell (2010) made the connection between self-awareness and self-deception. He argues that a clear understanding of oneself is necessary for organisational effectiveness. Congruence in how we assess ourselves is key to self-awareness; however, self-deception is a form of cognitive dissonance employed as a defence mechanism to maintain self-regard and pride (Caldwell, 2010). Self-awareness and self-deception are primarily unconscious actions, which means they are difficult and uncomfortable for leaders to acknowledge (Caldwell, 2010). Organisational outcomes, building trust and forming relationships can be positively

magnified through an understanding of how self-awareness and self-deception apply in a business environment (Caldwell, 2010).

Self-awareness and effective leadership

During difficult and turbulent times, it becomes particularly relevant to understand the determinants of effective leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Avolio and Gardner (2005) argued that the foundation for all positive types of leadership is authentic leadership (Avolio et al., 2018).

The basic assumption for what constitutes authentic leadership starts with the leaders' self-awareness and self-regulation (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Transformational leadership and servant leadership also have leader self-awareness based on values, cognition and emotion at their core (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Transcendent leadership describes leadership of self as one of three key pillars that leaders should master (Crossan & Mazutis, 2008).

Authentic leadership dictates that followers should be developed along with leaders through open and positive dialogue. The leader, through positive role-modelling, instils greater self-awareness in the follower (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). In transformational leadership, the leader aspires to meet the needs of followers through idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, individual consideration and linking self-awareness to positive organisational citizenship behaviour (Banks, Davis, Gardner, & Guler, 2016). Kouzes and Posner's model, *The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership* (Kouzes & Posner, 2011), describes five behaviours that leaders should adopt to lead effectively. Effective leadership is critical because it affects not only organisational performance but also employee engagement and commitment (Kouzes & Posner, 2016).The first practice of exemplary leadership involves modelling the way, clarifying and affirming shared values and aligning their actions and behaviours to those stated values (Dale, 2017). Further practices include inspiring a shared vision, fostering collaboration by building trust and competence in others, enabling others to act and, finally, encouraging the heart by celebrating the accomplishments and contributions of individuals (Dale, 2017).

Self-awareness as it relates to organisational outcomes has most often been examined in leadership literature and theories, where assessment of one's own behaviour is measured against perceptions of colleagues (Dierdorff, Fisher, & Rubin, 2019). This self–other agreement is often taken as a proxy measure for self-awareness (Day et al., 2014). Self–other agreement is generally related to leadership effectiveness, where those individuals with high self-agreement are found to have high self-awareness, and those with low self-agreement are considered low in self-awareness and therefore low in competence and effectiveness as well (Dierdorff et al., 2019; Fleenor et al., 2010). Self-awareness and self-image are also confirmed in the context of how a leader believes they are perceived by others (Caldwell, 2010; Sturm et al., 2014). Leader self-awareness is distinguished from individual-level self-awareness by incorporating expectations of how the leader thinks they are viewed by followers (Sturm et al., 2014). This metaperception has received far less focus in the theory of leaders' self-awareness than how a leader's self-rating compares with how others rate them (Sturm et al., 2014). Dierdorff et al. (2019) also highlighted the importance of metacognition in team functioning, because individuals who inaccurately view their contributions and overestimate how others see their contributions to the team cause poor team cohesion and coordination, leading to increased conflict (Dierdorff et al., 2019).

Talented individuals are often promoted on the basis of their technical business skills and intelligence, with little regard for their 'soft' skills (Ackley, 2016). This is confirmed by Boyatzis and McKee (2005), who postulated that ineffective leadership is more often the result of a lack of self-awareness than general ineptitude.

The behaviour and effects of destructive leaders

There is a paucity of academic literature describing a lack of self-awareness and its link to negative forms of leadership, such as destructive, toxic or despotic leadership (Lipman-Blumen, 2011; Padilla et al., 2007; Pelletier, 2012; Shaw, Erickson, & Harvey, 2011; Thoroughgood, Padilla, Hunter, & Tate, 2012). However, much literature has been written on the importance of self-awareness in positive forms of leadership. Where leaders do not display any of the actions or behaviours associated with high self-awareness, it can be assumed then that the opposite is true. This is confirmed by Debnam (2006), who wrote:

> An unaware leader is a leader out of control, careering along a road with no firm grip on the wheel. He will thrash around, lurching from one drama to the next, leaving a trail of misery and destruction in his wake. His behaviour will become manipulative and harmful to himself and those around him as he gets locked into destructive patterns of blame, projection, denial, and rationalisation. The unaware leader becomes so absorbed with, and driven by, his own needs and insecurities that he eventually becomes disconnected from the world around him. He loses – or never finds – the ability to have any meaningful, authentic dialogue with his colleagues and business partners. He becomes isolated and self-protected, with a distorted sense of reality. (p. 55)

Irwin (2012) argued that many Chief Executive Officers lack self-awareness, and this is the first early warning sign of derailment. Failing leaders display five behaviours and attitudes (Hewertson, 2012):

- They are dismissive of other people's perspectives and emotions and lack empathy.
- They miss social cues and political nuances.
- They blame others.
- They avoid dealing with and resolving conflict.
- They isolate themselves and certain teammates, creating silos.

These behaviours lead to destructive leadership and often failure (Hewertson, 2012). Destructive leader behaviour has been described as voluntary acts by a person in a leadership role which would be perceived as harmful or deviant towards followers or the organisation (Thoroughgood, Tate, Sawyer, & Jacobs, 2012). Leadership is again defined as intentional by Yukl (2006, p. 3), who says leadership is 'a process whereby intentional influence is exerted by one person over other people to guide, structure and facilitate activities and relationships in a group and organisation'. Schyns and Schilling (2013) argued that it is empirically difficult to differentiate between destructive leadership that is intentional or unintentional, but both can be considered destructive.

Shaw et al. (2011) and Pelletier (2012) investigated how the perception of toxic leadership was influenced by the relationship of the leader and follower through social identity in the context of leader–member exchange. It was observed that favouritism was encouraged, and favoured status influenced followers' perception of toxic behaviour and intention to challenge the leader (Pelletier, 2012). Eight dimensions of destructive leadership were identified, with by far the most damaging being the attack on self-esteem (Pelletier, 2012).

Shaw et al. (2011) proposed a method for identifying the prevalence and type of destructive leadership in organisations based on the perceptions of subordinates. They classified the 767 behaviours associated with these leaders into 11 categories:

- autocratic behaviour
- poor communication
- inability to deal effectively with subordinates
- low integrity
- inability to use technology
- erratic and inconsistent behaviour
- poor interpersonal behaviour
- micromanagement
- poor personal behaviour
- political astuteness
- lack of strategic skills.

These leaders are described as unethical bullies who micromanage and are controlling and unwilling to change with an inability to handle conflict or listen to others (Shaw et al., 2011).

Schyns and Schilling (2013) posited that the negative effects of destructive leadership are so severe that it is necessary to gain an understanding of the antecedents of destructive leader behaviour. Given the focus on authentic, inclusive leadership in modern organisations, Padilla et al. (2007, p. 176) proposed that toxic leadership can still prevail if the three factors of 'destructive leaders, susceptible followers and a conducive environment' exist in an organisation.

The outcomes of destructive leadership can broadly be categorised as leader-related concepts, job-related concepts, organisation-related concepts and individual follower-related concepts (Schyns & Schilling, 2013).

Leader-related concepts mostly include attitudes towards the leader and follower resistance. Positive concepts such as trust are negatively affected by destructive leadership (Schyns & Schilling, 2013). Job satisfaction, motivation and dedication are job-related concepts that are negatively affected by destructive leadership (Schyns & Schilling, 2013). Commitment and positive sentiment towards the organisation, as well as toxic retaliation by followers, are listed under organisation-related concepts (Schyns & Schilling, 2013). The consequences of destructive leadership on individual followers, such as performance, stress and sentiment, are captured under individual follower-related concepts and are positively related to destructive leadership (Schyns & Schilling, 2013).

Research into destructive leadership is nascent; however, there is an increase in interest regarding the dark side of leadership (Schyns & Schilling, 2013). This has stemmed from the substantial costs that destructive leadership brings, not only in terms of employee absenteeism, turnover and productivity, but also from findings that there are grave effects on followers (Schyns & Schilling, 2013). However, a lack of self-awareness has not been as well researched in terms of how it relates to leaders themselves, particularly their leadership style, behaviours or effectiveness (Boyatzis, 2008; Cherniss & Goleman, 2001).

Leader self-awareness and employee engagement

Kahn (1990) originally defined employee engagement as a work condition in which employees are engaged in their job tasks cognitively, physically and emotionally. Kumar and Pansari (2015, p. 68) defined employee engagement as 'a multidimensional construct that comprises all of the different facets of the attitudes and behaviours of employees towards the organisation'. They further identify five dimensions of employee engagement. These dimensions are employee satisfaction (referring to the overall happiness of employees with their job and employer), identification with the organisation, commitment, loyalty and performance (Kumar & Pansari, 2015).

Goleman (2017) stated that emotional self-awareness can improve the performance of teams and organisational climate. Climate refers to six factors that impact the work environment, including flexibility, responsibility to the organisation, standards employees set for themselves, the accuracy of feedback, perception of fair reward and clarity of purpose and commitment to that vision (Goleman, 2017). When leaders lack self-awareness, these factors are negatively impacted. Managers who have an inflated view of their leadership skill may refuse training, mentoring and development opportunities (Lee & Carpenter, 2018) and may need to be compelled to change (Vogel & Kroll, 2019). Kumar and Pansari (2015) demonstrated that through increased employee engagement, organisational performance was improved.

Despotic or destructive leadership has been shown to induce disengagement in employees, causing them to withdraw or engage in counterproductive work behaviour, which ultimately lowers performance (Naseer et al., 2016). Naseer et al. (2016) further suggested that to cope with the emotional exhaustion and stress of this type of leadership, employees are forced to conserve their emotional energy through disengagement.

Reactions to destructive leadership

Leadership, positive or negative, is the result of leadership processes and their outcomes, rather than simply the result of leader behaviour (Thoroughgood et al., 2018; Yukl, 2012). Followers who enable destructive leadership are described as susceptible, either being conformers with low levels of maturity and self-image or colluders who are ambitious with bad values (Padilla et al., 2007). Thoroughgood et al. (2012a) extended the understanding of how susceptible followers contribute to toxic outcomes by further dividing conformers into lost souls, authoritarians or bystanders, with colluders being divided into acolytes and opportunists. Lipman-Blumen (2005) described the need for interaction between toxic leaders and followers to result in destructive leadership outcomes.

These reactions in subordinates follow from destructive leadership. Alienated followers are negative and discontented, quietly undermining their leaders. Yes-men and sheep blindly follow the leaders whilst survivors adapt to the toxic leadership style, caring only for their own well-being (Thomas, Gentzler, & Salvatorelli, 2017). This research further confirms that counterproductive work behaviour, which is more subtle than direct resistance, occurs in response to toxic leadership (Schyns & Schilling, 2013).

Cuddy, Glick and Beninger (2011) proposed that leaders and individuals are judged based on the two attributes of warmth and competence. How leaders are perceived along these dimensions determines both the emotional and behavioural response received from subordinates. Warmth includes many of the attributes associated with high levels of self-awareness, such as friendliness and empathy, whilst competence denotes intelligence and skill (Cuddy et al., 2011). Those leaders deemed high in skill and warmth are trusted leaders who elicit positive reactions from followers, whilst those leaders who lack warmth evoke a passive facilitation and envy from followers, where they comply out of fear or convenience (Cuddy et al., 2011). Those low in skill and warmth evoke contempt and passive harm from subordinates. Leaders low in warmth or self-awareness evoke negative emotional and behavioural responses in subordinates (Cuddy et al., 2011).

The current descriptions of destructive, toxic or flawed leadership mention a lack of emotional intelligence peripherally, but the conceptual and empirical links between a lack of self-awareness, destructive leadership, and follower attitudes, engagement and behaviours have not been fully developed (Schyns & Schilling, 2013; Thoroughgood et al., 2018, 2012a).

Conclusion

Self-awareness is critical for effective leadership and has been identified as essential for authentic, servant, empowering, resonant and transformational leadership amongst others.

Research into destructive leadership is emerging, with a renewed focus (Schyns & Schilling, 2013). This has stemmed not only from the substantial costs of destructive leadership in terms of employee absenteeism, turnover and productivity but also from findings that there are grave effects on followers (Schyns & Schilling, 2013).

Leaders who most lack the ability to accurately assess their own capabilities and areas for improvement suffer from the Dunning–Kruger effect (Zell & Krizan, 2014). This describes the phenomenon that leaders with low self-awareness are much more likely to be underperformers across other competencies (Dierdorff et al., 2019; Zell & Krizan, 2014). As self-awareness is a critical component of leadership success, it is imperative to understand the impact that a lack thereof has on followers and the organisation.

Methodology

A qualitative, exploratory approach was used to gain insights into the role that self-awareness plays in effective leadership, how a lack thereof affects employee engagement and behaviour and understanding how leaders with low self-awareness affect employee perceptions and behaviour. An interpretivist lens was applied to explore this topic because the research involved people and how they experience the social world (Žukauskas, Vveinhardt, & Andriukaitienė, 2018). A primarily inductive research approach was followed.

A single data collection method was employed, which took the form of semistructured, in-depth interviews with senior managers working in large organisations. The one-on-one interaction and mono method allowed the researchers to gather rich insights into the subject matter (Hussey & Hussey, 1997; Saunders & Lewis, 2012).

Data collection occurred during one short period of time; therefore, the study was cross-sectional, as it was based on a point in time during which data were collected during face-to-face, online interviews (Saunders & Lewis, 2012).

Population

The target population for this study was executive leaders in large organisations (more than 1000 employees) who have experienced being managed by a leader who they perceived as having poor self-awareness. Large organisations were chosen because multiple management levels exist, and the teams being managed by these leaders are large. It is assumed that the experience of working for a manager

with low self-awareness in a small company could be experienced differently by subordinates. The population covered different industries and companies and included leaders from different functional areas of the business. The research was limited to executives operating in the Gauteng province of South Africa.

A total of 12 respondents were interviewed (see Figure 2), which demonstrated saturation (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Purposive sampling was used to select senior executives who had at least 5 years of management experience and were at a leadership team or board level. Data collection approached thematic saturation after eight interviews, indicated in the trend shown in Figure 1. By the 12th interview, only one new, unique response was identified and coded. The decision was made to cease data collection at that point.

This study followed an inductive approach where codes would emerge naturally from the interviews. A total of 218 codes were identified during the 12 interviews.

Data gathering

In-depth, one-on-one, semistructured, open-ended interviews were conducted to gather data, which were recorded and transcribed with the permission of the participants. Interview guides were used to ensure that data were collected consistently and to encourage more natural, elucidative answers. The interview guide was drawn up using elements of McCracken's (1988) four-part method and after a thorough review of the literature. Open-ended questions were used to elicit a rich understanding of the respondents' experience.

Validity was established when the research findings accurately reflected the data collected through rigorous methods (Noble & Smith, 2015). Consistent and accurate analytical procedures demonstrated reliability (Noble & Smith, 2015). A pilot interview was conducted to strengthen and add credibility to the interview guide. This process led to amendments, which reduced ambiguity in the questions.

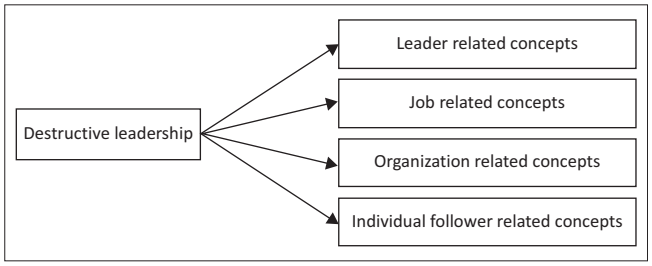
Analysis approach

A thematic analysis approach was used, which was appropriate for questions that could be answered through experiences and the views of respondents (Saunders & Lewis, 2012). The recordings from the interviews were transcribed and uploaded into ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis software program (CASDAQ). These documents were then coded using ATLAS.ti by assigning codes to each appropriate quotation in the documents. The researcher generated a total of 218 codes. Saldana (2009) suggested a codes-to-theory model for qualitative research, which was then applied (see Figure 3).

Meaningful codes were developed to annotate the data, which were then aggregated to relevant categories for further analysis into themes. Eighteen categories were created in ATLAS.ti, and five themes emerged.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained prior to the commencement of the research.



Source: Schyns, B., & Schilling, J. (2013). How bad are the effects of bad leaders? A meta-analysis of destructive leadership and its outcomes. *Leadership Quarterly, 24*(1), 138–158. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2012.09.001

FIGURE 1: Outcomes of destructive leadership.

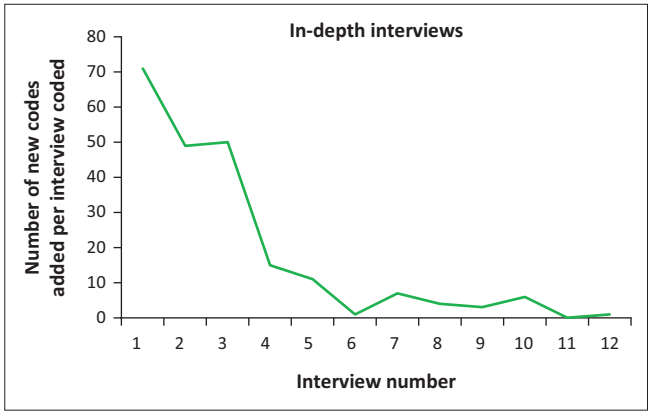
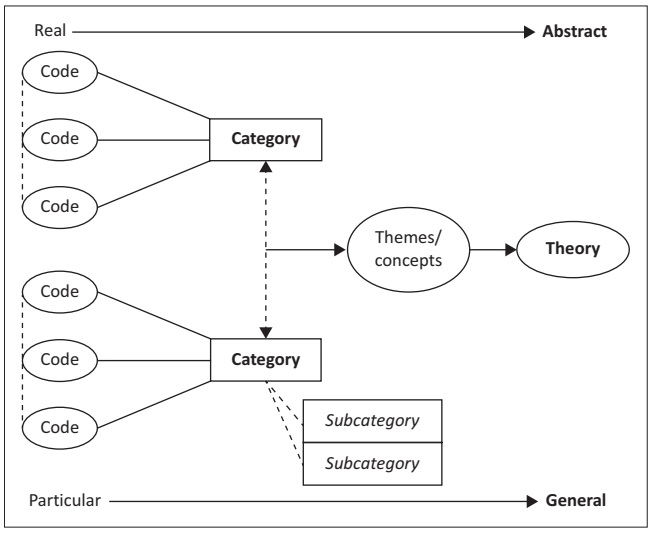


FIGURE 2: New code generation trend per interview.

Results

Introduction

Purposive sampling was used to select the 12 executives as interview respondents. Each respondent had experienced



Source: Saldana, J. (2009). An introduction to codes and coding. *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers, 2006*, 1–31. https://doi.org/10.1519/JSC.0b013e3181ddfd0a

FIGURE 3: Codes-to-theory model for qualitative inquiry.

leadership directly from a superior they believed had low self-awareness. The sample excluded other management or lower levels of the business. The sample crossed various industries, including consulting, fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG), pharmaceutical manufacturers and automotive retail. The companies selected were large, defined as having more than 1000 employees. The sample was purposefully split to gain representation across different gender, age and racial groups and competencies.

Behaviours exhibited by leaders with low self-awareness

This section set out to determine which behaviours or traits are exhibited by senior leaders that lead them to being perceived as having poor self-awareness. The discussion began by asking respondents how they understood self-awareness in the workplace. This was done to ensure there was a common understanding of self-awareness in the business context.

The first interview question sought to establish each respondent's understanding of the concept of self-awareness. Respondents were able to articulate a common understanding of self-awareness that broadly fell into two categories. These were understanding of self and understanding one's impact.

Most respondents believed that understanding one's own strengths and weaknesses was key to self-awareness. According to a few respondents, equally important in understanding of self is recognising one's triggers and being able to modify one's behaviours.

Most respondents agreed that being self-aware means understanding the impact that one's behaviour has on others. Respondents were asked to give a detailed account of their experience of working for a leader who was not self-aware. They were then asked to describe the behaviours or traits that led them to believe that these leaders lacked self-awareness.

Most respondents described leaders who exhibited insecurity and self-preservation, as well as narcissism and ego. They added that self-preservation became more pronounced during turbulent times.

All the respondents described leaders who were volatile, prone to emotional outbursts and who displayed inconsistent behaviour. Respondents reported leaders who had temper tantrums, screamed and shouted at people and even exhibited violent behaviour. This inconsistency led to a lack of trust in the leader.

The respondents agreed that these leaders often caused offence without realising it. These leaders were described by Respondent 7 as 'living in a world they have created' where they mistakenly believed that everybody loved them and that they were well-respected.

Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that these leaders were not open to feedback or criticism. Having an organisation that did not support a culture of constant feedback and a fear of repercussions were other reasons given by a few respondents as to why staff felt they could not give honest feedback.

A lack of accountability was mentioned by most respondents as being indicative of a lack of self-awareness. Aligned with the lack of accountability was the belief held by these leaders that they were the ones doing all the work.

Respondents described the experience of having senior leaders with low self-awareness as creating a negative environment, with destructive consequences. The most cited comment was that they created a culture of fear. People were scared to speak up and were afraid of the consequences.

Self-awareness and effective leadership

This section sought to answer whether self-awareness was necessary for effective leadership. To begin the discussion, respondents were asked to describe their managers' leadership style. As there is no agreed standard against which to measure effective leadership, Kouzes and Posner's (2011) Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership were used to guide the discussion.

One respondent believed that leaders should have a vision and be able to build trust and motivate or inspire their teams. All respondents agreed that their leader was unable to do this and thus unable to build high-performing teams. Two respondents described leaders who had a 'helicopter' management style. They were hands-off and only got involved when something was going to reflect badly on them. Some other respondents described leadership styles that were authoritarian, autocratic, contrary, dictatorial and more like a parent–child management style. This was closely aligned to micromanagement.

The question naturally arose after the first interviews that if these leaders were exhibiting such poor leadership behaviours, how did they get to such senior positions within these organisations? Two respondents mentioned luck, charisma, having a high IQ and the right qualifications, as well as having the right connections in the organisation. Some respondents believed that hard work and individual results got their manager to a general manager or higher level. One respondent described his leader as:

> '[*A*] super clever, super capable guy, especially from a sales, marketing and strategy perspective; he had a lot of good, hard, tangible skills. So I think that's how he got there.' (Respondent 9, male sales executive)

Another respondent added that their leader was so obsessed with results that he was oblivious to what was happening to his team:

> 'Everything is just about him, and him winning at whatever cost. So he delivers the results, but he delivers it with broken people.' (Respondent 4, female senior manager)

Respondent 3 stated that to earn respect, leaders needed to be clear on their values and model their behaviour accordingly. The respondents unanimously agreed that their leaders' behaviour was not aligned with the company values. Two other respondents said that values were only mentioned for self-interest, believing their leaders were 'deceitful' and inauthentic. These inconsistencies in behaviour led to a lack of trust in the leader.

All respondents agreed that these leaders were not able to inspire a shared vision in the team. They were able to communicate short-term operational goals, such as sales targets, but nothing inspirational. Respondents unanimously agreed that these leaders were not innovators, and in most cases where they tried to challenge the process, they forced through their own ideas. Respondent 4 explained that their leader would have a workshop to drive innovative thinking but would then be the only one talking.

Fostering collaboration, building competent teams and actively involving everyone was not something these leaders were able to do, according to all respondents. According to most respondents, these leaders could not bring people along with them. Some respondents said the organisation suffered because these leaders created factions and alliances within the organisation. Most respondents felt that these leaders were able to recognise the contributions that individuals made in achieving organisational goals, but that it was insincere or self-interested praise. Other respondents felt that successes were not celebrated and recognition was only given to favourites and inconsistently applied.

Leaders' self-awareness and employee engagement

This section sought to understand how having a leader with low self-awareness affected employee engagement. To guide the discussion, participants were asked to discuss how they felt about their engagement levels along five dimensions: employee performance and willingness to go the extra mile, employee job satisfaction, employee identification with the organisation, employee commitment and employee loyalty or withdrawal behaviour (Kumar & Pansari, 2015).

Employee performance was affected in several negative ways. Most respondents felt that their performance had deteriorated under this type of leader, whilst one respondent felt more determined not to let their performance slip. What all the participants did agree on was the emotional toll that it took on them. The respondents were all senior leaders and reported trying to maintain their performance, despite being disengaged. Closely aligned to the disengagement level was how demotivated these respondents were. Some respondents lost confidence in their own abilities because of what they were experiencing and because they did not receive positive reinforcement or positive and enabling support.

Most respondents felt that their identification with their organisation was damaged because of the leader they had. Most commonly, they lost faith in the company. Other respondents felt that not only had they lost faith in the company, but they had also become insecure in their own position because of a lack of trust in the organisation. Probing during the interviews revealed that this negative sentiment went further, when leaders started to question what kind of organisation would value a leader such as this.

Some respondents also reported that they lost respect for the company in appointing a leader like this, with two going as far as to state that they became disillusioned with corporate life in general. Another finding was that in three cases, participants reported that the experience had made them more committed to being a better leader. The great majority of respondents reported an increase in their intention to leave and negative views on loyalty. Most respondents reported looking for another job within 6 months, and in some cases, this was almost immediate.

Followers' reactions to perceived inauthentic leadership

How did the senior managers interviewed react to the behaviours and experience described by leaders with low self-awareness? Micromanagement was identified by most respondents as a behaviour that led to disengagement and toxic retaliatory behaviour. Some leaders felt that the leadership team had to step in to ensure business continuity. Some respondents described being highly frustrated because nothing had any effect on these leaders. Many respondents reported losing their temper in extreme cases. Some respondents acknowledged that the organisation was not getting the best out of them, and that they withdrew and became disengaged. One leader admitted that they had to learn to manage their anger.

Leaders with low self-awareness affected organisational culture and performance in several ways. Most respondents agreed that the first indication was that fractures started to appear in the executive team. This lack of self-awareness in the leader had a negative impact on everyone in the company, according to most respondents. A few respondents claimed it was a talking point throughout the organisation. For the most part, respondents reported that this type of leader created a toxic and confrontational culture.

All the respondents reported that, eventually, their feedback led to an intervention by the organisation. These varied in severity but mostly included coaching for the relevant individual or team-coaching interventions.

Discussion of results

The current descriptions of destructive, toxic or flawed leadership mention a lack of emotional intelligence peripherally, but the conceptual and empirical links between a lack of self-awareness, destructive leadership and follower attitudes, engagement and behaviours have not been fully developed (Schyns & Schilling, 2013; Thoroughgood et al., 2018, 2012a).

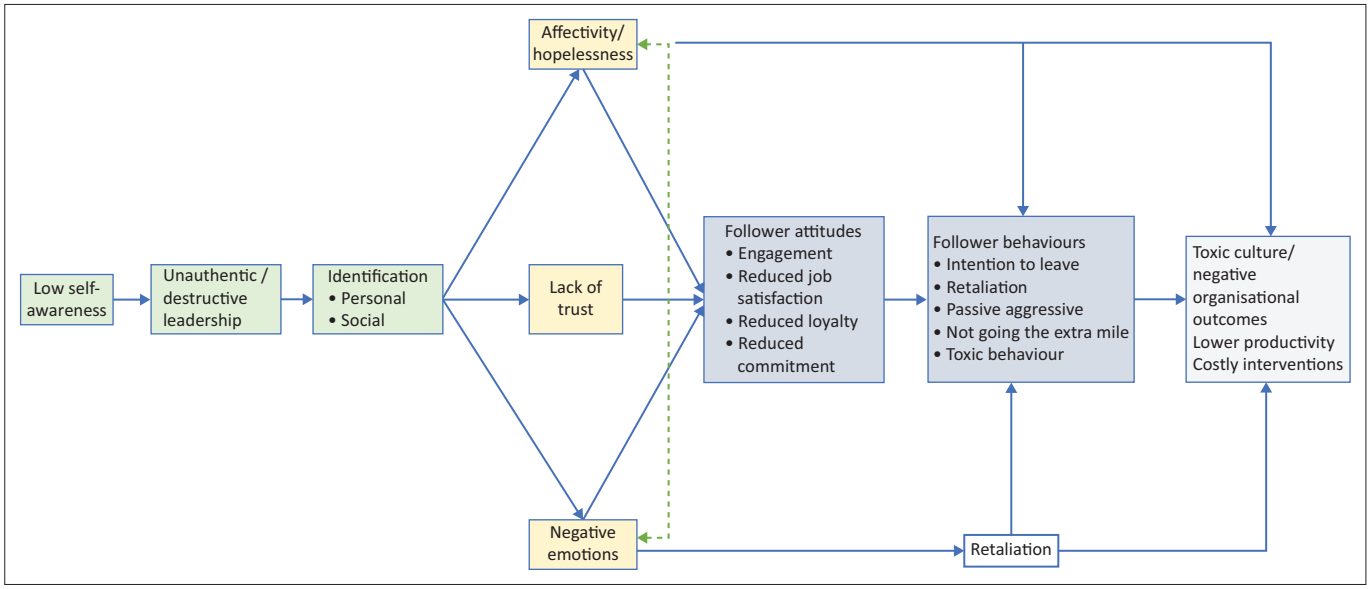
This research proposes a model to describe the processes through which leaders who exhibit a lack of self-awareness influence the attitudes, behaviours and engagement of followers, resulting in destructive leadership (Figure 4). It extends the current model of destructive leadership outcomes (Schyns & Schilling, 2013) by integrating it with a model that includes the impact on followers and their reactions (Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans, & May, 2004; Thoroughgood et al., 2018). Avolio et al. (2004) proposed a theoretical framework to show the process by which authentic leaders influence their followers positively in terms of their attitudes and behaviours. The model acknowledges that authentic leadership alone is not enough to achieve organisational goals; it recognises the role of emotion, trust and both personal and social identification of followers in the process (Avolio et al., 2004). Their purpose in developing this model was to provide a foundation from which future research into the process by which authentic leaders inspire positive followership could be based. This model proposes that inauthentic or destructive leadership should be considered in the same way. A lack of self-awareness in the leader results in inauthentic, destructive leadership and negatively influences subordinates' engagement, motivation, job satisfaction and commitment.

Leadership behaviours alone do not create destructive leadership. Social identity theory suggests that leadership is a group process where the perception of inauthentic leadership results in a disconnect from followers who do not see the leader as prototypical of the group's identity (Hogg, 2001). Negative followers' reactions to this 'inauthentic' leadership contribute to the dysfunctional leader–follower relationship, eventually affecting company culture and performance (Thoroughgood et al., 2018). This model acknowledges that whilst destructive leadership is detrimental to followers and the organisation, it is the process that links destructive behaviour to follower attitudes and behaviours which creates destructive leadership outcomes. A discussion of the elements in the model follows by addressing each research theme.

Behaviours exhibited by senior managers that lead them to being perceived as having low self-awareness

The literature abounds with descriptions of positive leadership, where self-awareness is considered the foundational competency for positive leadership (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005; Crossan et al., 2008; Sturm et al., 2014). Self-awareness is an important factor in leadership success and the ability of leaders to influence others (Goleman, 2017). Destructive leadership, conversely, has been used as an all-encompassing term for negative behaviours from leaders (Thoroughgood et al., 2018).

This research has described these behaviours from the perception of followers, and perceptions may vary according to level in the organisation and favoured status of employees (Padilla et al., 2007; Thoroughgood et al., 2018). Six categories of behaviours associated with leaders with low self-awareness were identified in this study: narcissistic, egotistical and self-interested; volatile, emotional and inconsistent; ignoring or discouraging feedback; blaming others and creating a negative environment and consequences for the organisation and followers. Shaw et al. (2011) identified seven clusters of destructive leaders' behaviours. The worst type of leader was a 'Cluster 7', exhibiting bullying, dishonesty, micromanagement, the inability to deal with conflict, lack of the requisite skills and an unwillingness to change or listen to other points of view (Shaw et al., 2011).



Source: Avolio, B.J., Gardner, W.L., Walumbwa, F.O., Luthans, F., & May, D.R. (2004). Unlocking the mask: A look at the process by which authentic leaders impact follower attitudes and behaviors. *Leadership Quarterly, 15*(6), 801–823. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2004.09.003; Schyns, B., & Schilling, J. (2013). How bad are the effects of bad leaders? A meta-analysis of destructive leadership and its outcomes. *Leadership Quarterly, 24*(1), 138–158. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2012.09.001; Thoroughgood, C.N., Sawyer, K.B., Padilla, A., & Lunsford, L. (2018). Destructive leadership: A critique of leader-centric perspectives and toward a more holistic definition. *Journal of Business Ethics, 151*(3), 627–649. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-016-3257-9

FIGURE 4: Proposed framework linking destructive leadership to followers' attitudes and behaviours.

The six categories identified in this study closely align to this classification, confirming the literature. Bullying, however, was not mentioned as one of the most prevalent behaviours of leaders with low self-awareness.

In discussing the behaviour of their managers, participants' descriptions of their behaviour confirm the literature that aggressive behaviours have three dimensions (Einarsen, Aasland, & Skogstad, 2007). Physical and verbal aggression was demonstrated in the research by leader volatility and included shouting and throwing things. Active aggression included the need to control, manipulate and denigrate people. Passive-aggression was displayed by playing favourites and attempting to divide and conquer. Being argumentative and blaming others is an active direct behaviour. This research demonstrated that this behaviour was perceived as volatile and contradictory, and this eventually led to a lack of trust in the leader, thus confirming research by Pelletier (2012).

Toxic leaders are associated with positive effects for the organisation in the short term, which is confirmed by this research (Padilla et al., 2007). These leaders are described as initially charismatic, results-driven and talented in an individual capacity. They are promoted based on individual results and intelligence early on in their careers but lack the requisite leadership skills to bring people along with them. Respondents described these leaders as being unaware of the impact that they were having, which is in contradiction to Lipman-Blumen's (2005) findings that mention evil and callous behaviour.Lipman-Blumen (2005) described toxic leadership as a sustained and severe process characterised by causing psychological distress in subordinates. This research confirms that respondents experienced leaders with low self-awareness in the same way.

Existing research describes types of destructive behaviour, including incompetence, paranoia, narcissism and ego, but offers very little explanation as to the cause of these behaviours (Lipman-blumen, 2011; Thomas et al., 2016; Thoroughgood et al., 2018, 2012b). This field research demonstrates that leaders with low self-awareness exhibit behaviours consistent with destructive leadership and aspects of toxic leadership, providing a possible antecedent for negative leadership behaviours. Einarsen et al.'s (2007) model of constructive and destructive leadership behaviour describes leaders with pro-organisational and anti-subordinate behaviours as tyrannical leaders. Behaviours included undermining the motivation and job satisfaction of staff whilst carrying out the tasks and missions of the organisation. This research confirmed that these leaders got results but at the expense of people. A lack of self-awareness and emotional intelligence is not mentioned as a behaviour, but this field research confirms the literature, because the behaviours exhibited by leaders with low self-awareness are congruent with tyrannical leadership.

Effectiveness of leaders with low self-awareness

Leadership is a widely studied and published subject, yet despite this, there is no agreed-upon definition of effective leadership. Kouzes and Posner's model, *The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership* (Kouzes & Posner, 2011) explained the actions and behaviours needed for exemplary leadership. Their research asserted that effective leadership is critical because it affects not only organisational performance but also employee engagement and commitment (Dale, 2017). This field research confirms that leaders with low self-awareness display none of the behaviours or qualities associated with positive forms of leadership.

Authentic leadership focuses on the ethical dimensions of the leader–follower relationship to build open and honest relationships (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). This style of leadership is based on four components: self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing and a strong moral code (Avolio & Gardner, 2005).

Authentic leaders are able to demonstrate self-awareness by ensuring that their internal values and behaviour align and can withstand external pressure and influence (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). This field research found inconsistencies in the behaviours of destructive leaders, where there was a clear disconnect between company and espoused values and behaviours. Respondents felt that the company values were clear and often communicated, but 'there was no walking the talk.'

Cuddy et al. (2011) described warmth and competence as the two dimensions by which leaders are judged. Warmth includes kindness, trustworthiness and empathy – characteristics which this field research found lacking in those leaders identified by respondents as having low self-awareness. Competence includes an individual's intelligence, skill and efficacy (Cuddy et al., 2011). This research shows that these leaders were skilled technically, often hard-working and successful at delivering individual results. This individual talent got them promoted, but the lag in their self-awareness and leadership skill was overlooked. This field research supports the literature that authoritarian, autocratic, dictatorial leadership emphasises competence over warmth and is still a major driver in promotion and hiring decisions (Cuddy et al., 2011).

The first practice of exemplary leadership involves modelling the way, which means leaders need to set a personal example of what they expect from their teams. It means clarifying and affirming shared values and aligning their actions and behaviours to those stated values (Dale, 2017). The findings here demonstrated that all respondents believed that their leader's behaviour was not aligned to the company's or their own espoused values. These inconsistencies in behaviour led to these leaders being perceived as deceitful and inauthentic. This in turn led to a lack of trust in the leader.

Inspiring a shared vision is the second practice of exemplary leadership (Dale, 2017). Leaders should be able to inspire willing followers to get behind a common vision by appealing to the common aspirations of the group. This research found that leaders were initially charismatic but because of the inconsistencies in behaviour did not engender a common vision or inspiration.

Exemplary leaders challenge the process by looking for innovative ways to improve and encourage experimentation whilst learning from mistakes (Dale, 2017). This behaviour was not exhibited in this field research, as these leaders were perceived to 'force through their own ideas' and ignored the advice and opinions of their teams.

Fostering collaboration by building trust and competence in others enables others to act (Dale, 2017). Supporting decisions that people make on their own and actively involving others shows trust in the team and is the fourth practice of exemplary leadership (Kouzes & Posner, 2011). Divisive leadership, micromanagement, as well as taking credit for others' work are mentioned in the destructive leadership discourse, and this field research confirms that leaders with low self-awareness exhibit these behaviours (Schyns, 2015; Schyns & Schilling, 2013; Thoroughgood et al., 2018).

The final behaviour exhibited by exemplary leaders is encouraging the heart, through celebrating accomplishments and the contributions of individuals (Dale, 2017). The field research demonstrated that destructive leaders only gave insincere or self-interested praise, which was perceived as inauthentic.

Employee engagement

Most respondents felt that their functional work performance was maintained under this style of leadership, but they did the bare minimum to get by and spent time covering themselves because of fear of retribution.

All respondents felt that working for a destructive leader had negatively affected their overall job satisfaction. This confirms the literature that destructive leaders undermine the overall well-being and job satisfaction of employees (Einarsen et al., 2007; Kumar & Pansari, 2015; Shaw et al., 2011).

Respondents agreed that they lost faith and trust in the company, questioning what type of an organisation would value a leader like that. This research confirmed that both personal and social identification were negatively affected, thus supporting the literature (Erkutlu & Chafra, 2018; Naseer et al., 2016; Nauman, Zheng, & Basit, 2020).

Paradoxically, the research showed that these respondents stayed committed to delivering on expectations because of pride in themselves, a feeling of not wanting to let their team down and a desire to be better leaders than their destructive managers.

Employee loyalty was negatively affected by leaders with low self-awareness; most respondents reported trying to leave within the first 6 months of working for their leader. Respondents felt that the organisations were not doing anything about the leadership issues. This strongly confirms literature that cites employee turnover as a costly consequence of destructive leadership (Nauman et al., 2020; Schyns & Schilling, 2013; Thoroughgood et al., 2018).

This field research found that even highly engaged followers resorted to toxic behaviour eventually because of frustration. The respondents tried various methods to address their leader's behaviour, including telling them directly, giving feedback during a 360-degree review and eventually reporting them to more senior levels in the organisation. Lipman-Blumen (2005) described the need for interaction between toxic leaders and followers to result in destructive leadership outcomes. This field research confirms this assertion, as followers became more negative over time. Organisations promoted these leaders because of their individual performance, rather than their ability to lead others. This somewhat confirms Padilla's et al. (2007) third dimension in the toxic triangle of a conducive environment.

Reactions to leaders with low self-awareness

Micromanagement was described by respondents as the leader behaviour that elicited disengagement and toxic retaliatory behaviour the most. This confirms Shaw et al. (2011), who list micromanagement as one of their 11 categories of 'bad' leadership and is a definitive behaviour of 'Cluster 7' leaders. Toxic behaviours respondents reported exhibiting ranged from losing their temper and shouting to passive-aggressive behaviour. They admitted that these leaders brought out the worst in them. Passive-aggressive reactions included 'malicious compliance', not challenging the leader and going with the path of least resistance. This correlates with toxic followers who feel alienated and quietly undermine their leaders (Maulding, Peters, Roberts, Leonard, & Sparkman, 2012). This field research further confirms counterproductive work behaviour, which is more subtle than direct resistance, in response to toxic leadership (Schyns & Schilling, 2013).

Resentment was created and respondents reported either having to manage their anger or withdrawing and avoiding their leader where possible. When it appeared that the organisation was not taking any action, respondents became stressed and cited the emotional toll these leaders took on them. This strongly confirms literature indicating that subordinates will withdraw their emotional and cognitive efforts in response to destructive leadership behaviours (Nauman et al., 2020).

Respondents reported that they became desperate and escalated the leadership issues through various mechanisms in the organisation. This eventually led to an intervention in all cases.

This field research not only supports the literature that destructive leadership inspires toxic followership but also found that even senior, ambitious, highly engaged, principled followers, who neither fell into the category of 'conformers' or 'colluders', resorted to toxic retaliatory behaviours.

Conclusion

This study set out to determine more deeply the experience of having a manager with low self-awareness. Firstly, the behaviours associated with these leaders were identified and explored (Breevaart & De Vries, 2017; Einarsen et al., 2007; Schyns, 2015). Secondly, the perceptions as to how effective these leaders are was discussed by examining leadership style and behaviours (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Dale, 2017; Kouzes & Posner, 2011). Next the effect on employee engagement of having a leader with low self-awareness was investigated, and finally, how subordinates reacted to these managers was examined (Avolio et al., 2004; Kumar & Pansari, 2015; Schyns & Schilling, 2013; Thoroughgood et al., 2018, 2012a). It also answers the call to action from Thoroughgood et al. (2018) who suggested that inductive qualitative research would add to a more comprehensive view of destructive leadership processes by understanding more deeply the personal experiences of subordinates.

Behaviours exhibited by leaders with low self-awareness

Leaders who lack self-awareness exhibit behaviours commonly associated with toxic, destructive and despotic leaders, which seems to suggest that there is causality. These leaders were perceived by their followers as being toxic and destructive, causing cognitive dissonance as the values and behaviours of these leaders were not consistent with those of subordinates (Hogg, 2001). Personal identification with the leaders was therefore negatively affected. Social identity was also negatively affected, as subordinates no longer felt a sense of belonging or pride in their organisation.

Self-awareness is considered essential for authentic, resonant, servant, spiritual and transcendent leadership, amongst others (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005; Crossan et al., 2008; Sturm et al., 2014). By contrast, the lack of self-awareness in leaders is not a central theme in destructive leadership discourse. Despite this, this field research confirmed that leaders with low self-awareness display destructive leadership behaviours, exhibiting bullying, dishonesty, micromanagement, the inability to deal with conflict, not having the requisite skills and an unwillingness to change or listen to other points of view (Einarsen et al., 2007; Shaw et al., 2011).

Although initially charismatic and producing positive results for the organisation in the short term, they had a distorted belief about how they were viewed by subordinates and were perceived as having narcissistic and arrogant tendencies (Amundsen & Martinsen, 2014; Padilla et al., 2007).

The destructive behaviours exhibited by these leaders caused negative emotional reactions in subordinates. A loss of trust and feelings of hopelessness and being demoralised occurred. This field research confirmed that leaders with low self-awareness exhibit behaviours consistent with destructive leadership and aspects of toxic leadership, providing a possible precursor to negative leadership behaviours.

Effectiveness of leaders with low self-awareness

Effective leadership can be thought of as the ability to be authentic and motivate followers through building trust, empathy, relational transparency and balanced processing (Avolio et al., 2018; Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Gardner, Cogliser, Davis, & Dickens, 2011). Kouzes and Posner's model, *The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership* (Kouzes & Posner, 2011), explained the actions and behaviours needed for exemplary leadership. Effective leadership is critical because it affects not only organisational performance but also employee engagement and commitment (Dale, 2017).

Authentic leaders can demonstrate self-awareness by ensuring that their internal values and behaviour align and that they have a high moral code (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Resonant leadership requires high levels of self-awareness, empathy, honesty and transparent communication (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005). Transformational leadership requires an ability to inspire and motivate through idealised influence, whilst transcendent leadership requires an ability to lead across self, which bears the responsibility of being self-aware (Banks et al., 2016; Crossan et al., 2008).

The findings of this study indicate that those leaders with low self-awareness are not able to demonstrate the behaviours associated with exemplary leadership, and they are perceived by followers as inauthentic and lacking transparency. This has led them to be considered ineffective leaders and confirms that self-awareness is necessary for positive forms of leadership.

The effect of leaders with low self-awareness on employee engagement

Those leaders perceived to be authentic can improve the engagement, job satisfaction and motivation of followers (Avolio et al., 2004). This research confirms that destructive leaders negatively affect employees' performance as they become disengaged, withdraw and lose trust in the leader and organisation (Jabeen & Rahim, 2021; Nauman et al., 2020).

This study indicates that the five dimensions of employee engagement from Kumar and Pansari (2015) are negatively affected by the destructive leadership witnessed in those leaders with low self-awareness. Toxic leaders engender mistrust in subordinates and lower employee loyalty and identification with the organisation, leading to the potential for reduced performance and lower productivity (Kumar & Pansari, 2015; Thoroughgood et al., 2018). Subordinates' perception of meaningfulness in their work is also reduced,

negatively affecting commitment to the organisation (Nauman et al., 2020).

Subordinate reactions to leaders with low self-awareness

Followers who enable destructive and toxic leadership are described as susceptible, and as either conformers, with low levels of maturity and self-image, or colluders, who are ambitious with deficient moral values (Padilla et al., 2007). This study supports the concept of destructive leadership as a process which involves the interaction between leaders and followers in their context (Padilla et al., 2007; Thoroughgood et al., 2018).

What was surprising was that this study found that highly engaged subordinates eventually resorted to toxic behaviour as a result of frustration and having their concerns over the leadership behaviours not being addressed. Respondents admitted losing their temper and shouting, being passive-aggressive or eventually giving up and not challenging their leader by going with the path of least resistance. They were maliciously compliant in some instances, and in others, they constantly fought with their leader. Eventually, the leadership team became siloed and almost dysfunctional in some cases. This study further demonstrated that counter-productive work behaviour ensued in response to toxic leadership (Schyns & Schilling, 2013).

This study further found that negative emotional reactions were demonstrated in subordinates where they needed to manage their anger or withdraw and avoid their leader where possible. When it appeared that the organisation was not taking any action, respondents became stressed and cited the emotional toll these leaders took on them. This confirms literature indicating that subordinates will withdraw their emotional and cognitive efforts in response to destructive leadership behaviours (Nauman et al., 2020).

Findings from this study indicate that as a result of the extremely negative consequences of these leaders and the fact that subordinates were willing to report the behaviour, organisations eventually intervened.

Implications for management and other relevant stakeholders

Whilst there is no agreed-upon definition of effective leadership, self-awareness has been identified as a crucial component of positive forms of leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Leaders with higher self-awareness are perceived to be more effective leaders (Butler, Kwantes, & Boglarsky, 2014). Through improved self-awareness, self-regulation and positive role-modelling, authentic leaders can stimulate the development of positive work behaviours in subordinates (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Authentic leadership has been linked to increased follower job satisfaction, task performance, organisational citizenship behaviour and performance (Banks et al., 2016). This increased employee engagement results in improved profitability for the business (Kumar & Pansari, 2015).

This research demonstrated that a lack of self-awareness in leaders results in destructive leadership by inspiring destructive behaviours in followers, thus negatively impacting the organisation and resulting in costly interventions. By adapting the model (see Figure 5) from Cuddy et al. (2011), predicted leadership styles along the dimensions of self-awareness (warmth) and performance (competence) can be mapped.

This research showed that promotion and recruitment decisions were based largely on the individual performance of the leaders. These leaders were skilled in strategy and functional expertise or were politically astute with good connections in the organisation. These leaders, whilst high in competence or individual performance, were low in self-awareness, resulting in destructive leadership outcomes for both subordinates and the organisation.

Those individuals who lack both self-awareness and individual competence can be considered non-performers and would likely inspire contempt from colleagues (Cuddy et al., 2011). Management should look to those high in self-awareness but lower in individual performance as potential leaders, rather than simply considering individual performance in recruitment or promotion decisions, because self-awareness is a requirement for positive leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Butler et al., 2014; Walumbwa et al., 2008).

It is important that adequate measures are put in place to deal with destructive leadership, given the costly impact on both staff and on the organisation. Given the harmful effects on employee performance and engagement, organisations should guard against employing these leaders at all. Destructive leadership affects the five dimensions of

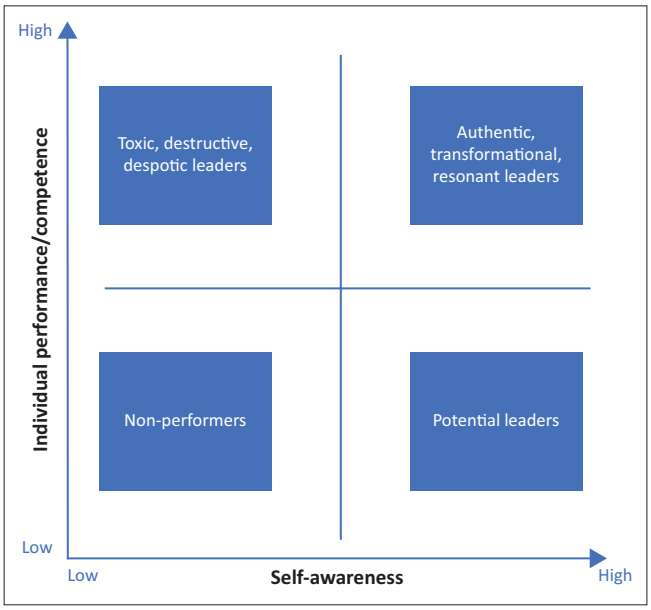


FIGURE 5: Model prediction for leadership potential based on individual performance by self-awareness adapted from Cuddy et al. (2011).

employee engagement negatively. Destructive leadership is also not just an absence of leadership; over time, it creates lasting negative consequences for the organisation. Management therefore needs to act quickly and take reports of destructive leadership seriously.

The initial selection of individuals adept at achieving results on their own needs to be weighed against their emotional intelligence and self-awareness. High-potential candidates should not simply be drawn from the pool of individuals who show functional expertise but rather from those with the characteristics associated with authentic leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Walumbwa et al., 2008). Promotion and succession-planning support the longevity of organisations, which is why self-awareness should be considered a critical skill for candidates hoping to manage and lead others.

Of concern in this research was how long it took for organisations to intervene. The situation had to reach a crisis point where subordinates had become desperate and many talented individuals had left the organisation or resorted to retaliatory behaviours. The leaders in question were in very senior positions and were unwilling to acknowledge that there was an issue with their leadership style. Management and human resource professionals should consider a focus on self-awareness, development and interventions earlier in the careers of potential managers.

Limitations

Some limitations in this study result from the sample being limited to respondents at an executive level, which may differ from lower levels in the organisation. The use of self-reported data means that the constructs derived in this research are based on respondents' perceptions and are therefore highly subjective. The research was largely leader-centric and focused on the behaviours of these 'bad' leaders and the reactions they provoked in followers. Contextual factors, such as the external macroeconomic environment or the internal company culture, were not investigated fully. Research was limited to large organisations in limited sectors based in Gauteng, so generalisability to other contexts is limited.

Acknowledgements

The article is based on an MBA research report undertaken by S.D.F. The report was entitled 'The impact of self-awareness on effective leadership outcomes in South Africa'. The report may be found in the University of Pretoria repository.

Competing interests

The authors have declared that no competing interest exist.

Authors' contributions

S.D.F. conducted the research under the supervision of H.M. K.H. assisted with the writing and the submission of the article.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

References

Ackley, D. (2016). Emotional intelligence: A practical review of models, measures, and applications. *Consulting Psychology Journal, 68*(4), 269–286. https://doi.org/10.1037/cpb0000070

Amundsen, S., & Martinsen, O.L. (2014). Self-other agreement in empowering leadership: Relationships with leader effectiveness and subordinates' job satisfaction and turnover intention. *Leadership Quarterly, 25*(4), 784–800. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2014.04.007

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

Avolio, B.J., Gardner, W.L., Walumbwa, F.O., Luthans, F., & May, D.R. (2004). Unlocking the mask: A look at the process by which authentic leaders impact follower attitudes and behaviors. *Leadership Quarterly, 15*(6), 801–823. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2004.09.003

Avolio, B.J., Wernsing, T., & Gardner, W.L. (2018). Revisiting the development and validation of the authentic leadership questionnaire: Analytical clarifications. *Journal of Management, 44*(2), 399–411. https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206317739960

Banks, G.C., Davis, K., Gardner, W.L., & Guler, C.E. (2016). A meta-analytic review of authentic and transformational leadership : A test for redundancy ☆. *The Leadership Quarterly, 27*(4), 634–652. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2016.02.006

Boyatzis, R., & McKee, A. (2005). *Resonant leadership: Sustaining yourself and connecting with others through mindfulness, hope, and compassion.* Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Boyatzis, R.E. (2008). Competencies in the 21st century. *Journal of Management Development, 27*(1), 5–12. https://doi.org/10.1108/02621710810840730

Braddy, P.W., Gooty, J., Fleenor, J.W., & Yammarino, F.J. (2014). Leader behaviors and career derailment potential: A multi-analytic method examination of rating source and self-other agreement. *Leadership Quarterly, 25*(2), 373–390. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2013.10.001

Breevaart, K., & De Vries, R.E. (2017). Supervisor's HEXACO personality traits and subordinate perceptions of abusive supervision. *Leadership Quarterly, 28*(5), 691–700. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2017.02.001

Butler, A.M., Kwantes, C.T., & Boglarsky, C.A. (2014). The effects of self-awareness on perceptions of leadership effectiveness in the hospitality industry: A cross cultural investigation. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 40*(January 2019), 87–98. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2013.12.007

Caldwell, C. (2010). Identity, self-awareness and self-deception: Ethical implications for leaders and organizations. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *2009*, 393–406. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-010-0424-2

Caldwell, C., & Hayes, L.A. (2016). Self-efficacy and self-awareness: Moral insights to increased leader effectiveness. *Journal of Business Ethics, 35*(9), 1163–1173. https://doi.org/10.1108/JMD-01-2016-0011

Cherniss, C., & Goleman, D. (2001). *The emotionally intelligent workplace*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, A Wiley Company.

Crossan, M., & Mazutis, D. (2008). Transcendent leadership. *Business Horizons, 51*(2), 131–139. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2007.11.004

Crossan, M., Vera, D., & Nanjad, L. (2008). Transcendent leadership: Strategic leadership in dynamic environments. *Leadership Quarterly, 19*(5), 569–581. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2008.07.008

Cuddy, A.J.C., Glick, P., & Beninger, A. (2011). The dynamics of warmth and competence judgments, and their outcomes in organizations. *Research in Organizational Behavior, 31*, 73–98. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.riob.2011.10.004

Dale, K. (2017). Learning leadership: The five fundamentals of becoming an exemplary leader. *The Journal of Applied Management and Entrepreneurship, 22*(1), 113–115. https://doi.org/10.9774/gleaf.3709.2017.ja.00010

Day, D.V., Fleenor, J.W., Atwater, L.E., Sturm, R.E., & McKee, R.A. (2014). Advances in leader and leadership development: A review of 25 years of research and theory. *The Leadership Quarterly, 25*(1), 63–82. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2013.11.004

Debnam, S. (2006). *Mine's Bigger than yours: Understanding and handling Egos at work*. Cyan.

Dierdorff, E.C., Fisher, D.M., & Rubin, R.S. (2019). The power of percipience: Consequences of self-awareness in teams on team-level functioning and performance. *Journal of Management, 45*(7), 2891–2919. https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206318774622

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

Erickson, A., Shaw, B., Murray, J., & Branch, S. (2015). Destructive leadership: Causes, consequences and countermeasures. *Organizational Dynamics, 44*(4), 266–272. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orgdyn.2015.09.003

Erkutlu, H., & Chafra, J. (2018). Despotic leadership and organizational deviance. *Journal of Strategy and Management, 11*(2), 150–165. https://doi.org/10.1108/JSMA-04-2017-0029

Fleenor, J.W., Smither, J.W., Atwater, L.E., Braddy, P.W., & Sturm, R.E. (2010). Self-other rating agreement in leadership: A review. *Leadership Quarterly, 21*(6), 1005–1034. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2010.10.006

Gardner, W.L., Cogliser, C.C., Davis, K.M., & Dickens, M.P. (2011). Authentic leadership: A review of the literature and research agenda. *Leadership Quarterly, 22*(6), 1120–1145. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2011.09.007

Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional Intelligence*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Goleman, D. (1998). *Working with emotional intelligence*. Bantam Books.

Goleman, D. (2017). Leadership that gets results. *Leadership Perspectives,* 85–96. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315250601-9

Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough?: An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods, 18*(1), 59–82. https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X05279903

Hewertson, R.B. (2012). Great financial leadership: Stand out among peers. *Financial Executive, 28*(10), 57–59.

Hogg, M.A. (2001). A social identity theory of leadership. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 5*(3), 184–200. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327957PSPR0503_1

Hurrell, S.A. (2016). Rethinking the soft skills deficit blame game: Employers, skills withdrawal and the reporting of soft skills gaps. *Human Relations, 69*(3), 605–628. https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726715591636

Hussey, J., & Hussey, R. (1997). *Business research: A practical guide for undergraduate and postgraduate students* (3rd ed.). Macmillan International Higher Education.

Irwin, T. (2012). *Derailed: Five lessons learned from catastrophic failures of leadership (NelsonFree)*. Nashville: HarperCollins Leadership.

Jabeen, R., & Rahim, N. (2021). Exploring the effects of despotic leadership on employee engagement, employee trust and task performance. *Management Science Letters, 11*, 223–232. https://doi.org/10.5267/j.msl.2020.8.012

Kahn, W.A. (1990). Psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement at work. *Academy of Management Journal, 33*(4), 692–724.

Kouzes, J.M., & Posner, B.Z. (2011). *The five practices of exemplary Leadership*. New York: John Wiley.

Kouzes J.M. & Posner, B.Z. (2016). *Learning leadership: The five fundamentals of becoming an exemplary leader*. John Wiley & Sons.

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

Kumar, V., & Pansari, A. (2015). Measuring the benefits of employee engagement. *MIT Sloan Management Review, 56*(4), 67–72.

Lee, A., & Carpenter, N.C. (2018). Seeing eye to eye: A meta-analysis of self-other agreement of leadership. *Leadership Quarterly, 29*(2), 253–275. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2017.06.002

Lipman-Blumen, J. (2005). Toxic leadership: When grand illusions masquerade as noble visions. *Leader to Leader, 2005*(36), 29–36. https://doi.org/10.1002/ltl.125

Lipman-Blumen, J. (2011). Toxic leadership: A rejoinder. *Representation, 47*(3), 331–342. https://doi.org/10.1080/00344893.2011.596444

Maulding, W.S., Peters, G.B., Roberts, J., Leonard, E., & Sparkman, L. (2012). Emotional intelligence and resilience as predictors of leadership. *Journal of Leadership Studies, 5*(4), 20–30. https://doi.org/10.1002/jls

McCracken, G. (1988). *The long interview* (Vol. 13). Newbury ParkNaseer: Sage.

Naseer, S., Raja, U., Syed, F., Donia, M.B.L., & Darr, W. (2016). Perils of being close to a bad leader in a bad environment: Exploring the combined effects of despotic leadership, leader member exchange, and perceived organizational politics on behaviors. *Leadership Quarterly, 27*(1), 14–33. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2015.09.005

Nauman, S., Zheng, C., & Basit, A.A. (2020). How despotic leadership jeopardizes employees ' performance : The roles of quality of work life and work withdrawal. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal, 42*(1), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1108/LODJ-11-2019-0476

Noble, H., & Smith, J. (2015). Issues of validity and reliability in qualitative research. *Evidence-Based Nursing, 18*(2), 34–35.

Padilla, A., Hogan, R., & Kaiser, R.B. (2007). The toxic triangle: Destructive leaders, susceptible followers, and conducive environments. *Leadership Quarterly, 18*(3), 176–194. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2007.03.001

Pelletier, K.L. (2012). Perceptions of and reactions to leader toxicity: Do leader–follower relationships and identification with victim matter? *The Leadership Quarterly, 23*(3), 412–424.

Rubens, A., Schoenfeld, G.A., Schaffer, B.S., & Leah, J.S. (2018). Self-awareness and leadership: Developing an individual strategic professional development plan in an MBA leadership course. *International Journal of Management Education, 16*(1), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijme.2017.11.001

Saldana, J. (2009). An introduction to codes and coding. *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers, 2006*, 1–31. https://doi.org/10.1519/JSC.0b013e3181ddfd0a

Saunders, M.N.K., & Lewis, P. (2012). *Doing research in business & management: An essential guide to planning your project*. New York: Pearson.

Schyns, B. (2015). Dark personality in the workplace: Introduction to the special issue. *Applied Psychology, 64*(1), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1111/apps.12041

Schyns, B., & Schilling, J. (2013). How bad are the effects of bad leaders? A meta-analysis of destructive leadership and its outcomes. *Leadership Quarterly, 24*(1), 138–158. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2012.09.001

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

Sturm, R.E., Taylor, S.N., Atwater, L.E., & Braddy, P.W. (2014). Leader self-awareness: An examination and implications of women's under-prediction. *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 35*(5), 657–677. https://doi.org/10.1002/job.1915

Suri, V., & Prasad, V.M. (2011). Relationship between self-awareness and transformational leadership: A study in IT industry. *IUP Journal of Organizational Behavior, 10*(1), 7–17.

Thomas, T.A., Gentzler, K., & Salvatorelli, R. (2016). What is toxic followership? *Journal of Leadership Studies, 10*(3), 62–65.

Thoroughgood, C.N., Padilla, A., Hunter, S.T., & Tate, B.W. (2012a). The susceptible circle: A taxonomy of followers associated with destructive leadership. *Leadership Quarterly, 23*(5), 897–917. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2012.05.007

Thoroughgood, C.N., Tate, B.W., Sawyer, K.B., & Jacobs, R. (2012b). Bad to the bone. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies, 19*(2), 230–255. https://doi.org/10.1177/1548051811436327

Thoroughgood, C.N., Sawyer, K.B., Padilla, A., & Lunsford, L. (2018). Destructive leadership: A critique of leader-centric perspectives and toward a more holistic definition. *Journal of Business Ethics, 151*(3), 627–649. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-016-3257-9

Vogel, D., & Kroll, A. (2019). Agreeing to disagree? Explaining self–other disagreement on leadership behaviour. *Public Management Review, 21*(12), 1867–1892. https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2019.1577910

Walumbwa, 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. *JournalofManagement,34*(1),89–126.https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206307308913

Yukl, G. (2006). *Leadership in organisations* (6th ed.). Pearson-Prentice Hall.

Yukl, G. (2012). Effective leadership behavior: What we know and what questions need more attention. *Academy of Management Perspectives, 26*(4), 66–85. https://doi.org/10.5465/amp.2012.0088

Zell, E., & Krizan, Z. (2014). Do people have insight into their abilities? A metasynthesis. *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 9*(2), 111–125. https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691613518075

Žukauskas, P., Vveinhardt, J., & Andriukaitienė, R. (2018). Philosophy and paradigm of scientific research. *Management Culture and Corporate Social Responsibility,* 121–139.