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THE DARK SIDE OF SUCCESS: WHY DO ORGANIZATIONS TOLERATE DESTRUCTIVE LEADERSHIP?

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Abstract: Organizations frequently evaluate managers according to financial performance and the achievement of organizational targets, while the methods used to obtain these results may receive considerably less attention. This article examines the factors that may allow destructive leadership to persist within organizations through a conceptual narrative review. The analysis draws on Einarsen et al.'s definition of destructive leadership and the Toxic Triangle model developed by Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser. Three possible organizational mechanisms are examined: performance-based evaluation systems, employee silence, and organizational dependence on individual managers. Previous meta-analyses have identified negative associations between destructive leadership and employees' job satisfaction, work commitment, and subjective well-being. Furthermore, longitudinal research suggests that the relationship between destructive leadership and employee behavior may be reciprocal. The hospitality industry is considered as a relevant context for examining the possible consequences of narrow performance evaluation and employee silence. The article also identifies research gaps concerning Kazakhstan. Rather than establishing causal relationships, the study develops three hypotheses and proposes directions for future empirical research. Its central argument is that managerial effectiveness should be assessed not only by the results achieved but also by the methods through which those results are obtained.

Keywords: destructive leadership, tyrannical leadership, Toxic Triangle, employee silence, organizational performance evaluation, hospitality industry, Kazakhstan.

INTRODUCTION

If a manager meets departmental targets, reduces operational costs, and increases company revenue, can that manager automatically be considered effective? What if these results are achieved by creating an environment in which employees are afraid to express their opinions, remain silent about workplace problems, and gradually consider leaving the organization?

Organizations expect managers to deliver measurable results. However, the methods used to achieve these results are not always reflected in managerial performance evaluation systems. This creates an important organizational question: can a manager be considered successful when financial performance improves but the working environment deteriorates?

Research on destructive leadership has developed substantially. For example, the meta-analysis conducted by Mackey et al. (2021) included 418 samples (k = 418, N = 123,511). The negative consequences of destructive leadership for employees have been widely examined. Nevertheless, another question deserves attention: why do organizations sometimes fail to recognize destructive managerial behavior, or why do they continue to retain managers even when such behavior becomes visible?

This article approaches the problem from an organizational perspective rather than focusing exclusively on the personal characteristics of destructive leaders.

The article makes three contributions. First, it examines organizational tolerance through the concepts of a conducive environment and susceptible followers within the Toxic Triangle framework. Second, it considers longitudinal research when discussing the possible direction of relationships between destructive leadership and employee behavior. Third, it identifies research gaps relevant to the hospitality industry and the context of Kazakhstan.

The article is structured as follows. First, the review method and theoretical foundations are presented. Next, three organizational mechanisms that may contribute to the persistence of destructive leadership are examined. The discussion then considers the consequences of destructive leadership, its relevance to the hospitality industry, and the cultural context of Kazakhstan. Finally, practical implications, limitations, and directions for future research are presented.

1. METHODOLOGY

This article uses a conceptual narrative review rather than a systematic literature review. The selected publications include major meta-analyses of destructive leadership (Schyns & Schilling, 2013; Mackey et al., 2021; Li et al., 2024; Palmer et al., 2024), foundational conceptual studies (Einarsen et al., 2007; Padilla et al., 2007), research on employee silence (Lam & Xu, 2019; Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Edmondson, 1999), and selected studies related to the hospitality industry and cultural context.

The reviewed literature provides substantial evidence concerning the negative outcomes of destructive leadership. However, direct empirical evidence connecting organizational evaluation systems and dependence on individual managers with the persistence of destructive leadership was limited among the selected sources.

Therefore, these mechanisms are presented as analytical propositions rather than established empirical findings. They are formulated as hypotheses that can be tested through future organizational research.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. The concept of destructive leadership

The literature uses several related concepts to describe harmful managerial behavior, including abusive supervision, tyrannical leadership, toxic leadership, and derailed leadership.

This article adopts the definition proposed by Einarsen, Aasland, and Skogstad (2007). According to these authors, destructive leadership refers to systematic and repeated behavior by a leader, supervisor, or manager that undermines the organization's legitimate interests by damaging its goals, tasks, resources, or effectiveness, or by negatively affecting subordinates' motivation, well-being, and job satisfaction.

The terms *systematic* and *repeated* are particularly important. Strict management, demanding performance standards, criticism of mistakes, and the enforcement of workplace discipline do not automatically constitute destructive leadership. The defining characteristics are the repeated nature of the behavior and the harm it causes to employees or the organization.

Tepper (2000) describes abusive supervision as employees' perceptions of their supervisor's sustained hostile verbal and non-verbal behavior, excluding physical contact. Abusive supervision is therefore one form of destructive leadership.

Because the terminology used in the literature overlaps, this article uses destructive leadership as its main conceptual term. The term toxic is retained when referring to the original name of the theoretical model discussed below.

2.2. Tyrannical leadership

Einarsen et al. (2007) distinguish several forms of destructive leadership. These include derailed leadership, supportive-disloyal leadership, and tyrannical leadership.

Derailed leadership is directed against both the organization and its employees. Supportive-disloyal leadership acts against organizational interests while remaining supportive of subordinates. Tyrannical leadership, in contrast, is directed toward achieving organizational objectives but uses intimidation, humiliation, or excessive pressure against employees as a means of achieving them.

Tyrannical leadership is particularly relevant to the central argument of this article. A manager may deliver strong organizational results and therefore appear valuable to senior management, while the negative consequences remain concentrated at the employee level.

This creates a potentially misleading organizational perception: if a manager achieves the required results, their management methods may receive insufficient attention. The assumption that successful performance automatically indicates effective leadership may contribute to the persistence of destructive managerial behavior.

2.3. The Toxic Triangle model

Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser (2007) argue that destructive leadership cannot be explained exclusively by the personal characteristics of a leader. Instead, it emerges through the interaction of three elements: destructive leaders, susceptible followers, and conducive environments.

The authors identify two categories of susceptible followers: conformers and colluders. Conformers may support destructive leaders because of personal needs, vulnerability, or a perceived lack of alternatives. Colluders, in contrast, support destructive leaders because doing so may help them achieve their own objectives.

A conducive environment may include organizational instability, perceived threats, certain cultural values such as collectivism, high power distance, and uncertainty avoidance, as well as the absence of effective checks and balances.

The model provides an important theoretical foundation for this article because it shifts attention from individual managerial behavior toward the organizational conditions that may allow such behavior to continue.

The three mechanisms examined in the next section are primarily connected to the conducive environment and susceptible followers components of the model. The personal characteristics of destructive leaders are not the main focus of the present review.

3. WHY DO ORGANIZATIONS TOLERATE DESTRUCTIVE LEADERSHIP?

The following three mechanisms are proposed as possible explanations for why destructive leadership may persist within organizations. They are derived from the Toxic Triangle framework, but their empirical support differs.

3.1. Performance-based evaluation systems

One possible explanation is that organizations may place excessive emphasis on measurable business results when evaluating managerial effectiveness.

Managers are frequently assessed through indicators such as revenue, sales volume, cost reduction, and the achievement of operational targets. Although these indicators are important, they do not necessarily reflect the quality of managerial relationships or the working environment within a team.

Consider a manager who increases departmental sales during a particular quarter. At the same time, employee turnover increases, communication deteriorates, and trust within the team declines. From a financial perspective, the manager may appear successful. However, the organizational consequences of their management approach remain largely invisible in the financial report.

This situation may be related to the concept of a conducive environment proposed by Padilla et al. (2007). The authors identify the absence of effective checks and balances as one of the conditions that may facilitate destructive leadership. If organizational evaluation systems do not consider how managers achieve their results, an important element of managerial accountability may be missing.

It should be emphasized that the reviewed sources do not establish a direct empirical relationship between performance evaluation criteria and the persistence of destructive leadership. Therefore, the following proposition is formulated as a hypothesis:

H1: Destructive leadership is likely to persist for longer in organizations that evaluate managerial effectiveness exclusively through financial and operational performance indicators.

3.2. Employee silence

A second possible mechanism is employee silence.

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Organizations often depend on employees to report inappropriate managerial behavior, workplace conflicts, and operational problems. When employees do not communicate their concerns, important information may never reach senior management.

Morrison and Milliken (2000) describe organizational silence as a collective organizational phenomenon in which employees withhold information or concerns that could contribute to organizational change. Their approach demonstrates that silence is not simply an individual decision but may also reflect the broader organizational environment.

Edmondson (1999) introduces the concept of psychological safety, defined as a shared belief that a team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking. Psychological safety creates conditions in which employees can ask questions, admit mistakes, and express concerns without expecting negative interpersonal consequences.

Lam and Xu (2019) examine the relationship between abusive supervision and employee silence in the context of power imbalance. Their study distinguishes between defensive silence and acquiescent silence.

Defensive silence occurs when employees deliberately withhold information because they fear negative consequences. Acquiescent silence reflects resignation or the belief that expressing an opinion will not make a meaningful difference.

The distinction is important because these two forms of silence require different organizational responses. In situations involving fear, employees need confidentiality and protection from retaliation. In situations involving resignation, organizations need to demonstrate that employee feedback can lead to visible improvements.

However, employee silence should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of destructive leadership. Other factors, including time pressure, insufficient communication channels, or limited motivation to provide suggestions, may also contribute to silence.

Therefore, silence should be considered a potential warning signal requiring further investigation rather than direct proof of managerial misconduct.

The following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: In departments characterized by higher levels of employee silence, information concerning managerial behavior is less likely to reach senior management, potentially delaying corrective action.

3.3. Organizational dependence on individual managers

A third possible explanation concerns organizational dependence on individual managers.

Padilla et al. (2007) emphasize the role of susceptible followers, particularly colluders, whose interests may be connected to those of destructive leaders.

At the organizational level, dependence may emerge when a manager controls resources that are considered difficult to replace. These resources may include relationships with major corporate clients, specialized professional knowledge, or responsibility for important operational processes.

When senior management believes that replacing a particular manager would create significant financial or operational difficulties, complaints concerning that manager's behavior may receive less attention.

For example, imagine a hotel manager who maintains long-term relationships with several important corporate clients. Employees may report inappropriate behavior, but senior management may hesitate to intervene because replacing the manager could temporarily disrupt those business relationships.

This example illustrates a possible conflict between short-term operational stability and long-term organizational well-being.

The reviewed literature does not directly establish this mechanism through organizational data. Therefore, it should be treated as an analytical proposition requiring empirical investigation.

Managerial contribution and managerial behavior should be evaluated separately. Strong performance in one area should not automatically compensate for harmful conduct in another.

The following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: The greater an organization's dependence on an individual manager, the lower its likelihood of taking corrective action in response to that manager's destructive behavior.

4. CONSEQUENCES OF DESTRUCTIVE LEADERSHIP AND THE DIRECTION OF CAUSALITY

The consequences of destructive leadership have been examined through several major meta-analyses.

Schyns and Schilling (2013) synthesized 57 studies and identified associations between destructive leadership and various individual and organizational outcomes. However, most of the studies included in their analysis used cross-sectional research designs, which limit the possibility of establishing causal relationships.

Mackey et al. (2021) examined the nomological network of destructive leadership using 418 samples and a total sample size of 123,511 participants. Their meta-analysis provides a broad overview of the relationships between destructive leadership and different employee outcomes.

Palmer et al. (2024) conducted a relative-weight analysis examining destructive leadership and employee personality in relation to subjective well-being. Their findings indicated that destructive leadership accounted for approximately 71% of the explained variance in negative subjective well-being, with a total R^2 of 19.3%. Big Five personality traits accounted for approximately 29% of the explained variance. For positive subjective well-being, personality traits were stronger predictors.

An important contribution to understanding the direction of these relationships comes from Li et al. (2024). Their meta-analysis included 104 independent prospective and longitudinal studies from 82 articles, covering a total of 30,314 participants.

The authors identified lagged negative effects of destructive leadership on behavioral outcomes, including organizational citizenship behavior, workplace deviance, counterproductive work behavior, and withdrawal. Negative effects were also identified for attitudinal outcomes such as job satisfaction and work commitment.

However, their cross-lagged analysis produced an important finding. After controlling for autoregressive effects, destructive leadership was not significantly associated over time with employees' negative behavior, whereas employees' negative behavior was associated over time with destructive leadership.

This finding introduces an important consideration for organizational management. The relationship between managerial behavior and employee outcomes should not automatically be interpreted as a one-directional causal process.

For example, destructive managerial behavior may contribute to declining employee performance, but poor employee performance may also lead managers to increase monitoring and control.

Consequently, organizations should avoid immediately attributing every negative departmental outcome to a manager without examining the underlying causes and direction of the relationship.

Employee turnover, repeated complaints, and declining trust should be treated as potential warning indicators that require further investigation.

5. DESTRUCTIVE LEADERSHIP IN THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY

The hospitality industry provides a relevant context for examining the organizational mechanisms discussed in this article.

Hotels and restaurants rely heavily on direct interaction between employees and guests. Their operations frequently involve shift-based work, clearly defined managerial responsibilities, and immediate performance indicators such as sales, operating costs, and service efficiency.

These characteristics are presented as relevant industry features rather than universal characteristics of every hospitality organization.

In such an environment, a manager may achieve strong operational results while maintaining an unhealthy working atmosphere. For example, a restaurant manager may successfully increase

daily sales while employees experience excessive pressure, limited opportunities to express concerns, or repeated conflicts within the team.

This situation may make destructive leadership difficult to identify when organizational evaluation focuses primarily on financial performance.

Employee silence may create an additional challenge. Front-line employees are often directly involved in guest interactions and may observe service-related problems before senior management becomes aware of them. If employees are afraid to report concerns, information about both managerial behavior and service quality may remain within the department.

Empirical research in the hospitality sector provides some support for examining these relationships.

Trần (2026) analyzed survey data from 249 hotel employees in Hanoi. The study identified a mediating role of work engagement in the relationship between abusive supervision and turnover intention, as well as a moderating role of perceived organizational support.

These findings provide a basis for connecting managerial behavior with employee retention. Nevertheless, evidence obtained from hotel employees in one city cannot be directly generalized to the hospitality industry in Kazakhstan.

Employee turnover may also create additional organizational costs related to recruitment, training, and onboarding. Remaining employees may experience increased workloads, potentially affecting operational stability and service delivery.

Whether these consequences directly influence service quality in Kazakhstan's hospitality industry requires further empirical investigation.

6. THE KAZAKHSTAN CONTEXT

The cultural context of Kazakhstan is relevant to the discussion of employee silence and organizational power relationships.

Some secondary sources presenting Hofstede's cultural dimensions report relatively high scores for Kazakhstan in power distance (88) and uncertainty avoidance (88), alongside a comparatively low score in individualism (20) (Nadirova, 2024).

Such a cultural profile may appear consistent with certain characteristics of a conducive environment described by Padilla et al. (2007), including collectivism, high power distance, and uncertainty avoidance.

However, research concerning cultural values in Kazakhstan and other post-Soviet countries presents a more complex picture.

Ardichvili and Kuchinke (2002) examined leadership styles and cultural values among more than 4,000 managers and subordinates in Kazakhstan, Russia, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan, comparing their findings with Germany and the United States. Their study reported substantially lower power distance in the former Soviet countries than might be expected from some commonly cited cultural profiles.

Similarly, Temirbekova et al. (2014), examining student samples from four post-Soviet countries, found that Kazakhstan was characterized by comparatively high individualism rather than high power distance.

These differences may reflect variations in research methods, sample characteristics, and measurement approaches. Furthermore, national cultural averages cannot necessarily describe the internal culture of every organization.

It is therefore important not to assume that all employees or organizations in Kazakhstan share the same attitudes toward hierarchy and managerial authority.

Lam and Xu (2019) measured power-distance orientation at the individual employee level. This suggests that future research in Kazakhstan should also examine employees' individual orientations rather than treating power distance as a fixed characteristic of the entire national workforce.

Within the scope of the English-language search conducted for this article, no empirical study directly examining destructive leadership in Kazakhstan's hotel and restaurant industry was identified.

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This observation reflects the limitations of the search rather than proof that such research does not exist. Additional examination of Kazakh- and Russian-language publications is necessary.

7. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The mechanisms discussed in this article suggest several possible directions for improving organizational evaluation and managerial accountability.

These recommendations are theoretical implications derived from the reviewed literature. Their effectiveness should be examined through future empirical research.

1. Evaluate both results and management processes.

Organizations should assess not only financial performance but also the methods through which managers achieve their targets. Managerial performance scorecards could include team turnover, employee trust, and the quality of internal communication and feedback.

2. Establish safe employee feedback channels.

Employees should have access to independent reporting mechanisms that allow them to communicate concerns without approaching their direct manager. Confidentiality and protection from retaliation are particularly important when silence is driven by fear. When employees remain silent because they believe their opinions will not matter, organizations should demonstrate that feedback can produce meaningful outcomes (Lam & Xu, 2019).

3. Monitor early warning indicators.

Repeated complaints, increasing employee turnover, and declining levels of team trust should be considered potential indicators of organizational problems. In accordance with the findings of Li et al. (2024), organizations should investigate the direction of relationships before assigning responsibility.

4. Develop managerial competencies.

Organizations should invest in managers' communication, conflict-resolution, feedback, and fair task-allocation skills. These competencies should complement managerial performance rather than replace the ability to achieve operational objectives.

5. Reduce organizational dependence on individual managers.

Important client relationships and operational knowledge should be maintained at the organizational level rather than concentrated in one individual. This may reduce the perceived cost of replacing a manager whose behavior creates organizational risks. When destructive behavior is confirmed through an appropriate investigation, corrective measures should be selected according to the circumstances and may range from professional coaching to formal disciplinary action.

8. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This article has several limitations.

First, the study uses a narrative review rather than a systematic literature review. Publications were selected purposively, which may introduce selection bias.

Second, effect sizes from the reviewed meta-analyses are not discussed in sufficient detail for direct comparison. Future research should examine the original publications more extensively and compare their statistical results.

Third, the three mechanisms proposed in this article are hypotheses rather than empirically confirmed explanations. In particular, the discussion of performance-based evaluation systems and organizational dependence on individual managers relies on analytical reasoning rather than direct organizational data.

Fourth, the hospitality industry is represented by a limited number of empirical studies. Only one sector-specific study was examined in detail.

Fifth, the review did not identify direct empirical evidence concerning destructive leadership in Kazakhstan's hotel and restaurant industry within the scope of the English-language search.

Finally, the article is conceptual and does not establish causal relationships between the proposed mechanisms and the persistence of destructive leadership.

Future research could address these limitations through several directions:

- Testing hypotheses H1–H3 in hotels and restaurants in Kazakhstan using longitudinal research designs and data collected from employees, direct supervisors, and senior management.

- Examining managerial performance evaluation documents to determine whether organizations include employee-related and process-based indicators alongside financial results.
- Measuring different forms of employee silence, including defensive and acquiescent silence, while assessing individual power-distance orientation.
- Investigating the direction of relationships between managerial behavior and employee outcomes through cross-lagged research designs.
- Comparing organizations with different management structures to examine whether dependence on individual managers influences organizational responses to destructive behavior.

Such research would contribute to a more detailed understanding of how organizational structures, managerial evaluation systems, and employee behavior interact in the hospitality industry and other sectors of Kazakhstan's economy.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined why destructive leadership may persist within organizations despite its documented negative consequences for employees and organizational outcomes.

Drawing on the Toxic Triangle framework, three possible organizational mechanisms have been proposed: performance-based evaluation systems, employee silence, and organizational dependence on individual managers.

The reviewed meta-analyses demonstrate negative associations between destructive leadership and employees' job satisfaction, work commitment, and subjective well-being. At the same time, longitudinal research indicates that the relationship between destructive leadership and employee behavior may be reciprocal, emphasizing the importance of examining organizational situations rather than assuming a single causal direction.

The hospitality industry provides a relevant context for further investigation because managerial decisions, employee working conditions, and service delivery are closely connected. However, direct empirical evidence concerning destructive leadership in Kazakhstan's hospitality sector remains limited within the scope of the literature reviewed.

The main practical implication is that managerial success should not be measured exclusively through financial and operational results. Organizations should also consider how managers achieve those results and how their behavior affects employees.

Ultimately, a manager who achieves short-term business objectives at the expense of employee well-being may create risks that are not immediately visible in financial reports. Recognizing these risks requires broader evaluation systems, safe communication channels, and organizational accountability.

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