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COMMENTARY

Dysfunctional leadership as a dynamic and relational process

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The focal article by Ducheyne and De Fruyt (2026) calls for a clear conceptual distinction between toxic and incompetent leadership, proposing that these categories can guide research and practice by reducing ambiguity. Although we agree that this differentiation offers useful conceptual clarity, we contend that it becomes unstable in its application. Dysfunctional leadership unfolds through both temporal fluctuation in leader behavior and relational variation in follower appraisal. These intertwined processes suggest that the same leader may appear toxic in one moment and merely incompetent in another, depending on shifting behavioral cues and the relational context in which followers interpret them. From this perspective, dysfunctional leadership is not a fixed category but an emergent pattern shaped by ongoing leader–follower dynamics.

We propose that dysfunctional leadership is best understood as a dynamic, episodic, and relational process. Leaders move across behavioral patterns over time as stress, resource depletion, situational triggers, and relationship quality evolve. Followers, in turn, make sense of these behaviors through their own goals, emotions, and relationships with the leader, producing variable interpretations of the same actions. Because both leader behavior and follower appraisal fluctuate, a static distinction between toxic and incompetent leadership risks obscuring how dysfunctional leadership actually develops and is experienced. Although Ducheyne and De Fruyt's distinction provides a valuable starting point, a more comprehensive understanding requires attention to within-person variability and the relational appraisals that shape organizational life.

The dynamic process of dysfunctional leadership

A key aspect of the author's framework is the idea that toxic leadership reflects a stable and repetitive pattern of harmful behavior, whereas incompetence is unintentional and skill based. However, this distinction overlooks how dysfunctional behavior fluctuates based on leaders' internal resources and stress levels. Conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989) suggests that resource depletion impairs self-regulation, making harmful behaviors more likely under strain. Thus, dysfunctional leadership can be episodic, situationally triggered, and subject to within-person variability, challenging the assumption that harmful behavior can be reliably distinguished based on stability or intent.

Daily fluctuations in leaders' resources further illustrate this point. Research on abusive supervision demonstrates that behaviors vary daily as a function of a leader's internal resources, such as sleep (Barnes et al., 2015), and McClean et al., (2019) show that stressors can trigger short-term spikes in dysfunctional behavior. Further meta-analytic research also suggests that stress can impair a leader's cognitive functioning and increase aggressive responding (Harms et al., 2017),

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meaning that the same leader may oscillate between behaviors that appear toxic and behaviors that appear incompetent depending on the demands they face.

Beyond stress-related depletion, several other situational triggers can elicit dysfunctional leadership, in which these derailers often remain hidden and only emerge when situational pressure increases (Hogan & Hogan 2001). One such trigger is subordinate performance, which can provoke reactive or punitive responses when leaders interpret underperformance as a threat to their competence or how others perceive them (Shen et al., 2021). Additionally, performance pressure can further narrow leaders' attention to short-term outcomes, increasing the likelihood of abusive behaviors targeted at subordinates (Mawritz et al., 2013). Other high-pressure periods, like organizational change or instability, can further elicit leadership inconsistency, which acts as a unique stressor for employees (Klebe et al., 2022).

Together, these situational forces illustrate that dysfunctional leadership often reflects contextual pressures that elicit maladaptive responses, rather than stable traits or enduring intentions. If harmful behaviors can fluctuate within leaders, then the authors' requirement of repetitive, long-term behavior may be difficult to apply. Leaders who exhibit episodic toxicity may be misclassified as merely incompetent, whereas leaders who are more competent may be labeled as toxic during periods of situational stress. These patterns show that dysfunctional leadership is not a fixed attribute but an evolving process shaped by shifting behavioral cues and contextual pressures.

The importance of follower perceptions

The dynamic fluctuations described above do not occur independently, as their meaning, impact, and escalation depend on how followers interpret them. Ducheyne and De Fruyt do emphasize that toxic leadership is shaped, in part, by follower perceptions, which is an important point, but it further complicates their argument. Even with this acknowledgment, their operational definition still relies heavily on leader intent and behavioral patterns, which suggests that leadership can't be defined independently of follower appraisal. A dynamic relational view suggests that follower perceptions are central to how dysfunctional leadership is experienced and distinguished.

Cognitive appraisal theory (Lazarus & Folkman 1984) and affective events theory (Weiss & Cropanzano 1996) both emphasize that individuals interpret the same event differently based on goals, motives, and emotional states. Applied to leadership, this means that the same behavior may be labeled as either toxic, incompetent, or appropriate depending on the follower. For example, Tepper et al., (2011) show that followers' justice orientations shape whether they interpret corrective feedback as abusive. Additionally, employees with low core self-evaluations are more likely to interpret a supervisor's behavior as abusive (Wu & Hu 2009). If perceptions of leader behavior vary across individuals and situations, then leadership labels are inherently tied to context.

Leader-member exchange (LMX) theory further illustrates how relational quality shapes interpretations of leader behavior (Graen & Uhl-Bien 1995). High-quality LMX relationships foster trust, positive affect, and benevolent attributions, which buffer negative interpretations of leader behaviors (Lapointe et al., 2020). In contrast, low-quality LMX relationships heighten sensitivity to threat and increase the likelihood that followers interpret the same behaviors as hostile or abusive (Pelletier, 2012; Xu et al., 2012). Because LMX is co-constructed and fluctuates over time, these relational processes introduce additional variability into how dysfunctional leadership is experienced, reinforcing the argument that dysfunctional leadership is inherently dynamic and relational.

The manifestations of behaviors and related outcomes, in turn, differ based on this relational variability. If follower appraisal determines how behaviors are labeled, then the distinction between leadership types cannot be stable across individuals and contexts. The authors' focus on

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intent as a differentiator can also be problematic, as interpretations of intent are inherently shaped by relational dynamics. Dysfunctional leadership is not simply a property of the leader; rather, it emerges from the interaction between leader behavior, follower interpretation, and relational context. Because follower appraisals shift with goals, emotions, and relationship quality, they introduce additional variability into how leader behavior is experienced. Ultimately, follower appraisal is what transforms fluctuating leader behavior into experiences of dysfunction, making perception a central mechanism in how dysfunctional leadership is recognized and sustained.

Theoretical and practical implications

A dynamic relational perspective complicates the boundary between toxic and incompetent leadership. If leaders oscillate between harmful and ineffective behaviors depending on situational pressures, and if followers' interpretations shift based on relational context, then categorical distinctions become difficult to apply in practice. Theoretical models of dysfunctional leadership should therefore incorporate within-person variability, situational triggers, and follower appraisal as core mechanisms rather than peripheral considerations. This shift also calls for longitudinal and within-person research designs capable of capturing the episodic nature of dysfunctional leadership.

Recognizing dysfunctional leadership as dynamic and relational has practical implications for how organizations select, develop, and intervene with leaders. Selection systems should assess not only stable traits but also potential derailers under responses to stress and pressure, where episodic toxicity is most likely to emerge. Development efforts can focus on identifying situational triggers and strengthening leaders' capacity to regulate behavior under stress to get ahead of potential derailment (Conger, 2024). Organizations should also be cautious of rigidly labeling leaders as toxic or incompetent, as these labels may oversimplify complex behavioral patterns and lead to misguided interventions. Finally, follower-feedback systems should account for relational context, acknowledging that perceptions of the same behavior may diverge depending on LMX quality.

Conclusion

Dysfunctional leadership cannot be fully understood through static categories alone. Although distinguishing toxic from incompetent leadership offers conceptual clarity, we suggest that dysfunction emerges through shifting behavioral patterns and the relational interpretations that accompany them. Recognizing this dynamic interplay reframes dysfunctional leadership as an evolving process rather than a fixed type. This perspective not only clarifies why rigid diagnostic labels may be problematic but also highlights the importance of attending to situational triggers, within-person variability, and follow–leader relationships. By highlighting these dynamics, we extend the focal article's contribution and offer a framework that better aligns with how dysfunction actually unfolds in organizational life.

Competing interests. The authors have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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