

Personality and the Dark Side of Leadership

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Abstract

Personality likely plays an important role for destructive leadership, but research is still in its infancy. In this chapter, we review empirical evidence along four lines of research: 1) Leaders' personality traits predict their destructive leadership behavior (*direct relation*), also in regard to the situations that individuals seek and enter (*situation activation*), 2) situational characteristics can attenuate or strengthen the relations of leaders' personality traits with destructive leadership behavior (*trait activation*), 3) subordinates' personality traits shape reactions to experienced destructive leadership (*trait activation*), and 4) examining subordinates' personality traits as antecedents of destructive leadership carries the danger of victim blaming. We summarize these four lines of research in a model that captures the role of personality for destructive leadership. These findings can be used by organizations and HR professionals in job design, job advertisements, and job selection to reduce levels of destructive leadership and its consequences.

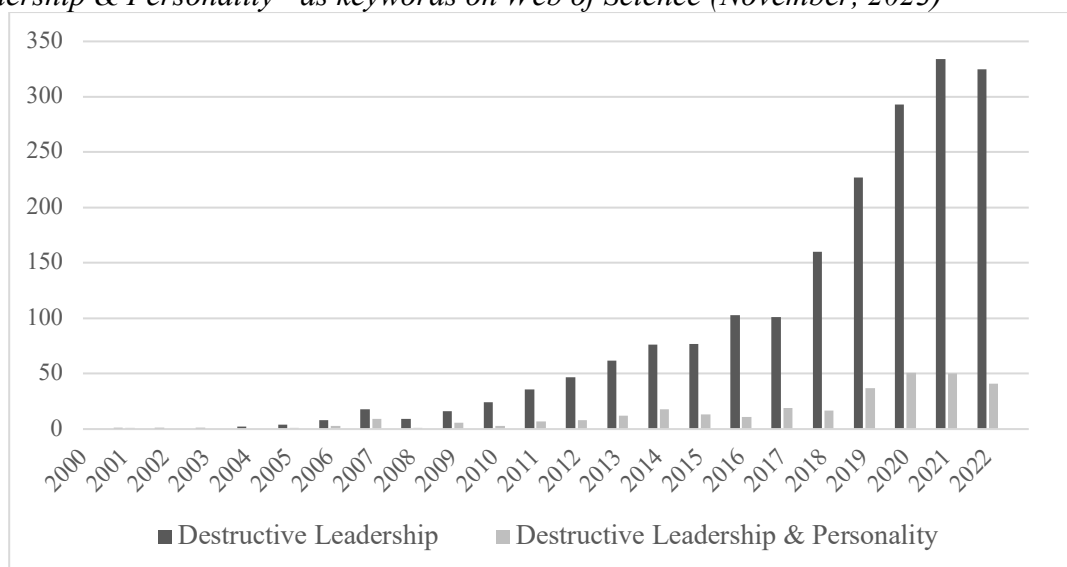
Personality and the Dark Side of Leadership

David works as a team leader of a marketing department. He is dominant and not interested in compromises, rather unorganized and regularly too late to meetings, and likes to show off his sports car. As a leader, he is impulsive and rude. Whenever things do not go his way, he does not talk calmly about it, but rather yells at his subordinates or ignores them altogether. He constantly reminds subordinates of their past mistakes and has been caught lying to his employees. In short, he behaves destructively and abusively towards his subordinates. However, his subordinates react to and deal with the abuse differently. Simon, who does not shy away from conflict and who is rather emotionally unstable, repeatedly falls victim to the abuse and already feels exhausted and depressed because of it. But Sarah, who is diligent and organized, does not let the mistreatment get to herself and seems to handle it better than Simon.

Destructive leadership behavior, like the one described in this fictional case, is an omnipresent problem in many organizations worldwide, and research interest in the predictors and consequences thereof has increased dramatically ever since Tepper's (2000) seminal work on abusive supervision. Although situational variables, such as experiencing stress or injustice, can play an important role in explaining David's behavior, research interest in dispositional predictors of destructive leadership has received increasing scientific attention in recent years (see Figure 15.1). As the case illustrates, this can include individual differences of both leaders and subordinates: David seems to have certain dispositions that incline him to behave abusively, but he also specifically targets some of his subordinates, and some of his subordinates can deal better with the abuse than others.

Figure 15.1

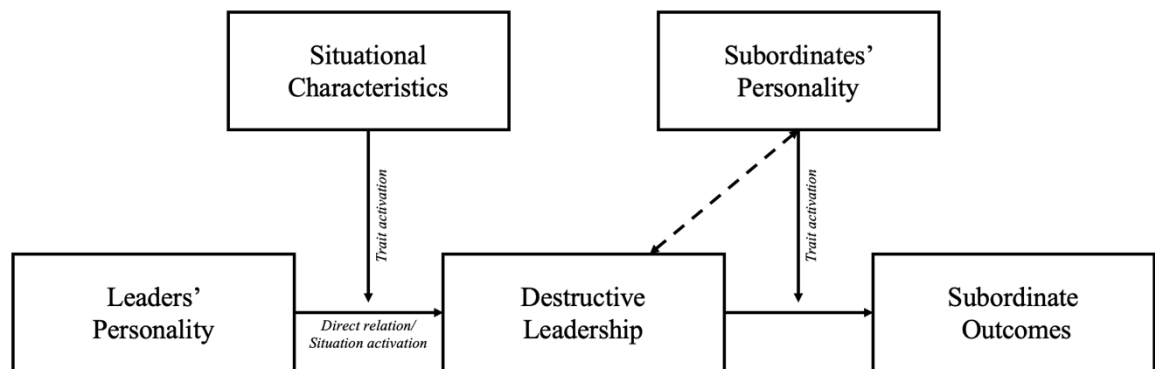
The number of peer-reviewed publications with “Destructive Leadership” or “Destructive Leadership & Personality” as keywords on Web of Science (November, 2023)



In line with these examples, the aim of this chapter is to review literature about the role of personality in the emergence and dynamics of destructive leadership, and to propose a theoretical model that describes the role of personality in the destructive leadership process based on these findings. This includes examining the leader's personality traits as predictors of the proclivity to act abusively (*direct relation*), also in regard to the situations that individuals seek and enter (*situation activation*). Altering situational characteristics, such as the leaders' autonomy to make decisions, can affect the strength of the relations between personality traits and destructive leadership (*trait activation*). We also address the dangers of examining the subordinates' personality traits as antecedents of destructive leadership (cf. victim blaming) and discuss how subordinates' personality traits shape reactions to experienced abuse (*trait activation*). All of these dynamics are captured in a model about the role of personality in the destructive leadership process (see Figure 15.2).

Figure 15.2

The Role of Personality for Destructive Leadership



Note. The bi-directional dashed line between destructive leadership and subordinates' personality indicates that destructive leaders might be more likely to target subordinates with certain personality traits and/or that subordinates with certain personality traits might be more likely to report experiencing destructive leadership.

Understanding the role of personality in the destructive leadership process can have important practical implications, and we will review the literature on how personality-caused destructive leadership can be stopped and how its detrimental consequences can be mitigated. For example, organizations can try to prevent destructive leadership by not selecting or promoting individuals for leadership positions who possess personality traits that may incline them to act abusively and destructively toward subordinates. But if destructive leadership cannot be prevented this way, mainly because leaders started to abuse subordinates after they were selected, organizations can create strong situations that may suppress the expression of

destructive leadership-relevant traits and thus reduce the likelihood of destructive leadership. We will address these practical implications in more detail toward the end of this chapter.

The remainder of this chapter is structured as follows. We will start by defining personality, focusing on the most commonly used broad personality models and traits. We will then zoom in on the relations of leaders' personality traits with their destructive behavior, after which we will discuss the role of the context for these relations. Furthermore, we will address why studying the personality traits of subordinates as antecedents of destructive leadership can be dangerous, and we will review evidence about how subordinates' traits can shape reactions to destructive leadership. We conclude the chapter by highlighting important practical implications of this line of research and by summarizing the most important limitations that plague research on personality-destructive leadership relations. Based on all of this, we will deduce an agenda for future research to move the field forward.

Definition of Personality

Personality describes the relatively stable patterns of thoughts, feelings, and actions that differ across individuals (Larsen & Buss, 2005), and personality traits are, to approximately the same extent, determined by genetic and environmental factors (Kandler et al., 2020; Vukasović & Bratko, 2015). In the 1930s, Gordon Allport was one of the first to propose that personality consists of relatively stable traits that guide thoughts, feelings, and behavior across different situations. More recent personality research is largely based on the lexical approach to the study of personality, which holds that human personality is engrained in the words that we speak. By studying all adjectives in a dictionary that are used to describe the behaviors, tendencies, and characteristics of individuals, researchers can combine them into categories, which are then seen as indicators of personality traits. In the 1980s and 1990s, researchers proposed, based on this approach, that personality can be described in terms of five broad traits (Goldberg, 1990; McCrae & Costa, 1992): Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism (forming the OCEAN acronym; see Table 15.1 for descriptions of these traits). This model, which is commonly called the Five-Factor Model (FFM) or the **Big Five model**, has dominated personality research ever since.

More recently, researchers have argued that human personality can be described better based on six broad traits, also because a personality model based on six traits exhibits higher cross-cultural replicability (Thielmann et al., 2019). The most commonly studied model including six traits is the **HEXACO model** (Lee & Ashton, 2008), which contains the following six broad traits: Honesty-Humility, Emotionality, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness to Experience. As the names imply, similarities exist

between the Big Five and the HEXACO model. For example, Extraversion, Conscientiousness, and Openness to Experience are almost identical across the two models (Thielmann et al., 2022). However, the other traits exhibit substantial variations. The original content of Big Five Neuroticism and Agreeableness has been reorganized into HEXACO Emotionality and Agreeableness. More importantly, trait variance included in Honesty-Humility, which describes the tendency to be fair, genuine, and modest, is not sufficiently captured in the Big Five model (Thielmann et al., 2022). As we will see further below, this trait is of particular relevance for destructive leadership.

Next to the broad and general Big Five and HEXACO models, which largely focus on desirable personality traits (except for Big Five Neuroticism and HEXACO Emotionality), researchers have also studied undesirable and socially aversive personality traits. Most commonly, these are summarized in the **Dark Triad** model, which contains the traits Psychopathy, Narcissism, and Machiavellianism (see Table 15.1). Although each Dark Triad trait captures unique features, they all converge in describing an individuals' tendency to maximize outcomes for themselves while disregarding or even exploiting others (Moshagen et al., 2018). The Dark Triad traits, as a whole, also overlap strongly with honesty-Humility (Hodson et al., 2018), and are therefore of particular relevance for destructive leadership.

Although there are many other personality traits that have been studied, the majority of them can be summarized and grouped in one of the broad personality taxonomies mentioned above (Bainbridge et al., 2022). In the remainder of this chapter, we therefore focus on the broad, most commonly used conceptualizations of personality (i.e., Big Five, HEXACO, Dark Triad). Table 15.1 contains a description of these traits.

Table 15.1

Description of the most commonly studied personality traits

Defining adjectives	
Big Five	
Openness to Experience	Artistic, creative, curious, imaginative, intelligent
Conscientiousness	Dependable, organized, planful, precise, reliable, responsible, thorough
Extraversion	Active, assertive, enthusiastic, outgoing, sociable, talkative
Agreeableness	Agreeable, cooperative, fair, forgiving, generous, kind, soft-hearted, sympathetic, trusting, warm
Neuroticism	Angry, anxious, emotional, envious, fearful, moody, nervous, worrying
HEXACO	
Honesty-Humility	Faithful/loyal, fair-minded, honest, modest/unassuming, sincere

Emotionality	Anxious, emotional, fearful, oversensitive, sentimental, vulnerable
Extraversion	Active, cheerful, extraverted, lively, outgoing, sociable, talkative
Agreeableness	Agreeable, gentle, lenient, mild, patient, peaceful, tolerant
Conscientiousness	Careful, diligent, disciplined, organized, precise, thorough
Openness to Experience	Creative, innovative, intellectual, ironic, unconventional

Dark Triad

Narcissism	Selfish, egotistical, feelings of entitlement and superiority
Psychopathy	Unemotional, tolerant of stress, impulsive, risk-seeking, antisocial
Machiavellianism	Distrustful of others, manipulative, controlling, status-driven, calculating

Note. Big Five and HEXACO characteristics are reproduced from Thielmann et al. (2022).

Destructive Leadership

Before we zoom in on the relations of the leaders' personality traits with their proclivity to behave destructively, we need to briefly define destructive leadership. In a very influential review, Krasikova et al. (2013) defined destructive leadership as “*volitional behavior by a leader that can harm or intends to harm a leader's organization and/or subordinates by (a) encouraging subordinates to pursue goals that contravene the legitimate interests of the organization and/or (b) employing a leadership style that involves the use of harmful methods of influence with subordinates, regardless of justifications for such behavior*” (p. 1310).

A few interesting points about this definition need to be highlighted. First, defining destructive leadership as volitional excludes other ineffective forms of leadership, such as low levels of transformational or ethical leadership, that can also have detrimental consequences for subordinates or organizations. Second, this definition represents destructive leadership as a specific form of leadership, which helps to draw the line to other counterproductive work behaviors that are not embedded in the leadership process, such as stealing from the organization. Third, this definition distinguishes between two manifestations of destructive leadership: motivating subordinates to pursue destructive goals and leading subordinates in a destructive manner.

Several forms of destructive leadership behavior, such as despotic leadership, toxic tyranny, or exploitative leadership, have been proposed and examined, but the literature and scientific research is clearly dominated by the concept of abusive supervision (Mackey et al., 2021). Tepper (2000) defined this as the “subordinates' perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact” (p. 178). Another common distinction in the field is the one between active destructive (e.g., abusive supervision) and passive destructive leadership

behavior (e.g., laissez-faire leadership), but all types of destructive leadership behavior have in common that they break organizational norms and harm subordinates or the organization.

Leaders' Personality Traits and Destructive Leadership

Do you remember David from the case at the beginning of this chapter? He was described as dominant, unorganized, and interested in material things. These characteristics, which are indicative of low Agreeableness, low Conscientiousness, and low Honesty-Humility, respectively, all make him more likely to be a destructive leader. Let's take a systematic look at how the leaders' personality traits relate to their destructive leadership behavior (the *direct relation* path in Figure 15.2).

In general, research examining the relations of leaders' personality traits with their destructive leadership behavior is still in its infancy. One of the reasons for this is that examining these relations optimally requires matched data from leaders and subordinates where leaders rate their own personality, while subordinates rate their leaders' destructive behavior. Such data are generally difficult to collect, but some studies have done it. For the Big Five traits, Eissa and Lester (2017) found, in a sample of 190 leader-subordinate dyads, that the leaders' Neuroticism ($r = .51$), Conscientiousness ($r = -.35$), and Agreeableness ($r = -.27$) all significantly predicted subordinate-rated abusive supervision. Fosse et al. (2023) found that leaders' Agreeableness predicted abusive supervision ($r = -.26$) and laissez-faire leadership ($r = -.17$), whereas Neuroticism did not predict either form of destructive leadership ($r = .05$ and $-.03$, respectively). Furthermore, Camps et al. (2016) found some support for the negative relation of leaders' Conscientiousness with abusive supervision¹, but no significant relations for any of the other Big Five traits.

Another promising trait is Honesty-Humility from the HEXACO model, which describes the tendency to be genuine, fair, modest, and not interested in material things. As such, individuals scoring high on Honesty-Humility are generally less likely to engage in dishonest and counterproductive (work) behavior (Pletzer et al., 2020; Reinhardt & Reinhardt, 2023). In fact, Honesty-Humility is typically the strongest predictor of counterproductive work behavior out of all Big Five and HEXACO traits (Pletzer et al., 2019). Given that destructive leadership is essentially a specific form of counterproductive work behavior, it also seems very likely that Honesty-Humility is highly predictive of destructive leadership. However, to the best of our knowledge, only one published study has examined this relation so far: Breevaart

¹ The bivariate correlation was non-significant, but Conscientiousness was a significant predictor of abusive supervision in a linear regression which contained all Big Five traits as predictors.

and de Vries (2017) asked leaders to rate their own levels of Honesty-Humility, while subordinates assessed their leaders' abusive supervision. They found a relatively strong correlation between these two variables ($r = -.40$). Importantly, anecdotal evidence also supports the idea that dishonest leaders act more destructively and abusively: In recent years, many corporate scandals have come to light, such as the Volkswagen emissions scandal or Bernie Madoff's pyramid scheme, that were largely driven by dishonest, fraudulent behavior by C-level executives. As such, Honesty-Humility seems like a highly relevant trait for predicting destructive leadership. It has further been proposed that the combination of low Honesty-Humility with low levels of Agreeableness and Conscientiousness among leaders, which are called the 'three nightmare traits in leaders' (De Vries, 2018), is especially catastrophic for subordinates and organizations because such leaders exhibit dishonest, disagreeable, and careless behavior.

Interestingly, a few more studies have examined the relations of the Dark Triad traits with destructive leadership. In Table 15.2, we provide an overview of all studies that we were able to locate. For each study, the table includes the correlations of leader-rated Dark Triad traits with subordinate-rated destructive leadership and the associated sample size. The findings from these studies indicate that the three Dark Triad traits correlate to roughly the same extent with destructive leadership. Machiavellianism (average $r = .17$) and Narcissism (average $r = .22$) were studied most frequently, whereas Psychopathy ($r = .19$) was only assessed in one study that we could locate. Apparently, being selfishly interested while disregarding or even manipulating the interests of others are characteristics of destructive leaders.

Table 15.2

Overview of studies that assessed (one of) the relations of the leaders' Dark Triad traits with abusive supervision

Study	Sample size	Zero-Order Correlations		
		Psychopathy	Narcissism	Machiavellianism
De Hoogh et al. (2021) Study 1	219	-	-	.27
De Hoogh et al. (2021) Study 2	183	-	-	.29
Feng et al. (2023) Study 2	261	-	-	-.13
Gaughlitz et al. (2023) Study 1	123	-	.20	-
Gaughlitz et al. (2023) Study 2	313	-	.40	-
Khan et al. (2022)	111	-	-	.09
Kiazad et al. (2010)	92	-	-	.34
Nevicka et al. (2018) Study 1	85	-	-.08	-
Nevicka et al. (2018) Study 2	176	-	.19	-

Waldman et al. (2018)	47	-	.27	-
Wisse & Sleebos (2016)	225	.19	.12	.30
Sample size-weighted average		.19	.22	.17

Note. This table only includes studies that included leader-ratings of the Dark Triad traits and subordinate-ratings of abusive supervision; Studies that used other combinations of ratings include Lyons et al. (2019), Mathieu & Babiak (2016), and Study 1 from Feng et al. (2023).

Taken together, it can be concluded that there is initial evidence that Neuroticism, Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, Honesty-Humility, and the Dark Triad traits predict destructive leadership (i.e., that they have criterion-related validity), but that these relations are, on average, modest in size. One interpretation could be that personality is just not very relevant for the prediction of destructive leadership, but an alternative interpretation seems more likely: The fact that the leaders' personality is usually rated by the leader, while the leaders' destructive leadership is rated by the subordinate introduces the self-other agreement problem (De Vries, 2012; De Vries et al., 2023). This means that the correlation between two variables rated by two different individuals cannot be stronger than the correlation between the same construct rated by two individuals. In other words, the correlation between leader-rated personality traits and subordinate-rated destructive leadership perceptions cannot be stronger than the correlation between subordinate- and leader-rated destructive leadership or between subordinates' and leaders' ratings of the leaders' personality trait. The fact that self-other agreement correlations for personality ratings in a work context (e.g., $r = .25 - .30$; Connelly & Ones, 2010) or for leadership behaviors (e.g., $r = .16$; Ostroff et al., 2004) are not very strong constrains correlations between self-rated leader personality and subordinate-rated destructive leadership to that magnitude of correlations as well. As such, the correlations between leaders' personality traits and destructive leadership can be considered relatively large if the self-other agreement problem is taken into consideration.

The Role of the Context

When discussing the relations of personality traits with destructive leadership, it is not just important to understand which traits are related to destructive leadership, but also when, why, and how. In other words, personality always unfolds in a situational context and its relations with other variables can be influenced by various situational characteristics. More specifically, individuals might actively seek out certain situations depending on their personality, situations might activate the expression of certain personality traits, or situational characteristics might influence the effectiveness of certain leadership behaviors (De Vries et al., 2016). Here, we will focus on the first two mechanisms, which are called situation

activation and trait activation, because these two are directly relevant for the relations of leaders' personality traits with their destructive leadership behavior (see Figure 15.2).²

Situation activation takes place if individuals with certain personality traits select into or enter situations that fit their personality traits. For example, dishonest and manipulative individuals (i.e., those scoring low on Honesty-Humility and high on the Dark Triad traits) might rather apply to leadership positions in so-called hazardous organizations in which the reward structure allows these individuals to pursue their interests relatively uninhibitedly without paying attention to the interests of other individuals or groups in the organization (B. Wang et al., 2023). More specifically, in hazardous organizations, managers or employees (a) are more tolerant of sexual misconduct, (b) support power inequality, (c) are strongly motivated by monetary incentives, (d) disregard ethical standards, and (e) hide knowledge. B. Wang et al. (2023) found that individuals scoring low on Honesty-Humility ($r = -.48$) and Conscientiousness ($r = -.33$), and high on the Dark Triad traits ($r = .37$ to $.63$) were more attracted to such hazardous organizations. Similarly, Judge and Cable (1997) found that individuals scoring low on Agreeableness were more attracted to an organization with an aggressive organizational culture and that individuals scoring low on Conscientiousness were not very attracted to detail- and outcome-oriented organizations. These findings support the assertion that personality traits can shape the situations that individuals seek and enter, and that this can also be applied to personality-based self-selection into specific leadership positions. Organizations characterized as hazardous or aggressive might subsequently experience higher levels of destructive leadership because of such *situation activation*.

Trait activation takes place if situational features activate or de-activate the expression of certain traits (Tett & Burnett, 2003). As we presented above, dishonest and manipulative individuals are more likely to engage in destructive behaviors as leaders, but situational features can (de-)activate the expression of these traits. For example, if such individuals work in very constrained, highly standardized work environments, they might not actually behave destructively because they have no freedom to express their traits which would normally incline them to behave destructively. It is also conceivable that such individuals, working for organizations or in teams with a competitive culture, might resort to destructive leadership behaviors under the false pretense of wanting to motivate subordinates.

² Readers interested in learning more about the relevance of the third mechanism in a leadership context, which is called outcome activation, should read de Vries' (2018) review about "three nightmare traits in leaders".

In general, the trait activation theory has received substantial empirical support (for a review, see Tett et al., 2021), and there is also some evidence for the utility of trait activation when examining the relations of leaders' personality traits with their destructive leadership behavior. For example, de Hoogh et al. (2021) found that leaders scoring high on Machiavellianism only acted abusively if organizations did not emphasize the importance of following rules or if there was an organizational climate that was focused on selfish values. Turned around, the relations between Machiavellianism and abusive supervision disappeared if organizations placed a lot of emphasis on following the rules and when there was a climate in which cooperation and collaboration was valued. Similarly, Eissa and Lester (2017) found that supervisor frustration was related significantly to abusive supervision only among leaders who scored low on Agreeableness. However, more research is needed testing the trait activation theory in a leadership context, and researchers can systematically examine this by pairing specific situational features to certain traits based on theoretical arguments: Examples include that situations which allow for the exploitation of others activate the expression of (low) Honesty-Humility, but not of other personality traits, or that situations with strict procedures and rules activate the expression of (high) Conscientiousness, but not of other personality traits.

Subordinates' Personality Traits Shape Reactions to Destructive Leadership

From meta-analyses (P. Li et al., 2023; Mackey et al., 2021), we know that destructive leadership is negatively associated with subordinates' well-being, job-related attitudes (e.g., job satisfaction), and job performance. Do you remember the case from the beginning of this chapter? While Simon, who was characterized as disagreeable and neurotic, was strongly affected by the abuse from David, Sarah, who was characterized as conscientious, handled the abuse much better. This can also be explained by theoretical arguments based on the trait activation theory, which suggest that the relations of destructive leadership with subordinate outcomes can be dependent upon the subordinates' personality traits. In other words, subordinates' personality traits can shape reactions to experienced abuse.

In studies that investigate this, personality traits are usually positioned as moderators for the relations between destructive leadership and subordinate outcomes (see Figure 15.2). For example, in one of the first studies to examine this, Tepper et al. (2001) found that abusive supervision related positively to dysfunctional resistance among subordinates, and that this relation was particularly strong among subordinates who scored low on Conscientiousness and Agreeableness. Similarly, G. Wang et al. (2015) found that abusive supervision was particularly strongly related to subordinates' interpersonal deviance among

subordinates who scored low on Agreeableness and Extraversion. Another interesting study found that abusive supervision was positively associated with problematic alcohol consumption, but not among subordinates who scored high on Conscientiousness and Agreeableness (Bamberger & Bacharach, 2006). Together, these findings indicate that the subordinates' personality traits can function as exacerbating or protective factors after experiencing destructive leadership.

The Dangers of Blaming the Victim

Many studies have also examined relations of the subordinates' personality traits with destructive leadership (see the dashed line in Figure 15.2), and Mackey et al. (2021) recently summarized all existing studies about these relations in a meta-analysis. They found that subordinates' Big Five Conscientiousness ($r = -.15$) and Agreeableness ($r = -.13$) related negatively, whereas Big Five Neuroticism ($r = .17$) related positively to destructive leadership. Big Five Extraversion and Openness to Experience were not strongly related to destructive leadership.

There are two ways to interpret these findings. One possibility is that subordinates who are organized and diligent, compassionate and friendly, and emotionally stable are less likely to be targeted and victimized by abusive supervisors. Following this interpretation, subordinates' personality traits can be considered contextual factors that influence leaders. For example, leaders might become annoyed and frustrated by subordinates who are unorganized, stubborn, and neurotic (i.e., who score low on Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, and Emotional Stability), which makes them more likely targets of destructive leadership. An alternative interpretation is that individuals with these personality traits are less likely to perceive or report being abused. However, irrespective of the interpretation, these relations are often viewed through the lens of victim precipitation theory (Tepper et al., 2006), which holds that the traits and behaviors of certain individuals increase the likelihood that they are being victimized. This theoretical perspective, and empirical research based on it, is often criticized for shifting the blame for the abuse from the abuser to the victim, and this is particularly dangerous in leader-subordinate interactions, which are by definition characterized by a power imbalance. As such, we hope that the field will invest more efforts into understanding the personality traits of abusers or into understanding the relational dynamics between leaders and subordinates that result in the highest levels of destructive leadership, for which there has been little research, and less in examining relations of the subordinates' personality traits with destructive leadership.

In addition, it deserves to be mentioned that the subordinates' personality can serve as a barrier when trying to escape abusive leader-subordinate relations (Breevaart et al., 2022). For example, highly agreeable subordinates might shy away from engaging in a conflict with an abusive leader and might rather opt to endure the abuse because they value harmony in relationships and are rather forgiving. A better understanding of these barriers can help victims overcome them.

Practical Implications

The various empirical findings reviewed above carry important practical implications for organizations. At the most general level, organizations can use personality tests (more often) as screening tools in recruitment settings to select candidates for leadership positions who do not possess traits that incline them to behave destructively as leaders (Nikolaou & Foti, 2018). However, it is possible to derive even more specific practical recommendations based on the reviewed empirical evidence. For example, organizations can use the principles of *situation activation* and associated findings in a recruitment and selection setting. To do so, organizations should highlight values in job postings that do not appeal to candidates with levels of traits that incline them to behave destructively. For example, individuals scoring low on Honesty-Humility or high on the Dark Triad may be less likely to apply to a job if the job posting clearly emphasizes the importance of integrity and honesty. Similarly, research has found that individuals scoring low on Conscientiousness are less likely to apply to jobs that place a strong emphasis on being organized and diligent (Stevens & Szmerekovsky, 2010). These theoretical arguments and empirical findings based on the principles of situation activation suggest that organizations can design their recruitment procedures in ways that deter individuals with specific levels of traits that predispose them to behave destructively and abusively in leadership positions.

The principles of trait activation theory can be used in two ways to reduce the occurrence of destructive leadership. First, organizations can allow for the expression of relevant personality traits in a job selection setting to avoid hiring individuals that are likely to behave destructively as leaders. This can be achieved by allowing for the expression of undesirable traits in structured interviews, situational judgment tests, or in gamified personality assessment. Situational judgment tests can be used to assess personality traits that predict destructive leadership (e.g., Ostrom et al., 2019) or interview questions can be phrased to elicit responses that would flag individuals likely to act destructively. For example, interviewers could ask applicants to describe a situation in which they experienced a lot of stress and had to prioritize their tasks to deduce the applicants' Conscientiousness and

Neuroticism scores, which are both predictors of destructive leadership. Gamified personality assessment (Barends et al., 2022; Barends & de Vries, 2023) might offer another viable alternative because applicants' in-game behavior in situations specifically designed to elicit the expression of relevant traits can be observed and their personality traits inferred.

Second, if organizations already face problems with destructive leadership, they can rely on the trait activation theory to reduce its occurrence and prevalence. This can be achieved by designing jobs in ways that activate the expression of desirable traits and that deactivate the expression of undesirable traits. For example, organizations can emphasize the importance of following rules or design jobs in ways that require teamwork and collaboration, which, according to findings by De Hoogh et al. (2021; see above), will attenuate the relation between leaders' Machiavellianism and destructive leadership behavior. Another common trait-activating moderator is job autonomy (Tett et al., 2021), which describes the extent to which employees have the freedom to make decisions at work. In such situations, personality traits usually have a stronger effect on behavior compared to situations that are highly standardized and structured. As such, organizations can grant leaders autonomy and decision-making freedom if these leaders are conscientious, agreeable, and honest, but limit their autonomy when leaders are rather manipulative, rude, and dishonest by implementing clear procedures and adequate monitoring.

Limitations and Future Research Agenda

In general, there is still relatively little research examining the role of personality for better understanding the onset and dynamics of destructive leadership. This becomes obvious when investigating how leaders' personality traits relate to subordinate-rated leadership behavior in general, but even more so when it comes to destructive leadership. Although it is possible that many more studies have examined these relations but were never published because of non-significant findings (Rothstein et al., 2005), we rather believe that the complicated nature of collecting data among leaders and subordinates has prevented a thorough understanding of these relations. As such, we call for more studies that examine the relations of leaders' personality traits with subordinates' perceptions of destructive leadership, and generally believe that understanding the personality-related nomological net around destructive leadership is a fruitful avenue for future research.

Importantly, those studies that already exist suffer from important limitations that need to be mentioned as well. First, although personality is generally assumed to be relatively stable, recent research demonstrates that major life events can result in small changes in personality (Bleidorn et al., 2018), and that this even applies to work events (Tasselli et al.,

2018). For example, Li et al. (2021) show that becoming a leader results in small increases in Conscientiousness, which indicates that it is likely that a reciprocal relation exists between leaders' Conscientiousness and their leadership behavior. Although we still believe that the causal effect from Conscientiousness to destructive leadership is stronger than the one from destructive leadership to Conscientiousness, future research should conduct more longitudinal and quasi-experimental studies that can contribute to establishing causality in cases where the independent variable (here: personality) cannot be manipulated.

Second, many of the studies that examined relations between leaders' personality and their destructive leadership behavior seem underpowered to detect moderate or small effects. For example, the average sample size of studies summarized in Table 15.2 was $N = 167$, which results in 49% statistical power to detect a true effect of $r = .15$. To detect such an effect with 80% statistical power, which is a commonly used level, a sample size of $N = 347$ would be necessary. Notably, statistical power is even more of a concern when examining trait-situation interactions postulated by the trait activation theory. This indicates that we need studies with substantially larger sample sizes to detect small to moderate effects that might otherwise be overlooked although potentially being of practical relevance.

Third, findings from research relying on self-reports to assess variables can be influenced by social desirability and faking. For example, leaders can rate their own personality in more desirable ways and subordinates might be afraid of repercussions when rating their leaders' destructive leadership behavior. Safeguarding anonymity and confidentiality are therefore of utmost importance to reduce the influence of these response biases on results. Alternative methods for data collection, such as experimental and scenario-based studies, qualitative studies, or behavioral observations, could also help to overcome the limitations associated with self-reports.

A few additional ideas for future research deserve to be mentioned as well. First, leaders do not engage in destructive behavior all the time, but their destructive behavior instead rather fluctuates from day to day (Kelemen et al., 2020). Daily fluctuations in behavior can also be predicted by personality traits. For example, research has found that neuroticism is predictive of intra-individual variability in affective experiences (Eid & Diener, 1999), and similar findings might emerge when predicting daily destructive leadership behavior, especially given the central role of negative affect for destructive leadership (Hoobler & Hu, 2013). As such, future research could examine if stable personality traits of leaders predict variability in destructive leadership behavior from day to day. Second, recent research has explored if it is possible to change personality traits through

interventions and has found some promising results. For example, Neuroticism and Extraversion can be changed through clinical interventions (Roberts et al., 2017), but also through non-clinical digital interventions (Stieger et al., 2021). Especially the latter findings could also be used in an organizational context to change personality traits in ways that reduce destructive leadership (and other counterproductive work behaviors).

At last, as organizations are multi-level structures nested within national cultures, we find it important to better understand the role of personality for destructive leadership accounting for multilevel factors (Klein & Kozlowski, 2000). Specifically, previous research has not yet investigated if personality-related findings in the realm of destructive leadership are specific to certain teams, organizations, or cultures. For example, some meta-analyses (Crede et al., 2019; P. Li et al., 2021) have found that the relations of constructive leadership behaviors with subordinates' outcomes are stronger in some countries or cultures than in others, and the same should be investigated for the relations of personality with destructive leadership and its outcomes for subordinates. It would further be interesting to examine if the reviewed findings generalize beyond the commonly studied leader-subordinate dyads to all other subordinates working under the same leader and in the same team.

Conclusion

A few decades after research on destructive leadership has picked up, research about the role of personality in the destructive leadership process is still in its infancy. Most studies have examined the relations of subordinates' personality traits with destructive leadership which can result in blaming victims for the abuse. Instead, more research should focus on how, when, and why leaders' personality traits relate to their destructive leadership behavior. The studies that have examined this so far are promising: Leaders' Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, and Honesty-Humility relate negatively to destructive leadership, whereas leaders' Neuroticism and Dark Triad traits relate positively to destructive leadership. Research also indicates that the leaders' personality traits can determine the situations that they enter (*situation activation*) and situational characteristics can affect the strength of the relations of personality traits with destructive leadership (*trait activation*). At last, subordinates' personality traits can shape reactions to the experience of destructive leadership, which is also based on the principles of *trait activation*. These reviewed findings are summarized in the model depicted in Figure 15.2. Researchers can use this model as inspiration for future studies and practitioners can apply the reviewed findings in job selection, job advertisements, and job design to reduce levels of destructive leadership.

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