
Destructive Leadership

Social movements are constantly developing across the globe, taking countless forms, and promoting numerous causes. Social movements are defined as “collectivities of people who are engaged in trying to create or resist social change.” (1) While there are many different types of social movements, their success is related to the extent to which individuals and groups mobilize to support them. You cannot have a movement without large-scale participation, and among these participants, an individual or group of individuals must rise to lead the rest. Not all leaders have the best interests of the group; some are sinister and have evil intentions of genocide and domination. We have observed this kind of destructive leadership plenty of times in human history. It is hard to imagine how anyone followed them, looking at the past from our perspective. Why, then, do these types of leaders continue to emerge in society? I explore the similarities that these leaders and their social movements share using concrete evidence from historical examples. Studying ineffective and harmful leadership will ideally provide insight into improving constructive and effective leadership styles. Most research has tended to focus on one side of the topic, emphasizing constructive aspects of leadership while avoiding the “darker side.” Baumeister, Bratlavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs (2001) conclude that “there is overwhelming support to the notion that negative events in social interactions have a stronger effect than do positive events.” Therefore, understanding and learning how to prevent destructive leadership is even more important than understanding and enhancing positive aspects of leadership.

What makes a leader destructive? One misconception is that destructive leadership is merely the absence of effective leadership; however, there are sharp contrasts between lacking constructive leadership, and destructive leadership. Prior studies indicate that leaders actively engage in various types of harmful behavior and that such behaviors reflect more than simply a failure to engage in constructive activities (6). It is not an easy task to define destructive leadership; some researchers claim that leadership can only be positive. They reject the concept of destructive leadership as being an oxymoron and advocate for different terms to capture the negative side of leader behavior. For example, Burns claims that “Hitler ruled the German people, but he did not lead them,” implying that the term leader can only be used in a positive sense. Einarsen states that “tyrannical leaders may behave in accordance with the goals, tasks, missions, and strategies of the organization, but they typically obtain results not through, but at the cost of subordinates. They humiliate, belittle, and manipulate subordinates in order to ‘get the job done’” (2).

Historical examples of tyrants include Adolf Hitler, Vladimir Lenin, Joseph Stalin, and Kim Jong Un. Tyrannical methods include creating groups of insiders and outsiders, fomenting distrust within the group, using propaganda, and creating scapegoats who they punish harshly to serve

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as a warning to others. Adolf Hitler is one of the most infamous leaders in history. After World War I, the worst war in human history at the time, and the Treaty of Versailles, Germany was economically and politically devastated. The Germans needed someone to guide them out of this mess, and concurrently, Hitler became the leader of the Nazi socialist party. He was aided in part by his willingness to use violence in advancing his political objectives and recruiting party members who were willing to do the same. This party advocated extreme nationalism and Pan-Germanism as well as virulent anti-Semitism. Mass unemployment and runaway inflation due to the worldwide depression contributed to the need for unity, and large numbers of German voters turned to extremist groups like Hitler's. Hitler used Jewish people as a scapegoat to blame the country's problems, which is one tyrannical method described by Einarsen. He shifted the focus from the recovery of the country to eliminating the Jews and any other non-Germans; those who opposed the Nazis were also eliminated, giving the supporters a false sense of consensus. Hitler also deceived his subordinates by appealing to their sense of national pride; "Nazi party rallies featured enormous military pageants that deeply impressed the German people" (3).

Joseph Stalin is remembered as one of the bloodiest tyrants in the history of the world. After Vladimir Lenin died in 1924, Stalin eventually outmaneuvered his rivals and won the power struggle for control of the Communist Party. Stalin was not the natural successor of Lenin, but he was able to use his position within the Soviet Communist Party to become the undisputed leader of the Soviet Union from 1929 to 1953. Stalin was born into poverty, and his father was an alcoholic who beat him repeatedly. Growing up in an emotionally and financially unstable family most likely led Stalin to have severe mental health issues which is reflected in his tyrannical demeanor. As a boy, Stalin contracted smallpox, which left him with lifelong facial scars; this may have caused him to be bullied by his peers and leave him with feelings of insecurity. In school, he began secretly reading the work of German social philosopher and "Communist Manifesto" author Karl Marx.

When he was old enough, he joined the more militant wing of the Marxist Social Democratic movement, the Bolsheviks, which is where he made his first contact with Lenin. Stalin's destructive leadership was portrayed in his development plan; it was centered on "government control of the economy and included the forced collectivization of Soviet agriculture, in which the government took control of farms. Millions of farmers refused to cooperate with Stalin's orders and were shot or exiled as punishment. The forced collectivization also led to widespread famine across the Soviet Union that killed millions" (6). Stalin ruled by harnessing his subjects' fear and eliminating anyone who challenged his power. For example, "he expanded the powers of the secret police, encouraged citizens to spy on one another and had millions of people killed or sent to the Gulag system of forced labor camps. He also instituted the Great Purge, a series of campaigns designed to rid the Communist Party, the military and other parts of Soviet society from those he considered a threat" (6). These tactics, along with many others, made his

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leadership style effective, although very deadly. While there is no concrete template on how a destructive leader rises to power, there are similarities between destructive leaders. After studying what classifies a leader as destructive and examining historical examples, we can determine what the characteristics of a destructive leader are and be able to use these characteristics to predict a situation where a leader may become destructive. One study (Padilla, Hogan, Kaiser) groups these characteristics into a “toxic triangle” consisting of leaders, followers, and the environmental contexts connected to destructive leadership.

The first leg of the triangle focuses on the leaders themselves. Some of the most widespread characteristics of destructive leaders include narcissism, charisma, negative life themes, ideology of hate, and personalized power. The presence of the personality disorder of narcissism contributes to destructive tendencies. Personality disorders are “dysfunctional dispositions that may or may not be associated with anxiety and depression - the traditional indicators of neuroticism - but which are associated with poor social and occupational performance” (13). Penney and Spector (2002) found that narcissism was a predictor of destructive leadership behavior. Individuals high in this trait are driven to obtain the power and status that come with being a leader. Conger also examined narcissism and found that this disorder is what pushes the destructive leader into abusing status or symbolic power. Although all individuals have a measure of narcissism, it can become pathological in certain leaders as their sense of self-importance grows beyond reasonable boundaries. Narcissism can lead destructive leaders to overestimate their capabilities and underestimate the role of critical skills, resources, and changing marketplaces. For example, they may fail to accept responsibility for bad decisions, ignore reality, disregard the views of others, blame external sources, and eventually blame the followers. In extreme cases (Hitler, Stalin, Saddam Hussein), “malignant narcissism” is associated with hyper-aggressiveness and sadistic, exploitative personal relationships. They often claim to have special knowledge or privilege and demand unquestioning obedience. Their sense of entitlement often leads to self-serving abuses of power.

Charisma is another indicator of a destructive leader. Not all charismatic leaders are destructive (Winston Churchill, Martin Luther King Jr., John F. Kennedy), but most destructive leaders are charismatic (Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Jim Jones, Charles Manson). Charismatic leaders are able to sell a vision of a desirable future and convince their followers that they are capable of reaching this future. On the other hand, destructive leaders articulate a vision of a world characterized by threat and insecurity, where personal safety depends on the domination and defeat of rivals. Having a negative outlook on life is another characteristic of a destructive leader. A negative life story reflects “the extent to which the leader had a destructive image of the world and his or her role in the world.” (O'Connor et al., 1995). A bad childhood and traumatic early life experiences are tied to negative life themes. Parental discord, low socioeconomic status, paternal criminality, maternal psychiatric disorder, and child abuse are

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common themes for exploitive adults. For example, Joseph Stalin's childhood was characterized by an abusive and alcoholic father who beat his wife and young son. This demonstrates how Stalin's childhood made him cruel and lack empathy for others. Hitler, Mussolini, and Castro also experienced considerable childhood distress. Moreover, childhood experiences of powerlessness are associated with using coercive influence techniques.

The second leg of the triangle is dedicated to the followers. Although studied less frequently than leaders, followers do have a role in the rise of destructive leaders whether they realize it or not. There are specific characteristics of these followers that lack a clearly defined self-concept and allow for a destructive leader to emerge: unmet needs, low core self-evaluations, and low maturity. Maslow's hierarchy of needs argued that the basic needs of followers must be met before their higher aspirations can be engaged. The same holds for destructive leadership. The global economic depression of the 1930s and the aftermaths of World War I left many citizens of Germany, Russia, and Italy on the brink of poverty and starvation prior to the rise of Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini. Hitler and other dictators attracted followers by promising to help the country out of its economic hardships. The last leg of the triangle focuses on the environmental contexts of the leadership.

These characteristics that give rise to destructive leaders include instability, perceived threat, cultural values, lack of checks and balances, and ineffective institutions. During times of instability, leaders can enhance their power by advocating radical change to restore order. Leaders taking power in unstable environments are also granted more authority because instability demands quick action and unilateral decision making. In this instance, governments do not have time to deliberate over what to do, and have no choice but to hand over the decision-making power to one individual. Destructive leaders take advantage of the unstable setting to execute their malevolent plans. Related to structural and organizational instability is the perception of imminent threat, such as Germany after the Treaty of Versailles. Only the perception of threat is necessary, not an actual threat, to instill fear in the followers and allow the leaders to act. When people feel threatened, they are more willing to accept assertive leadership. Leaders often perpetuate the perception of threat or an external "enemy." Dictators exploit followers' needs for security, one of their basic needs, by providing structure, rituals, and rules that offer easy solutions to complex problems.

Another characteristic that I discovered during my research not included in the toxic triangle is the use of powerful symbols and propaganda. While Hitler was in prison, he used the time to write *Mein Kampf* which described the process by which he became anti-Semitic and outlined his political ideology and future plans for Germany. Hitler used the main thesis of "the Jewish peril", which posits a Jewish conspiracy to gain world leadership. The book has three whole chapters dedicated to "War Propaganda," and how he thought it should be used: "I saw that the Socialist-Marxist organizations mastered and applied this instrument with astounding skill.

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And I soon realized that the correct use of propaganda is a true art which has remained practically unknown to the bourgeois parties... Propaganda must not investigate the truth objectively and, in so far as it is favourable to the other side, present it according to the theoretical rules of justice; yet it must present only that aspect of the truth which is favourable to its own side" (12).

He also created a propaganda technique known as the "big lie"; "If you tell a big enough lie and tell it frequently enough, it will be believed." Hitler used strong symbols such as the straight arm salute and swastika that were easily identifiable. Propaganda has the power to brainwash followers into believing anything the leaders wants them to, which is one reason it is hard for the followers to reject the leader, regardless of how destructive they are. Leadership of any type springs from the interplay of an individual's motivation and ability to lead, subordinates' desire for direction and authority, and events calling for leadership. Leadership is a spectrum; it does not have one definition, and it is very complex. We are moving towards better defining the "dark side of leadership", and have narrowed down significant characteristics. Much more research must be done in order to fully understand destructive leadership; the more we know about destructive leadership, the better we can identify and put a stop to it when it occurs in the future. Destructive leadership has negatively impacted millions of people and it is time that something is done to stop it.

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