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COMMENTARY

Beyond incompetence: Why destructive leadership research must make the right distinctions

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Ducheyne and De Fruyt (2026) make a timely and worthwhile case for distinguishing destructive or toxic leadership from mere incompetence. Their central point, that not all poor leadership is malicious, and that conceptual precision matters, is important. As the authors argue, conflating incompetent leadership with destructive leadership risks obscuring important differences in intent, mechanisms, and consequences. This can potentially lead to organizations misdiagnosing leadership problems and applying inappropriate interventions. At the same time, the distinction Ducheyne and De Fruyt advocate may be better understood as a reminder for the leadership literature to correct course rather than as a conceptual breakthrough.

The central conjecture of the target article echoes a similar call advanced more than a decade ago by Krasikova et al. (2013) in their comprehensive review of destructive leadership. These authors highlighted persistent problems such as unclear construct boundaries, the proliferation of labels, and the absence of a unified framework. Notably, they argued that future research on destructive leadership should distinguish between destructive *intentions* and destructive *outcomes*, a distinction that closely parallels the difference between well-intentioned but ineffective leadership (incompetence) and leadership driven by selfish or hostile motives (destructive leadership).

Krasikova et al.'s insights opened the door to a more differentiated research agenda attentive to the distinct antecedents and consequences of destructive forms of leadership. Accordingly, further differentiation of destructive leadership is warranted given what research already suggests about the personality profiles and behavioral patterns of destructive leaders. Although Ducheyne and De Fruyt call for greater conceptual precision, their framework still relies on the broad category of "destructive leadership," thereby retaining some of the very construct conflation they seek to overcome. This category may encompass distinct motives, traits, and behavioral patterns, and treating it as unitary risks obscuring meaningful differences in antecedents, mechanisms, and consequences. To be clear, this tendency is not unique to their article. It also appears in prior reviews of destructive leadership (e.g., Mackey et al., 2021), dark personality (e.g., Moshagen et al., 2018), and workplace deviance more broadly (e.g., O'Boyle et al., 2012). At the same time, this is not an argument for endless splitting or construct proliferation. Distinctions are most useful when they improve explanation, prediction, or intervention, not when they merely multiply labels (which can also be an issue in this literature; see Schyns & Schilling, 2013).

This point becomes especially clear when considering personality antecedents. If destructive leadership is not a unitary phenomenon, then its dispositional roots should not be modeled as though they were. Research increasingly suggests that dark traits may be correlated, but they are not interchangeable (Harms, 2022; Muris et al., 2017; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Treating them as equivalent simply because they are aversive or moderately associated may simplify measurement,

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but it comes at a real explanatory cost. A leader driven by grandiose self-enhancement is not the same as one marked by callous, predatory impulses. Nor does it resemble the cold machinations of a cynical strategist. Narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism point to distinct pathways into leadership, different relational dynamics once in power, and divergent consequences for followers and organizations (Harms et al., 2024). Meta-analytic evidence from studies investigating the role of dark traits in leader behaviors and outcomes clearly shows that leader narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism result in meaningfully different patterns of association with leadership emergence, effectiveness, and follower perceptions (Grijalva et al., 2015; Landay et al., 2019; Marbut et al., 2025). These patterns suggest that dark personality traits do not simply represent interchangeable indicators of a general "dark core" but instead reflect distinct motivational orientations that shape leadership behavior in unique ways. If the underlying personality architecture differs, then so too should the motives, behaviors, and conditions under which these traits help or harm leaders.

The same construct-validity issue appears at the behavioral level. If bullying, micromanagement, intimidation, rash decision-making, and chronic failure to provide direction are all folded into one destructive leadership bucket, researchers risk obscuring differences in processes that matter for explanation and intervention. Shaw et al. (2011) showed that harmful leadership spans a range of distinguishable patterns, including bullying, micromanagement, rash decision-making, failure to provide clarity, and sheer incompetence. Subsequent work by Cho and Harms (2026) suggests that these behaviors do not merely look different; they also produce different emotional and behavioral reactions in followers. Bullying is more likely to evoke fear and turnover intentions, whereas micromanagement more often generates frustration and withdrawal, with these effects further shaped by follower personality. Once again, the implication is straightforward: The question is no longer whether destructive leadership is harmful, but how particular forms of harmful leadership operate within leader–follower systems and organizational contexts (Padilla et al., 2007). More broadly, this points to the need to move beyond broad classification and correlational aggregation toward greater process differentiation in the study of destructive leadership (Wood et al., 2019).

In conclusion, distinguishing incompetence from destructive leadership is an important starting point, but it should not end the field's work of conceptual clarification. The deeper issue is construct validity. Once scholars acknowledge that destructive leadership is not merely incompetence with worse outcomes, they must also ask whether different destructive processes truly share the same motives, antecedents, behaviors, and consequences. Evidence on leader personality and behavioral patterns suggests that they often do not. Consequently, a more complete science of destructive leadership will require distinctions that are theoretically meaningful, empirically defensible, and practically useful. In practice, this means moving beyond the tendency to treat dark personality antecedents as interchangeable simply because they are correlated and interpersonally aversive. Similarly, future scholarship should examine distinct destructive leadership behaviors and behavioral clusters rather than collapsing them into a single overall score. To better understand, prevent, and intervene, the field not only needs more distinctions, it needs the right ones.

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