
1. Destructive leadership: state of the art and future directions

Kimberley Breevaart, Birgit Schyns, and Pedro Neves

INTRODUCTION

Destroying individual lives, disrupting team processes, damaging organizations' reputations, and even threatening democracies, it is no wonder that destructive leaders have been the talk of the town for many years. For example, in 2009 it came to light that systemic harassment from top management at France Télécom led to 35 employees either committing suicide or attempting to take their lives (Chrisafis, 2019). In 2015, Volkswagen's Dieselgate scandal revealed that a reign of terror had created a culture of fear, eventually causing the automaker a great deal of reputational damage (Jong & Van der Linde, 2022). More recently, in 2023, Elon Musk was coined "the most reckless, destructive and dangerous corporate leader at this moment" (Vaidhyathan, 2023).

A little over 10 years ago, Schyns and Schilling's (2013) meta-analysis already showed that destructive leadership – in its many forms and configurations – does as much damage as constructive leadership does good. Yet scholarly attention on the topic has been running behind compared to the study of constructive leadership for many years. The field of destructive leadership got a significant boost in 2000 when Bernard Tepper published the first paper on the concept of abusive supervision. For about 15 years, there has been a steady increase in scientific publications on destructive leadership as indicated by a search on Google Scholar (January 2024, excluding references; see Figure 1.1).

Although nowadays "destructive leadership" will result in 1.1 million hits on Google Scholar, we do observe that scholarly attention seems to be on the decline (see Figure 1.1). Being infamously more present in bureaucratic and hierarchical organizations (e.g., Ferris et al., 2007; Salin, 2003), perhaps the scientific study of destructive leaders hits a little too close to home for most scholars. Unfortunately, and hopefully unintentionally, some scholars have even trivialized destructive leadership, for example by arguing that followers may perceive non-abusive behavior by their leader as abusive, that followers may be deserving of this type of leadership or that it only affects a small number of followers (Chan & McAllister, 2014; Mitchell et al., 2015; Schyns et al., 2018). Nonetheless, the evidence supporting its detrimental impact on individuals, teams, organizations, and societies at large is overwhelming.

When looking at the evolution of the prevalence of destructive leadership over time (see Table 1.1), we observe an interesting trend. Although it should be noted that different studies focus on different types of destructive leadership, it is striking that over time, the reported prevalence of destructive leadership has increased from 12.1 percent in 1999 to 36.4 percent in 2021. Notably, these numbers suggest that destructive leadership is a much bigger concern in Scandinavian countries. Whether that is a sign of a heightened problem or of additional apprehension concerning the topic and its ripple effects we do not yet know. However, drawing a parallel to Amy Edmonson's (2018) research showing that high performing teams

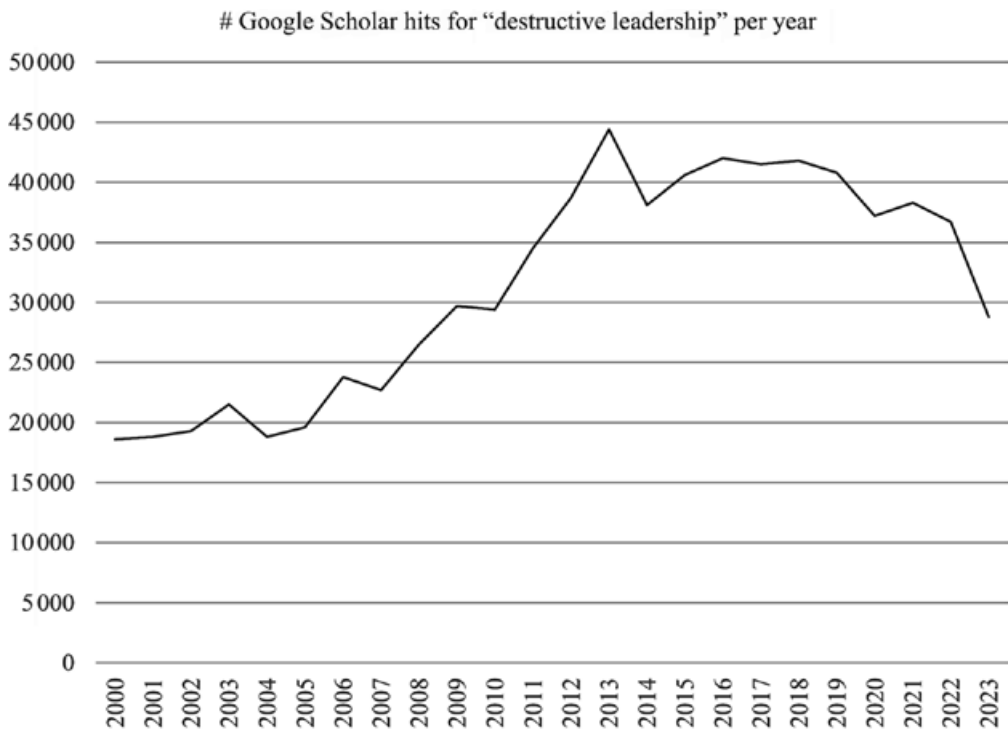


Figure 1.1 *Trend in scholarly attention for the topic of destructive leadership since 2000*

did not make more errors compared to low performing teams, but rather felt safe enough to admit more errors, it is likely that employees in the most egalitarian countries in the world feel safest to report their experiences with destructive leaders. Another explanation could be that over time, people have generally felt more supported to speak out and let their voices be heard because of large societal movements such as the #metoo movement. It is additionally important to look beyond the current prevalence of destructive leadership, because even if the prevalence is not extremely high, it can still affect a large group of people over the course of a lifetime. This is nicely illustrated when we draw a parallel to domestic abuse. According to the UK Office of National Statistics 7.5 percent (1.6 million) of women experienced abuse in the year 2018/2019 (Elkin, 2021), but the WHO states that over a lifetime, 1 in 3 women is abused (WHO, 2021). Vogel and Bolino (2020) also argue that even when the abuse ends, employees are likely affected throughout the course of their future careers. In any case, together, these numbers do not support the idea that destructive leadership is a rare disease, but rather show that it is an experience that many individuals live through in some shape or form at some time in their career.

Given the impact and prevalence of destructive leadership in many facets of our collective lives, this book has two aims. First, to provide a state-of-the art overview of the field taking into account its nuances and multiple forms; and second, to stimulate more systematic high-quality research on destructive leadership by providing clear new avenues for research. As long as we do not give destructive leadership the scholarly attention it deserves, both scientists and practitioners may wrongly believe that we go overboard in problematizing destructive leadership or

Table 1.1 Overview of the prevalence of destructive leadership in different countries

Authors	Sample	Findings
Hubert & Van Veldhoven (2001)	66,764 Dutch employees 1995–1999	5.1–12.1% of employees reported sometimes and 2.1% frequently being exposed to aggression by their leader.
Schat et al. (2006)	> 2,500 US employees	13.5% of US employees experience aggression from their leader.
Aasland et al. (2010)	2,539 Norwegian employees	83.7% indicated to have experienced some type of destructive leadership over the last six months. 33.5% even experienced this leadership quite often or very often: 3.4% experienced tyrannical leadership, 8.8% derailed leadership, 11.6% supportive-disloyal leadership and 21.2% laissez-faire leadership.
Lundmark et al. (2021)	1,132 Swedish employees	90.2% of employees had experienced at least one type of destructive leadership, 36.4% even often or more frequently. Specifically, for each behavior, this was 21% for arrogant/unfair, 8.7% for threats/punishments/overdemands, 16.9% for ego-oriented/false, 23.5% for passive/cowardly and 23.9% for uncertain/unclear/messy.

that such stance is a mere opposition to the new trends in the positive management approach. That is the *raison d'être* of this book. Across nineteen chapters, separated into three main parts, dedicated to the forms of destructive leadership, conditions and context of destructive leadership, and a small section on methods relevant to the study of destructive leadership, a series of well-established authors elaborate on specific elements of the destructive leadership process.

DEFINING DESTRUCTIVE LEADERSHIP

What is destructive leadership? Despite ongoing scientific debate on some of the defining elements of destructive leadership – such as the inclusion of intent and organization-directed leader behavior – it is generally agreed that destructive leaders harm their followers by systematically showing hostile behaviors (Aasland et al., 2010; Krasikova et al., 2013; Schyns & Schilling, 2013). These destructive leader behaviors can take many different forms, as we will discuss in the first part of the book. Specifically, the book discusses the topics of abusive supervision (Chapter 2), inconsistent leadership (Chapter 4), leadership incivility (Chapter 5), laissez-faire leadership (Chapter 6) and exploitative leadership (Chapter 7). It also discusses several aspects of narcissism related to leadership, that is, narcissistic leadership (Chapter 3), an event-based taxonomy of narcissistic leader behaviors (Chapter 8) and vulnerable narcissistic leader behavior (Chapter 9). Part I of the book outlines the breadth of concepts investigated in the realm of destructive leadership. In the following, we briefly summarize each chapter.

Part I: Forms of Destructive Leadership

Chapter 2 by Breevaart, Wisse, Rus, and Langner addresses the misalignment between the theory and assessment of abusive supervision. While abusive supervision is considered a longitudinal phenomenon, few studies on the topic adequately capture this process. By discussing and reviewing existing theoretical frameworks that capture the dynamic nature of abusive

supervision, the authors aim to stimulate theory driven research on the topic to reduce the misalignment between theory and assessment.

Chapter 3 by Forgo, Hanges, and Gruda focuses on narcissistic leadership and uses a relational-based perspective, such that they consider how narcissistic leaders and their followers interact in different contexts, building on Padilla et al.'s (2007) toxic triangle. They differentiate four different types of narcissists (i.e., grandiose, vulnerable, communal, and malignant) and discuss how they behave as leaders as well as which followers are more likely to follow them and which contexts are conducive to narcissistic leadership. They derive recommendations for future research, suggesting to focus on dynamic systems and complexity science.

In Chapter 4, Schilling, Schyns, and May provide an overview of inconsistent leadership, defined as a follower's perception of leader behavior and characteristics that they cannot make sense of considering their previous experiences with that leader. The chapter outlines the first studies to establish a measurement of inconsistent leadership and calls for more research to validate this measurement, including its stability and variability across followers of the same leader.

In Chapter 5, Provencher, Day, and González-Morales discuss the elusiveness of the subtle phenomenon of leadership incivility, characterized by low intensity and high ambiguity. They propose a framework that integrates leader behavior, workplace norms and culture, and individual characteristics to explain the process through which leader incivility influences work behaviors. The model emphasizes a number of potential moderators that might mitigate or enhance its effect and is followed by an in-depth discussion of areas of concern that future research should tackle.

Chapter 6 by Kuijpers, Cameron, and Vullingsh addresses the topic of laissez-faire leadership, referring to the situation in which leaders avoid their leadership responsibilities. Very little scholarly attention has been devoted to the study of laissez-faire leadership, which is perhaps due to the ongoing debate whether laissez-faire leadership should be considered destructive leadership. This chapter captures this tension and provides a state-of-the art overview of existing research and tools based on insights from other research fields that can potentially boost research on laissez-faire leadership.

Chapter 7 by Pircher Verdorfer and Schmid focuses on exploitative leadership, that is, self-interested leadership that is characterized by the leader inappropriately using their followers for personal gain. The chapter provides an overview of existing research and explains how exploitative leadership fits into the landscape of leadership concepts, outlining where exploitation is currently a part of existing leadership concepts and how exploitative leadership differs in its focus. The authors also highlight the role of followers and the environment in the development of exploitative leadership.

In Chapter 8, Topakas, Gan, and Braun develop an event-based view on the negative and positive outcomes of narcissism in leaders. Differentiating between vulnerable and grandiose narcissism as well taking into account the three-furcated model of narcissism, the authors build on trait activation (Tett & Burnett, 2003) and event system theory (Morgeson et al., 2015) to outline an event-based taxonomy of narcissistic leader behaviors and their consequences.

In Chapter 9, Schyns, Gauglitz, Gilmore, and Nieberle present a qualitative interview study into vulnerable narcissistic leader behavior. Focusing on higher education, they interviewed leaders, followers, and colleagues of vulnerable narcissistic leaders to better understand this phenomenon in the workplace. They derive from their interview concrete behaviors that vul-

nerable narcissistic leaders show. These behaviors are discussed in order to make sense of the often obscure behavior of some leaders.

DESTRUCTIVE LEADERSHIP IN PERSPECTIVE

The context in which destructive leadership takes place and the conditions surrounding its enactment also deserve additional attention, as these behaviors, as well as the responses that come with it, may vary (and not only in intensity). In the second part of the book, we will further elaborate on these issues. The chapters examine destructive leadership in the context of family businesses (Chapter 10), which represent roughly 90 percent of enterprises worldwide and account for a significant proportion of the national GDP (e.g., in India, Spain, Mexico, Italy, UK, Portugal, and Canada family businesses represent over 60 percent of the GDP; Tharawat Magazine, 2023), in the context of sports (Chapter 11), and during the recent COVID-19 pandemic (Chapter 12). The chapters also discuss erroneous perceptions of leader charisma (Chapter 13), the role of susceptible followers (Chapter 14) and of personality (Chapter 15) in the destructive leadership process. The final chapter in the part will elaborate on destructive leadership paradoxes (Chapter 16).

Part II: Boundary Conditions and Context

In Chapter 10, Hermle-Boersig, Kammerlander, and Waldkirch propose a model of destructive leadership in family firms. This context-specific model emphasizes the roles of the family leader and the owner's family and how these shape responses at the level of the family as well as the (family-owned) firm. They also introduce a matrix to explain individual responses towards the destructive family leader in light of family and non-family exchange relationships and dynamics.

In Chapter 11, Cotterill and Tibbert introduce the context of sports as a field prone to destructive leadership behaviors, where data shows that at least one third of Olympic athletes reported observing or receiving inappropriate behaviors from coaches. They do so by integrating coach-athlete relationships, which can take multiple configurations, as well as environmental influences, in particular the normalization of such behavior as a strategy to push performance, and claim the need for a more holistic perspective on the phenomenon in the sports context.

In Chapter 12, Lagowska and Schyns outline how crisis influences destructive leadership and its subsequent effects on recovery and well-being. They argue that mortality salience and displacement from the workplace influence not only how far destructive leadership emerges but also to what degree it will be detected. The authors argue that specifically in crisis situations characterized by mortality salience and displacement from the workplace followers will find recovery difficult and that destructive leadership adds to this concern.

Similar to Lagowska and Schyns, in Chapter 13, Simion and Bligh describe how destructive leadership emerges out of crisis situations, using the COVID pandemic as an example of a crisis environment. They argue that in times of crisis, some followers' need for a strong leader can alter their perceptions of a leader's charisma and effectiveness. The authors use examples of the 2020 US presidential election to illustrate this point.

In Chapter 14, Thoroughgood, Hong, and Sawyer review the literature on the role of followers in the destructive leadership process. They focus on susceptible followers as they represent an often overlooked intervenient. They revise the taxonomy put forth by Thoroughgood et al. (2012) and discuss different profiles of conformers (lost souls, authoritarians, bystanders) and colluders (opportunistics and acolytes) and put forth several ideas for future research on susceptible followers, including the use of inductive methods and specific approaches such as historiometric analysis.

Pletzer, Wang, and Buczny, in Chapter 15, discuss the role of personality in the study of destructive leadership. Building on four lines of research on the topic, they create a model that includes (a) the direct effect between leader personality and destructive leadership behavior, (b) contingencies that influence this direct relation, (c) the relation between subordinate personality and the perception of destructive leadership behavior, and (d) the direct effect between subordinate personality and destructive leadership behavior. Notably, they outline how the latter research line carries the risk of victim blaming.

Finally, in Chapter 16, Cunha, Simpson, Rego, and Berti discuss destructive leadership through a paradoxical lens. Such an approach relies on integrating opposing tensions rather than examining challenges as ‘either-or’ types of equations. In this chapter, they discuss destructive leadership as stemming from the mismanagement of these tensions, often reflected in pragmatic paradoxes. They elaborate on how vicious circles are reinforced and pave the way to destructive leadership. The authors also present a series of potential remedies such as empowerment, the stimulation of a collective paradoxical mindset, or the use of humor.

STUDYING DESTRUCTIVE LEADERSHIP

The study of destructive leadership is notoriously hard due to issues such as conceptual confusion, the lack of (proper) measurements, and the ethical concerns surrounding its experimental manipulation. Most commonly, subordinates are randomly sampled from the workforce and asked to report on their leaders’ destructive behaviors. As a result, mean levels of reported destructive behaviors are often low (Breevaart & de Vries, 2017). This book includes three chapters that address these issues and provide specific recommendations that support the development of our field. First, Fischer (Chapter 17) identifies a variety of issues related to the study of destructive leadership. Next, Mackey and colleagues (Chapter 18) specifically address the issue of construct proliferation in the study of destructive leadership. Finally, Ng and colleagues (Chapter 19) discuss experimental research designs to study abusive supervision. Part III of the book outlines the breadth of methodologies that are relevant to the study of destructive leadership. In the following, we briefly summarize each chapter.

Part III: Methods Relevant to the Study of Destructive Leadership

In Chapter 17, Fischer provides a critical review of the methodological limitations of current research on destructive leadership. He specifically discusses four issues related to the conceptualization and operationalization of destructive leadership, and the research designs used to capture low base-rate phenomena and to determine causes and effects. He also makes recommendations in each of these areas to improve the quality of our studies on destructive leadership.

Chapter 18 by Mackey, Phillipich, McAllister, and Alexander focuses on construct proliferation in the field of destructive leadership. They argue that because of the abundance of different destructive leadership styles and behaviors that have been introduced to the field recently, there is a risk that research on destructive leadership becomes disjointed. The authors review the definitions and measures of different destructive leadership styles and how they differ from ineffective leadership.

Ng, Zur, Liang, and Brown address the topic of experimental methodologies in the study of abusive supervision in Chapter 19. They review and critically evaluate existing methodologies such as experimental vignettes and critical incidents and discuss ways to potentially reduce demand characteristics in experimental research on abusive supervision. The authors also tap into the ethical issues that inevitably arise in this type of research.

REFERENCES

- Aasland, M. S., Skogstad, A., Notelaers, G., Nielsen, M. B., & Einarsen, S. (2010). The prevalence of destructive leadership behaviour. *British Journal of Management*, *21*, 438–452. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8551.2009.00672.x>.
- Breevaart, K., & de Vries, R. E. (2017). Supervisor's HEXACO personality traits and subordinate perceptions of abusive supervision. *The Leadership Quarterly*, *28*, 691–700. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2017.02.001>.
- Chan, M. E., & McAllister, D. J. (2014). Abusive supervision through the lens of employee state paranoia. *Academy of Management Review*, *39*, 44–66. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2011.0419>.
- Chrisafis, A. (2019). Former France Télécom bosses given jail terms over workplace bullying. *Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/dec/20/former-france-telecom-bosses-jailed-over-workplace-bullying>.
- Edmondson, A. C. (2018). *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Elkin, M. (2021). Domestic abuse victim characteristics, England and Wales: year ending March 2019. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/domesticabusevictimcharacteristicsenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2019>.
- Ferris, G. R., Zinko, R., Brouer, R. L., Buckley, M. R., & Harvey, M. G. (2007). Strategic bullying as a supplementary, balanced perspective on destructive leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly*, *18*, 195–206. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2007.03.004>.
- Hubert, A. B., & Van Veldhoven, M. (2001). Risk sectors for undesirable behaviour and mobbing. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, *10*, 415–424. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13594320143000799>.
- Jong, W., & van der Linde, V. (2022). Clean diesel and dirty scandal: The echo of Volkswagen's dieselgate in an intra-industry setting. *Public Relations Review*, *48*, 102–146. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2022.102146>.
- Krasikova, D. V., Green, S. G., & LeBreton, J. M. (2013). Destructive leadership: A theoretical review, integration, and future research agenda. *Journal of Management*, *39*, 1308–1338. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01492063124713>.
- Lundmark, R., Stenling, A., von Thiele Schwarz, U., & Tafvelin, S. (2021). Appetite for destruction: A psychometric examination and prevalence estimation of destructive leadership in Sweden. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *12*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.668838>.
- Mitchell, M. S., Vogel, R. M., & Folger, R. (2015). Third parties' reactions to the abusive supervision of coworkers. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *100*, 1040–1055. <https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000002>.
- Morgeson, F. P., Mitchell, T. R., & Liu, D. (2015). Event system theory: An event-oriented approach to the organizational sciences. *Academy of Management Review*, *40*, 515–537. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2012.0099>.

- Padilla, A., Hogan, R., & Kaiser, R. (2007). The toxic triangle: Destructive leaders, susceptible followers, and conducive environments. *The Leadership Quarterly*, *18*, 176–194. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2007.03.001>.
- Salin, D. (2003). Bullying and organisational politics in competitive and rapidly changing work environments. *International Journal of Management and Decision Making*, *4*, 35–46. <https://doi.org/10.1504/IJMDM.2003.002487>.
- Schat, A. C. H., Frone, M. R., & Kelloway, E. K. (2006). Prevalence of workplace aggression in the U.S. workforce: Findings from a national study. In E. K. Kelloway, J. Barling, & J. J. Hurrell, Jr. (Eds.), *Handbook of Workplace Violence* (pp. 47–89). London: Sage Publications.
- Schyns, B., Felfe, J., & Schilling, J. (2018). Is it me or you? How reactions to abusive supervision are shaped by leader behavior and follower perceptions. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *9*, 1309. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01309>.
- Schyns, B., & Schilling, J. (2013). How bad are the effects of bad leaders? A meta-analysis of destructive leadership and its outcomes. *The Leadership Quarterly*, *24*, 138–158. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2012.09.001>.
- Tepper, B. J. (2000). Consequences of abusive supervision. *Academy of Management Journal*, *43*, 178–190. <https://doi.org/10.5465/1556375>.
- Tett, R. P., & Burnett, D. D. (2003). A personality trait-based interactionist model of job performance. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *88*, 500–517. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.88.3.500>.
- Tharawat Magazine (2023 October 12). Economic impact of family businesses – a compilation of facts. <https://www.tharawat-magazine.com/facts/economic-impact-family-businesses/>.
- Thoroughgood, C. N., Padilla, A., Hunter, S. T., & Tate, B. W. (2012). The susceptible circle: A taxonomy of followers associated with destructive leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly*, *23*, 897–917. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2012.05.007>.
- Vaidhyanathan, A. (2023). Elon Musk is a lesson in the dangers of unchecked corporate leaders. *Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/sep/12/elon-musk-spacex-twitter-x-russia-ukraine>.
- Vogel, R. M., & Bolino, M. C. (2020). Recurring nightmares and silver linings: Understanding how past abusive supervision may lead to posttraumatic stress and posttraumatic growth. *Academy of Management Review*, *45*, 549–569. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2017.0350>.
- WHO (2021). Violence against women. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>.