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COMMENTARY

Destructive leadership versus leader ineffectiveness: Leveraging arguments from prior research to clarify the distinction and construct boundaries

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The argument that destructive leadership (DL) should be distinguished from ineffective leadership is important and timely (Ducheyne & De Fruyt, 2026). At the same time, this distinction has been articulated previously in the literature. In particular, Krasikova et al. (2013) proposed a theoretical framework that explicitly differentiated DL from ineffective leadership and identified the intentional nature of harmdoing as the key demarcation between the two forms of leadership (see the section titled *Destructive Leadership Versus Ineffective Leadership*, pp. 1314–1315). In this commentary, we build on that earlier work and clarify conceptual issues that are central to distinguishing DL from leader ineffectiveness. Specifically, we: (a) discuss definitional issues related to the construct domain of DL; (b) explain why the focal article's definition of DL, which allows DL to be either intentional or unintentional, blurs the theoretical boundary between DL and ineffective leadership; and (c) posit that ineffective leadership is better conceptualized as the low end of the broader leadership effectiveness continuum rather than as a distinct construct.

Destructive leadership: Construct scope and boundaries

Building on prior work (Einarsen et al., 2007; Kelloway et al., 2005; Lipman-Blumen, 2005), Krasikova et al. (2013, p. 1310) defined DL "as volitional behavior by a leader that can harm or intends to harm a leader's organization and/or followers by (a) encouraging followers 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 followers, regardless of justifications for such behavior." Krasikova et al. (2013) further proposed that DL should be distinguished from counterproductive work behaviors (CWB) or other deviant behaviors (e.g., bullying) performed by individuals in leadership roles and drew a line between DL and leader (in)effectiveness. The key points pertinent to these distinctions are: (a) unlike CWB or any other deviant behavior, which do not involve leading, DL is harmdoing embedded in the process of leading, and can be manifested in the use of either harmful methods of influence and/or engaging followers in the pursuit of destructive objectives; (b) DL reflects leader behaviors and goals they encourage followers to pursue, not the outcomes of leader behaviors and goal pursuits; and (c) unlike ineffective leadership, DL is *intentionally* harmful (this last item is where our

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conceptualization does not align with the focal article arguing that DL can be intentionally or unintentionally harmful). We now elaborate on these points.

Destructive leadership is harmdoing embedded in the process of leading

DL is a form of leadership. So, it should be conceptualized and empirically studied as a form of leadership. Leadership may be defined as "the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives" (Yukl, 2013, p. 7). A critical point that follows from this definition and earlier work on the nature of leadership is that not everything individuals in formal leadership roles do is necessarily an act of leadership (Kotter, 1990). Given that DL is a form of leadership, *not all harmful behaviors of individuals in leadership roles should be considered acts of DL* (Krasikova et al., 2013). Abusing, threatening, intimidating, or discrediting followers will be acts of leadership only when they are used as tools of influence over followers in the pursuit of organizationally valued (or not) objectives. As an example, a leader snapping at a follower just because the leader had a bad day (example from the focal article) is not an act of leadership, as it involves no influence toward goal achievement. It is just CWB performed by a person in a formal leadership role. So, although there is a power differential between leaders and followers, snapping at a follower may be rude, but it is not an act of destructive *leadership*. However, a leader verbally intimidating a follower to encourage them to follow organizational safety standards would be an act of DL, as it is a way to *influence* the follower to accomplish an organizationally valued objective. Failing to distinguish between DL and CWB (and other deviant behaviors) contributes to construct confounding and jingle-jangle fallacies.

To further distinguish DL from CWB (and related constructs), it is helpful to think about different ways in which DL, *as a form of leadership*, can be manifested. Leadership involves *influencing* followers to achieve *objectives* that may (or may not) be aligned with what is endorsed by the organization. Thus, DL *as a form of leadership* can manifest itself in leaders (a) using harmful methods of influence with followers (e.g., verbal or physical abuse, threats, intimidation), and/or (b) encouraging followers to pursue goals that contradict the rules, regulations, declared values, acceptable standards, and/or the mission of the organization (Krasikova et al., 2013). Thus, DL can be manifested in the following three broad scenarios: (a) using *destructive* tactics to encourage followers to pursue *constructive* (i.e., organizationally valued) goals (e.g., verbal abuse to improve follower performance); (b) using *destructive* tactics to encourage followers to pursue *destructive* goals (e.g., pressing followers to participate in deceptive sales practices that the organization does not condone); (c) using *constructive* tactics to encourage followers to pursue *destructive* goals (e.g., rationalizing with or engaging in a quid pro quo exchange with followers to encourage their participation in deceptive sales practices).

Destructive leadership is leader behavior, not the consequences of leader behavior

The construct of DL captures leader behaviors and goals that can harm or are intended to harm organizations and organizational members (Krasikova et al., 2013). The construct of DL *does not capture outcomes* of leader behaviors and goal pursuits (e.g., follower ill-being, decreased morale). Given recently expressed concerns about the conflation of leader behaviors with outcomes in leadership research (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023), it is important to underscore that outcomes of DL should be treated as separate constructs conceptually and empirically.

Leaders' actions should *not* be judged harmful *only after* they have produced harmful effects. They can be judged as harmful the moment they are enacted, regardless of what outcome they eventually produce. There are behaviors most reasonable people (applying the reasonable person standard) would agree are likely to result in some form of harm to individuals or social

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collectives—yelling at others, threatening others, physically attacking others, encouraging others to steal or disregard company rules and regulations, and so on. There is a consensus or shared understanding across people, codified in societal behavioral norms, ethical standards, and/or legal regulations, that such behaviors are potentially harmful and should be avoided regardless of whether their negative effects are eventually manifested and regardless of whether harmful tactics actually lead to positive outcomes (e.g., increased job performance).

To illustrate this point, let's consider driving while intoxicated (DWI). DWI is commonly considered a harmful behavior, regardless of whether it actually results in people being injured or property being damaged. Similarly, DL should be framed as harmful, the moment it is manifested, irrespective of whether the behavior results in immediate harm to followers or the organization. This is because the action itself is intended to harm, and substantial research has documented both the temporally proximal and temporally delayed consequences of DL (e.g., Mackey et al., 2019). We acknowledge there may be interindividual variation in what is considered harmful versus harmless. For example, leaders with higher levels of dark traits (e.g., aggression, narcissism, psychopathy) may have unique beliefs about what should be considered harmful, and those beliefs may deviate from commonly accepted norms (LeBreton et al., 2018). Thus, adhering to a reasonable person standard is useful when considering what constitutes destructive leader actions and goals.

Unlike ineffective leadership, destructive leadership is intentionally harmful

As suggested previously (Kelloway et al., 2005; Krasikova et al., 2013; Lipman-Blumen, 2005), leaders can cause intentional and unintentional harm to their organizations and followers. The notion of intent to harm is important for distinguishing DL from leaders who lack the skills and experience to effectively guide their team (i.e., ineffective leadership). Stating that DL is moored to the concept of intent to harm does not mean that DL assumes leaders are engaged in deliberate introspection and have veridical self-insights into their motives. There is a large literature suggesting that individuals frequently lack insight into what drives their behavior (Kahneman, 2011; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; Wilson & Dunn, 2004), and this is especially true when it comes to motives related to harm and aggression (James & LeBreton, 2010, 2012) and power (James et al., 2013). It is important to address the following points about intent to harm.

Is intent to harm present if DL is a consequence of provocation?

If a leader engages in DL in response to frustration or provocation (e.g., an underperforming or deviant follower), the leader's behavior would be considered reactive in nature (akin to reactive aggression, Berkowitz, 1988). Reactive aggression is an emotion-driven response to a situation when there is an obstacle to goal attainment and is defined as a behavior "intended to physically or mentally harm others as a result of real or perceived provocation" (Choy et al., 2025, p. 2; Miller & Lynam, 2006). Although reactive aggression differs from preplanned proactive aggression, both involve intent to harm (Choy et al., 2025). The reactive and proactive components may blend within a single DL episode, so it might be hard to tell when DL is reactively versus proactively destructive. Irrespective of whether DL is reactive or proactive, the intent to harm is present.

Is intent to harm present when DL is a consequence of a self-regulation failure?

Leaders may engage in DL when they fail to self-regulate, but insufficient self-control does not remove the harmful origins of DL (Krasikova et al., 2013). Self-regulation failure in the DL context may occur when a leader fails to suppress their desire to get back at the source of frustration or provocation (e.g., a poorly performing follower) and/or a more general dispositional desire to harm others (e.g., having a strong motive to aggress; James & LeBreton, 2010, 2012) and engages

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in reactive DL instead of a more constructive way of influencing followers. In either case, whether self-regulation failure occurs or not, the intention (conscious or unconscious) to cause harm is the *sine qua non* of DL, in its both reactive and proactive forms.

Is intent to harm present when DL is rationalized as aiming to achieve a greater good?

If DL is justified as a means to good ends (e.g., to improve team's effectiveness), it does not negate the intent to harm as the underlying motive that shapes the leaders' choice to use DL. As stated in Krasikova et al. (2013), when leaders use destructive methods of influence to encourage followers to pursue *constructive* goals, it is still an act of DL. In addition, research on the implicit motives for aggression and power has found that acts of harm and dominance may be rationalized as necessary by perpetrators to preserve their self-image as a person acting in a reasonable and appropriate manner (James et al., 2013). The desire or choice to cause harm may not even be consciously realized by people behaving aggressively or by leaders engaging in DL—a leader engaging in DL may truly believe they are acting in a way that is good for others.

Is ineffective leadership a stand-alone construct?

Although we believe the distinction between DL and leader ineffectiveness is useful, as it helps isolate DL as a separate construct and clarify its construct boundaries, we do not suggest that ineffective leadership should be identified as a stand-alone construct. There is a long history of research on leadership effectiveness as a criterion, which has considered various indicators of leader effectiveness (e.g., objective measures of team or organizational performance, follower ratings of effectiveness; Kaiser et al., 2008; Lowe et al., 1996; Yukl, 2013). Prior research has also identified constructs capturing leader behaviors that are negatively associated with leader effectiveness as a criterion (e.g., passive management by exception, laissez-faire leadership; Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Lowe et al., 1996). We do not see ineffective leadership as a construct separate from the previously proposed constructs; rather, it reflects the "low end" of the effectiveness construct continuum (cf. Tay & Jebb, 2018).[1]

In closing, we concur with the authors of the focal article that DL continues to be a pressing and timely topic. We hope our commentary clarifies the importance of understanding the motivational underpinnings of DL, which by definition, include a desire or intent (conscious or unconscious) to harm. In addition, we hope our commentary clarifies the importance of recognizing that ineffective (inept) leadership is not a distinct construct but rather reflects the lower end of a leadership effectiveness–ineffectiveness continuum.

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[1]As noted by an anonymous reviewer, this point of contention about ineffective leadership being a lower end of the effectiveness continuum as opposed to being an independent construct could be seen as analogous to the debate about the independence versus bipolarity of positive and negative affect (e.g., Diener & Emmons, 1984). This debate, as well as a debate about the independence of the constructs of organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) and CWB (Dalal, 2005; Dalal & Carpenter, 2018) may help inform future research on further defining and operationalizing the continuum of leader (in) effectiveness (Tay & Jebb, 2018).

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