Destructive Leadership

Understanding the Traits That Cultivate Bad Leaders

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Destructive leadership has become an important issue around the world for political, business, and non-governmental organisations. However, most of the advice and case studies only focus on improving the skills of good leaders. In today’s climate, it’s just as important to understand how to prohibit destructive leadership from damaging your organisation.

Likewise, most leadership articles focus on the person. However, context is a vital consideration. Leadership is not a person – a leader is a person. Leadership involves followers and other external forces. Thus, it’s critical to take into account both a leader’s characteristics and the environment of that leader, to best identify ways to avoid destructive leadership.

Types of Destructive Leaders

There are three main types of destructive leaders:

1. Narcissistic
2. Machiavellian
3. Incompetent

1. Narcissistic Leaders

While it is easy to envision narcissistic leaders throughout history, they are not easy to spot in the moment. Furthermore, it’s important to remember that there is a spectrum of narcissistic leader types, from those who are simply confident, to the arrogant, to the dangerously self-centered. They are often characterised as charismatic, self-absorbed and sometimes even psychopathic.

These leaders put their own self-interest above organisational goals and the common good. Narcissistic tendencies drive the corrupt leader to believe that he or she is a special person with a unique destiny to fulfill and is entitled to the special treatment and wealth that comes along with the abuse of power.

Sepp Blatter, former president of FIFA, is an example of a corrupt leader who abused his power to enrich himself and his close allies. Reports suggest that corruption and bribery had been going on for years within FIFA. In extreme cases, narcissistic leaders may actually be psychopaths – that deadly mix of narcissism, shallow emotions, anti-social tendencies and a penchant for risk-taking. Hitler, organised crime bosses and violent workplace bullies are examples of psychopathic leaders.

2. Machiavellian Leaders

Machiavellianism is a potentially destructive leader type that is characterised by the saying “the ends justify the means”. The concept was born out of Niccolò Machiavelli’s 1532 treatise entitled “The Prince” where he describes the need to engage in ruthless behaviour to maintain power for the overall benefit of society.

Machiavellian leaders will mistrust groups seen as subversive or as potential threats to power, in order to maintain security or achieve some grand vision. Although Machiavellianism is often talked about as being almost the same as narcissism and psychopathy, in reality, it is quite distinct. Machiavellian leaders are motivated by their view of what’s best for the group while psychopaths are motivated purely by self-interest.

Although the motives are different, Machiavellians can behave in ways that are just as destructive as corrupt leaders. Indeed, truly terrifying leaders are often a combination of both.

3. Incompetent Leaders

Incompetence is another type of destructive leader. Sadly, these leaders may have good intentions and be kind-hearted, yet make terrible mistakes that destroy organisations and harm individuals.

These leaders may even be duped by trusted advisers into making bad decisions that benefit a few while doing great harm to many. We have all known leaders whom we liked and thought were “nice” but had been promoted beyond their level of competence. It is unfortunate to see these individuals struggle alone when everyone around them clearly sees the right decision to make.

Identifying Destructive Leaders

Organisations can avoid massive problems by recognizing destructive leaders before they obtain power. The use of thorough leadership assessment to select leaders will reduce the chances of hiring or promoting a destructive leader.

However, the usual types of leader- ship assessments are not designed to identify destructive leaders. Narcissistic and psychopathic leaders often charm recruiters and interviewers with their confidence and flattery.

Likewise, Machiavellians will seem to have pure motives and passion to do good. Even incompetent leaders may be given the benefit of the doubt because they are friendly and likeable.

However, trained psychologists with experience assessing destructive leaders can identify those with negative tendencies.

Conducive Environments

While destructive leaders are very dangerous, there are situational factors that can reduce or exacerbate the scope of destruction.

Recent research has found three environmental factors which are more conducive to the rise of destructive leadership: perceived threat, cultural values, and organisational norms.

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Centralised governance systems tend to be more tolerant of large discrepancies in wealth, education, and power. Followers in these types of cultures are more susceptible to destructive leadership and likely to conform.

Norms and systems at the organisational level have a strong influence on curtailing destructive leaders. We know through research and experience that destructive leaders are drawn to positions with low supervi- sion, frequent risk-taking, and high visibility (such as sales, investment trading, and senior leadership).

Having independent governance with a series of checks and balances, is crucial to avoid damage by destructive leaders. Perhaps even more important is to instill a culture of accountability and ownership rather than dependence on “policies” or “systems” to force compliance.

Centralised governance systems that rely on the top of the organis-ation, lead to over-dependence and weakening of critical thought and expression of opposing views. Systems with decentralised, autonomous units foster greater accountability and are more effective at blocking destructive acts.

Concluding Thoughts

Clearly, destructive leadership has tremendous ability to negatively impact individuals, teams, companies, and nations.

These leaders are frequently charismatic, manipulative and skilled at taking advantage of the culture.