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Destructive Leadership

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Destructive Leadership

Ben Shaw, Anthony Erickson, Mike Harvey



Our research, based on factor and cluster analyses of 127 questions answered by a combined sample of 1165 respondents from around the world, suggests that there are a variety of ways for leaders to be harmful to the people they supervise and the organisations to which they belong. Seven “types” of destructive leaders based on cluster analyses of factor scores are described in the panels to the right. Destructive leadership lowers productivity and financial performance. It makes employees angry, lowers their self-esteem and causes them to engage in more “political” behaviour.

We are now investigating just how destructive each category of leader behaviour is, how pattern and frequency of behaviour matters, and subordinate attributions of the causes of various forms of destructive behaviour from their leaders. For instance, are destructive leaders just bad apples with flawed personalities? Are they simply incompetent or not trained how to behave appropriately? Does the organisation contribute to their bad behaviour by impossible expectations or inappropriate norms, rewards, and role models?

Characteristics of Seven Types of Destructive Leaders

Cluster 1 (n = 40) – **The Destructive Leader** – *Making Decisions Based on Inadequate Information; Lying and Other Unethical Behaviour; Inability to Deal with New Technology and Other Changes; Inability to Prioritize and Delegate; Inability to Make Clear Appropriate Decisions.*

Cluster 2 (n = 19) – **The Diminished Capacity Leader** – *Ineffectual at Negotiation and Persuasion; Not Having the Skills to Match the Job; Inability to Understand and Act on a Long Term View; Inability to Develop and Motivate Subordinates.*

Cluster 3 (n = 36) – **The Micro-Leader** – *Micro-Managing and Over-Controlling.*

Cluster 4 (n = 17) – **The Bipolar Leader** – *Inability to Deal with Interpersonal Conflicts; Playing Favourites and Other Divisive Behaviour; Exhibiting Inconsistent, Erratic Behaviour.*

Cluster 5 (n = 40) – **The Isolate Leader** – *Not Seeking Information from Others; Ineffective in Coordination and Management of Issues; Unwilling to Change Mind and Listen to Others; Inability to Develop and Motivate Subordinates.*

Cluster 6 (n = 32) – **The Neurotic, Borderline Personality Disorder Leader** – *Acting in an Insular Manner Relative to Other Groups in the Organization; Acting in a Brutal Bullying Manner; Micro-Managing and Over-Controlling; Inability to Deal with New Technology and Other Changes.*

Cluster 7 (n = 19) – **The Evil, Destructive Leader** – *Acting in a Brutal Bullying Manner; Lying and Other Unethical Behaviour; Micro-Managing and Over-Controlling; Inability to Deal with Interpersonal Conflicts; Not Having the Skills to Match the Job; Unwillingness to Change Mind and Listen to Others.*



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, 575-590.

