Industrial and Organizational Psychology (2026), **19**, 271–274
doi:10.1017/iop.2026.10101

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

COMMENTARY

A distinction with little difference: Incompetent leadership is destructive

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In their focal article, Ducheyne and De Fruyt (2026) argue that the lack of distinction between toxic/destructive and incompetent leadership is hindering research progress and creating challenges for practitioners. We agree that many "dark" leadership constructs are often conflated but contend that both toxic and incompetent leadership can be equally harmful for employees, teams, and organizations. Further, we argue that placing the responsibility of "correctly" labeling poor leadership on followers is unfair and could cause further harm. Rather than emphasizing the distinction between leader incompetence and toxicity, we propose a behavior-and outcome-centered framework. We recommend organizations focus on measurable behaviors and outcomes rather than relying on perceptions of poor leadership, arguing that a leader's competence or intentions matter less than the consequences of their behaviors.

First, Ducheyne and De Fruyt rely on the leader's *intentions* to differentiate toxic and incompetent leadership. However, behavioral intentions are not only challenging to capture but are less relevant than the outcomes that result from behaviors (or a lack thereof). For example, laissez-faire leadership, defined as "the absence of leadership, the avoidance of intervention, or both" (Bass & Avolio, 1994, p. 20), demonstrates how leader incompetence can be just as destructive as malicious intent, producing negative employee outcomes comparable to those generated by actively toxic leaders (e.g., role conflict, role ambiguity, interpersonal conflict; Skogstad et al., 2007). Further, failing to support individuals often results in increased anxiety, increased role strain, and well-being decrements (Skogstad et al., 2007). Thus, laissez-faire would not meet the competent leadership dimensions of (a) steer/support the team and (b) steer/support the individual (Table 1, Ducheyne & De Fruyt, 2026).

Relatedly, failing the minimal competencies of (a) creating a safe environment and (b) fostering a climate of trust (Table 1, Ducheyne & De Fruyt, 2026) can set followers up for harm, regardless of whether the harm is intentional or not. An analogy for this would be viewing child welfare cases: Neglect and abuse are treated as similar crimes (Abuse of Children, 2018) despite the caregiver's intentions (i.e., intentional abuse or absentminded neglect). The negative outcomes of these offenses are detrimental to the child, and the consequences are similar. The bottom line is that a leader's failure to cultivate a supportive environment ultimately inflicts damage, regardless of whether the behavior stems from incompetence or intentional harm.

Second, the focal article focuses on *perceptions* of leader behaviors, claiming that the behavior must be "perceived as threatening, intimidating, or discrediting " (p. 13), and the leader must be "experienced as" untrustworthy by others to qualify as toxic (p. 13). This is problematic because perceptions and evaluations of behavior are distinct from behavior itself (see Banks et al., 2023). For example, if a leader engages in toxic actions, such as shifting blame or interpersonal hostility,

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those behaviors are objectively toxic/destructive, regardless of whether subordinates explicitly identify or report them as such. In this case, we argue that subordinate perceptions of toxic or incompetent leadership are secondary to the leader's measurable behaviors.

Perhaps more problematically, this reliance on the followers' perceptions is backward: As I-O psychologists, we are trained to emphasize behaviors and their outcomes when grounding construct validity (e.g., Cronbach & Meehl, 1955; Schmidt & Hunter, 1998), not just the perceived effects of behaviors. Research suggests outcomes of incompetent leadership include a decrement in organizational vision, declines in motivation and productivity, impairment of organizational culture, and negative well-being outcomes (e.g., Bourne, 2025). Thus, instead of debating whether an incompetent leader's actions are deemed toxic by subordinates and/or coworkers, researchers (and practitioners) should focus on the objective behaviors of both incompetent and toxic leaders and evaluate subsequent effects to inform appropriate action.

Last, to address toxic leadership, the authors recommend that organizations provide clear definitions of effective, incompetent, and toxic leadership to reduce ambiguity and protect leaders from "unfounded accusations" (p. 14). We agree that there should be clearer definitions of constructs in the leadership domain to reduce construct proliferation and move toward construct clarity (Mackey et al., 2021). However, the authors' reasoning for doing so seemingly shifts the responsibility for identifying dark leadership onto followers—those who are often most vulnerable to power asymmetries, fear of retaliation, and the normalization of harmful behavior. Placing the burden of definition, distinction, and reporting on more vulnerable personnel creates inequity and heightens the risk that subordinates will not be believed.

Recommendations for organizations

We propose the following recommendations for organizations. First, we agree with the authors that leaders are not infallible and leadership monitoring systems should be multifaceted (e.g., trust-based measures, behavioral evidence, and team outcomes data), allowing for a holistic perspective. However, we argue organizations must treat subordinate protection as a foundational priority, embedding it directly into their accountability structures rather than treating it as a secondary concern. In practice, this means establishing confidential reporting channels before conflict arises rather than in response to a concern. Regardless of the result of an internal investigation, the reporter's confidentiality must be protected, and their continued employment and standing within the organization should be actively monitored for potential signs of retaliation.

Second, investigations should be behavior specific. When a concern is raised, the guiding questions should be which specific behavior occurred, how frequently it occurred, and what the documented outcomes were for the individuals and the team. Determining behavior and outcomes is more concrete and actionable than debating whether a behavior is perceived as "toxic" or not. For example, if a leader publicly humiliates an employee in a meeting, it can erode team psychological safety and increase turnover intentions even if the targeted employee dismisses it as "just how things are done here." This has been shown in meeting science literature: Harshly critiquing one another during meetings is linked to lower perceived meeting effectiveness and productivity, negatively influencing team and organizational outcomes (Kauffeld & Lehmann-Willenbrock, 2012).

Further, instead of categorizing a leader as either "toxic" or just "incompetent," HR teams should focus on identifying the specific behaviors that harm individuals and teams, including consistently and/or severely belittling others, interrupting, or publicly criticizing subordinates. This way, they can further examine whether those specific behaviors were associated with measurable outcomes, such as increased turnover, sick leave, or declining team performance. Additionally, behavioral documentation is more legally defensible and less susceptible to

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perceptual disagreement among witnesses. To aid in this effort, organizations should first establish operational definitions for specific harmful leader behaviors (e.g., what constitutes public ridicule) to allow for both interorganizational measurement flexibility and clarity in measurement of behavior across the organization.

Third, targeted interventions such as training or coaching should be based on behavioral patterns (e.g., Lacerenza et al., 2017). Developmental coaching should be structured around specific behavioral targets, such as reducing interrupting behavior, increasing the frequency of individual check-ins, or improving the delivery of performance feedback, with predefined benchmarks and timelines for reassessment. The outcomes should be carefully and systematically monitored. If a leader's behavior does not improve within a reasonable period of time, that evidence should directly inform the next step rather than allowing indefinite continuation of training or coaching that is not productive.

Finally, organizations must avoid the tendency to "pass the buck" by transferring problematic leaders to another team or department without accountability and intervention. This practice creates the perfect storm that allows destructive leadership to persist and spread. This pattern is well documented in institutional contexts such as education and healthcare, where administrators have historically reassigned problematic personnel rather than addressing the issues at hand (Smith & Fredricks-Lowman, 2020). In practice, organizations should require that any lateral transfer of a leader with documented behavioral concerns be accompanied by a formal plan that includes the receiving supervisor's awareness of prior concerns, a targeted behavioral intervention, continued behavioral monitoring, and clear conditions under which the transfer may be reversed. If the targeted behavioral intervention fails to result in improvement, removal from the leadership role and/or organization may be necessary, regardless of the leader's performance on other metrics, as retaining a destructive leader who delivers short-term results enables continued harm (Padilla et al., 2007). Accountability must ultimately be behavior and outcome driven: If the behavior persists and harm continues, the organization's obligation to its employees outweighs its investment in any individual leader.

Concluding remarks

We commend the authors' efforts to separate seemingly conflicting leadership constructs. However, we feel the proposed solution falls short. By separating toxic/destructive leadership from incompetent leadership, we risk introducing a new problem: requiring recipients of harmful leadership to "accurately perceive," name, and appropriately report their experience before action can be taken. By reorienting to a behavior-and outcome-based framework, we offer practitioners and academics a more empirically defensible and practically humane path to addressing issues arising from harmful leadership.

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Cite this article: Walters, Z. A. & Kreamer, L. (2026). A distinction with little difference: Incompetent leadership is destructive. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology* **19**, 271–274. https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2026.10101

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