

# The toxic triangle: Destructive leaders, susceptible followers, and conducive environments

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## Abstract

Destructive leadership entails the negative consequences that result from a confluence of destructive leaders, susceptible followers, and conducive environments. We review how destructive leadership has been discussed in the literature and note that it has not been clearly defined. Building on prior research, we develop a definition of destructive leadership that emphasizes negative outcomes for organizations and individuals linked with and affected by them. Then we outline the toxic triangle: the characteristics of leaders, followers, and environmental contexts connected with destructive leadership. We illustrate the dynamics of the framework using Fidel Castro's career as the dictator of Cuba.

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“Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men.” Lord Acton

## 1. Introduction

Recent abuses of authority in business, politics, and religion have revived interest in destructive leadership. Although philosophers from Plato to Hobbes to Bertrand Russell have analyzed leadership, modern social science has tended to take a one-sided view of the topic, emphasizing its positive and constructive aspects while avoiding its darker side (Hogan & Kaiser, 2005; Kellerman, 2004; Yukl, 1999).

This paper begins by reviewing how the term “destructive leadership” has been used in the professional literature and we find little clarity or consensus. Then we define the term and develop the concept of the toxic triangle—a confluence of leader, follower, and environmental factors that make destructive leadership possible. This is followed by an analysis of the literature on each of the three domains to develop a framework of the factors involved in destructive leadership. We illustrate the framework using the example of the Cuban dictator, Fidel Castro. Then we discuss the

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scholarly implications of the toxic triangle and suggest that future research should focus on individual leaders, their followers, the environmental context, and the interactions between factors in these three domains. We close the paper with practical implications.

## 2. Definitional issues

With the exception of a few discussions of charisma (e.g., Conger, 1990; Hogan, Raskin, & Fazzini, 1990; Howell & Avolio, 1992; O'Connor, Mumford, Clifton, Gessner, & Connelly, 1995; Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006), social scientists have avoided the dark side of leadership. Although this seems to be changing (e.g., Kellerman, 2004; Kets de Vries, 2006; Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Luthans, Peterson, & Ibrayeva, 1998), a careful reading of the literature shows that destructive leadership is not explicitly defined. In discussions of the dark side of charisma, for instance, Howell & Avolio (1992, p. 44) warn about “blind fanaticism in the service of megalomaniacs and dangerous values,” Sankowsky (1995, p. 57) describes how narcissists “abuse power,” Conger (1990, p. 44) refers to “problematic or even disastrous outcomes,” while O'Connor et al. (1995, p. 529) refer to “destructive acts” and note that some charismatic leaders “may be more interested in personal outcomes” (p. 529). But scholars have not explicitly defined destructive leadership, *per se*. Rather, they tend to treat it as a “know it when you see it” phenomenon. Thus, we begin by defining the term.

### 2.1. Leadership and goodness

Some writers regard destructive leadership as an oxymoron and maintain that leadership is by definition a positive force (Howell & Avolio, 1992; Kellerman, 2004). In this view, Adolf Hitler was not a leader. As Burns (2003, p. 29) put it: “Hitler ruled the German people, but he did not lead them,” because he failed to create “lasting, meaningful opportunities for the pursuit of happiness.” Another perspective might regard Hitler and Mother Teresa as leaders because they both built constituencies and influenced others to pursue objectives. The definition is further complicated because non-destructive leaders are not invariably good. Mother Teresa, a Nobel Peace Prize winner who worked for the world's poor and was beatified by the Catholic Church, also accepted over \$1.25 million and the frequent use of a private jet from Charles Keating, the principal figure in the U.S. savings and loan scandal of the 1980s (Joly, 1983; Kwilecki & Wilson, 1998). Although Keating was convicted of stealing millions of dollars from investors, Mother Teresa wrote the court urging leniency and refused a district attorney's request to return the money. Mother Teresa worked hard to improve the lives of the less fortunate, but some might question whether her ends justified her means.

### 2.2. Process or outcomes?

Some authors focus on destructive leadership as a process. They emphasize syndromes such as narcissism and psychopathy that are associated with alienation and betrayal (e.g., Hogan & Hogan, 2001; Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006) or behaviors like manipulation, intimidation, coercion, and one-way communication (e.g., Howell & Avolio, 1992). From this viewpoint, destructive leadership is something leaders do, independent of the outcomes from these behaviors. Other writers underscore the negative outcomes experienced by organizations and their members, including followers and external stakeholders, (House & Howell, 1992; O'Connor et al., 1995; Sankowsky, 1995) or personally by the leader (e.g., the literature on career derailment; McCall & Lombardo, 1983). Either way, destructive leadership results in undesirable outcomes.

Scholars focusing on process, on what destructive leaders do, emphasize behavior (Conger, 1990; Hogan et al., 1990; Howell & Avolio, 1992). Conger & Kanungo (1998), for example, describe several destructive behaviors common to narcissistic leaders, such as ignoring reality, overestimating personal capabilities, and disregarding the views of others. Hogan and associates (Hogan & Hogan, 2001; Hogan & Kaiser, 2005) provide a taxonomy of 11 “dark side” personality dimensions, each related to leader behaviors that alienate coworkers, disrupt teams, and undermine group performance. From the perspective of process, moreover, constructive leadership involves mutually agreed upon goals with followers working toward organizational objectives (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Howell & Avolio, 1992). This happens whether the objectives are developed mutually or unilaterally by a trusted leader (Conger 1999; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993). Destructive leadership, on the other hand, involves imposing goals on constituents without their agreement or regard for their long-term welfare (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Conger, 1990; Howell & Avolio, 1992; Sankowsky, 1995). Such a process is ultimately alienating (even if followers concur with the leader's goals

initially) because, over the longer term, the process fails to make goals personally meaningful to followers (House & Aditya, 1997; Klein & House, 1995; Shamir et al., 1993).

Defining destructive leadership as a process assumes that a leader's bad intentions are an essential component of destructiveness (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Howell & Avolio, 1992). It also assumes that certain behaviors are inherently destructive. But, as Kellerman (2004) notes, negative leader behaviors can be placed on a continuum ranging from ineffective/incompetent to unethical/evil. Although unethical and evil actions are obviously bad, it is more difficult to establish that grandiosity or egocentrism are wicked. Furthermore, dark side leader personalities are usually associated with positive effects, at least in the short term (Hogan & Hogan, 2001; Hogan & Kaiser, 2005), and this makes it difficult to equate them clearly with destruction. It is the long-term negative ramifications that prompt the "destructive" label.

Destructive leadership is less frequently viewed as an outcome (O'Connor et al., 1995 is an exception). Nonetheless, if leaders, in combination with followers and contexts, harm constituents or damage organizations, then destructive leadership has occurred. This is consistent with the dictionary definition of "destructive": *causing destruction or designed... to destroy* (Merriam-Webster, 2006). It is also compatible with Conger's (1990) reference to disastrous outcomes, O'Connor et al.'s (1995) study of organizational destruction, and Sankowsky's (1995) concern that narcissistic leaders damage "followers' psychological well-being" (p. 57). If destructive leadership is defined in terms of harmful outcomes, then it is possible for "good" leaders to produce bad outcomes, and "bad" leaders to produce desirable outcomes. The worst political and business leaders—Hitler, Stalin, Charles Keating, Dennis Kozlowski—brought some value to their constituents (Kellerman, 2004). And even highly regarded leaders sometimes make unfortunate mistakes—for example, Coca Cola's respected CEO, Roberto Goizueta, was associated with the "new Coke" debacle.

### 2.3. Personal and organizational destructiveness

Destructive leadership can also be defined with reference to its principal direction or target: toward oneself (personal destructiveness) or toward the organization and its internal members and external stakeholders. Personal destructiveness can be seen as the undesirable things that leaders bring upon themselves—reprimands, criminal records, or tarnished reputations. Personal destructiveness involves harmful consequences experienced by the self; the most common form might be derailment—being fired, demoted, or otherwise failing to progress in one's career (Bentz, 1985; Leslie & Van Velsor, 1996; McCall & Lombardo, 1983).

Organizational destructiveness occurs when leaders bring misfortune to their followers, including internal and external stakeholders, and to social institutions (Hogan & Kaiser, 2005; Kaiser & Hogan, 2007). This could be a demoralized work force, environmental disasters, countries driven to poverty. Organizational destructiveness is different from personal destructiveness. It might actually enhance a leader's power and longevity, as when dictators control the media, weaken countervailing social institutions, use the military to suppress dissidence, or usurp national resources for personal gain. But organizational destructiveness also affects the quality of life for employees and citizens and jeopardizes an organization's purposes (Hogan & Kaiser, 2005; Kaiser & Hogan, 2007).

### 2.4. Toward a definition of destructive leadership

Our view of destructive leadership distinguishes between occupying a leadership role and being effective in that role (Kaiser & Hogan, submitted for publication). We view leadership as a functional resource for group performance; it involves influencing individuals to forego, for a limited time, their selfish, short-term interests and contribute to long-term group goals within an environmental or situational context (Heifetz, 1994; Hogan, Curphy, & Hogan, 1994; Hogan & Kaiser, 2005). All significant human achievement requires leadership to unite people, channel their efforts, and encourage their contribution toward the goals of the collective enterprise. Thus, leadership *effectiveness* concerns how well a group is able to accomplish its purpose (Hogan et al., 1994; Kaiser & Hogan, submitted for publication). In this view, leadership is a value-neutral term (c.f., Howell & Avolio, 1992); it connotes social influence vis-à-vis group performance regardless of the context (Hogan, 2006). Deciding whether leadership is constructive or destructive is a matter of long-term group performance: how well did the team perform relative to its competition in achieving its goals? The test of toxic leadership, from this perspective, is a matter of outcomes; the essence of destructive leadership concerns negative organizational outcomes, and certain processes are more likely than others to lead to such outcomes.

We therefore agree with Burns (2003) that Hitler was destructive because he led the German people into external domination and poverty, not because he was a racist who ignored staff feedback while pursuing a personal agenda. However, we disagree with Burns' (2003) view that Hitler was not a leader; on the contrary, we agree with Kellerman (2004) that Hitler was a prime example of destructive leadership. We also believe Mother Teresa was a constructive leader. She was effective in improving the quality of life for her constituents—the poor and destitute of the world. She was less than perfect as a person because of the questionable means she sometimes used to achieve that goal.

Based on the foregoing discussion, we define destructive leadership in terms of five features, summarized in Table 1. These five elements describe what destructive leadership is; the toxic triangle identifies the leader, follower, and environmental factors that make it possible.

Our first point is that destructive leadership is seldom absolutely or entirely destructive: most leadership results in both desirable and undesirable outcomes. Leaders, in concert with followers and environmental contexts, contribute to outcomes distributed across a destructive–constructive continuum. Outcomes associated with destructive leadership are found primarily at the negative end of that spectrum. Constructive leadership can sometimes yield bad results, but their outcomes are largely located at the spectrum's constructive end. Emphasizing outcomes highlights the distinction between destructive leadership as a process and its consequences.

Second, destructive leadership involves control and coercion rather than persuasion and commitment (Howell & Avolio, 1992; Sankowsky, 1995). The distinction between leadership and dominance goes back at least to Freud (1921). Tyranny and dominance are a negative prototype in implicit leadership theory—most working adults consider despotic control to be the antithesis of desirable leadership (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004).

Third, destructive leadership has a selfish orientation. It focuses on a leader's objectives and goals, as opposed to the needs of constituents and the larger social organization. (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Conger, 1990; Howell, 1988; Howell & Avolio, 1992; McClelland, 1970, 1975; O'Connor et al., 1995; Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006). Efforts to maintain a destructive leader's regime thus often preclude developing, empowering, and involving followers (Conger, 1990).

Fourth, the effects of destructive leadership are seen in organizational outcomes that compromise the quality of life for constituents (whether internal or external to the organization) and detract from their main purposes (Hogan & Kaiser, 2005). Negative organizational outcomes are the product of dysfunctional leader behaviors and susceptible followers interacting in the context of a contributing environment (Boccialetti, 1995; Kellerman, 2004). Followers must consent to, or be unable to resist, a destructive leader. In such cases, leadership results in bad consequences for the group; hence, *destructive* leadership.

Finally, destructive organizational outcomes also depend on susceptible followers and conducive environments. Most research on destructive leadership, like leadership more broadly, is "leader-centric" (Hollander, 1992; Kellerman, 2004; Lord & Brown, 2004; Yukl, 2005) and the roles of followers and environmental contexts have not received adequate attention. We now attempt to remedy this focus.

### 3. The toxic triangle

Leadership of any type springs from the interplay of an individual's motivation and ability to lead, subordinates' desire for direction and authority, and events calling for leadership. This view is consistent with a systems perspective focusing on the confluence of leaders, followers, and circumstances rather than just the characteristics of individual leaders (e.g., Klein & House, 1995; Luthans et al., 1998; Popper, 2001; Weber, 1947; Weierter, 1997). Our model of the toxic triangle is portrayed in Fig. 1; the elements of the model are elaborated below. Although these variables interact in

Table 1  
Five features of destructive leadership

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1. Destructive leadership is seldom absolutely or entirely destructive: there are both good and bad results in most leadership situations.
  2. The process of destructive leadership involves dominance, coercion, and manipulation rather than influence, persuasion, and commitment.
  3. The process of destructive leadership has a selfish orientation; it is focused more on the leader's needs than the needs of the larger social group.
  4. The effects of destructive leadership are outcomes that compromise the quality of life for constituents and detract from the organization's main purposes.
  5. Destructive organizational outcomes are not exclusively the result of destructive leaders, but are also products of susceptible followers and conducive environments.
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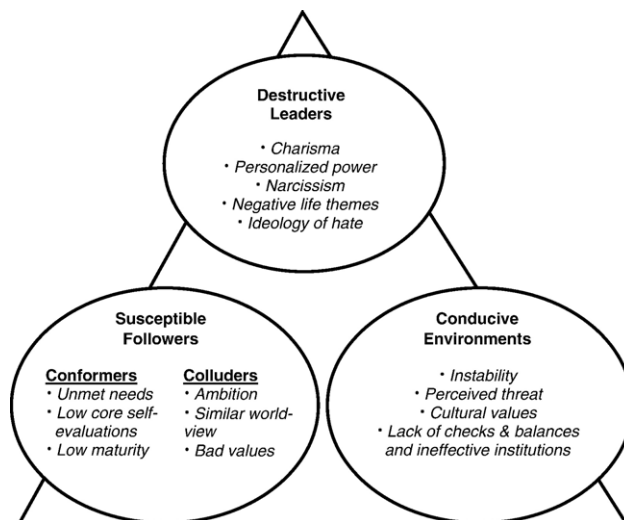


Fig. 1. The toxic triangle: elements in three domains related to destructive leadership.

complex ways, for the purposes of exposition we discuss them one domain at a time. In Section 4, we illustrate the model and its dynamics using the example of Fidel Castro and Cuba.

### 3.1. Destructive leaders

The first component of the toxic triangle concerns the characteristics of destructive leaders. Our analysis of the literature suggests five critical leader factors: charisma, personalized use of power, narcissism, negative life themes, and an ideology of hate.

#### 3.1.1. Charisma

Most scholarly analyses of destructive leadership identify charisma as a central characteristic (Conger, 1990; Hogan et al., 1990; Howell & Avolio, 1992; O'Connor et al., 1995). Not all charismatic leaders are destructive. There is evidence, for instance, that charismatic U.S. presidents are more effective across a range of criteria than non-charismatic presidents (House, Spangler, & Woycke, 1991)—even though some charismatic leaders have made some big mistakes (e.g., U. S. President John Kennedy's Bay of Pigs fiasco or British Prime Minister Winston Churchill's Gallipoli disaster). Nonetheless, destructive leaders typically are charismatic. Consider the following list: in government, Hitler, Stalin, Charles Taylor; in business, John Delorean, Joe Nacchio, Jeff Skilling; in religious cults, Charles Manson, Jim Jones, and David Koresh. Well known destructive leaders seem generally to be considered charismatic.

Research indicates that destructive leadership and charisma are empirically linked (Beyer, 1999; Conger, 1990; Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Gessner, O'Connor, Mumford, Clifton, & Smith, 1995; Hogan et al., 1990; House, 1977; Howell & Avolio, 1992; Hunt, Boal, & Dodge, 1999; Maccoby, 2000; O'Connor et al., 1995; Trice & Beyer, 1986). The literature suggests that even when charismatic leaders are not destructive, they can still be dangerous. Yukl (1999) notes that researchers have romanticized charismatic leadership; he observes that some charismatic leaders abuse their power for self-serving ends while "exaggerating positive achievements and taking unwarranted credit...covering up mistakes and failures...blaming others for mistakes... and limiting communication of criticism and dissent" (Yukl, 1999, p. 296). This might explain why there seems to be no direct link between CEO charisma and organizational performance (Agle, Nagarajan, Sonnenfeld, & Srinivasan, 2006; Tosi, Misangyi, Fanelli, Waldman, & Yammarino, 2004). Howell & Avolio (1992) observe that "the risks involved in charismatic leadership are at least as large as the promises" (pp. 43–44). Thus, not all charismatic leaders are destructive, but most destructive leaders are charismatic.

Three components of charisma apply to destructive leaders: vision, self-presentational skills, and personal energy (Conger, 1990; Conger & Kanungo, 1987; Gardner & Avolio, 1998). Charismatic leaders are able to sell a vision of a desirable future (Conger, 1989; Yukl, 1999). According to O'Connor et al. (1995), destructive leaders articulate a

vision of a world characterized by threat and insecurity, where personal safety depends on the domination and defeat of rivals. House & Howell (1992) argue constructive charismatic leaders offer a vision that emphasizes benefits to social institutions whereas destructive leaders articulate visions that enhance their personal power. Themes of enhanced personal power in a hostile world characterize the visions of destructive leaders and are associated with negative life events (Strange & Mumford, 2002), as discussed below.

Impression management is central to Gardner & Avolio's (1998) dramaturgical model of charismatic leadership. It is well documented that charismatic leaders (e.g., John Kennedy, Franklin Roosevelt, and Martin Luther King, Jr.) have exceptional rhetorical skill (Burns, 1978; Harvey, 2001). But the same is true of Hitler, Mussolini, and Foday Sankoh, whose dramatic talents are also established (Pardo Llada, 1988; Redlich, 1999). Consistent with their selfish orientation, destructive leaders are typically self-promoting and concerned with building support for themselves rather than pro-social causes (House & Howell, 1992).

Energy is another characteristic business and political leaders seem to share. Most work long hours and gaining support for a large agenda requires superior stamina and persistence (Gardner, 1996; Padilla, 2005; Viney, 1999). Remarkable achievement at an early age and a high level of vigor characterize charismatic leaders (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978; Simonton, 1994; Viney, 1999). The histories of destructive leaders show these patterns as well. Castro, for example, was described by teachers and schoolmates as “incansable” or untiring (Raffy, 2004).

### 3.1.2. *Personalized need for power*

Ethics distinguish constructive from destructive charismatic leaders (e.g., Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; House & Howell, 1992; Howell & Avolio, 1992; O'Connor et al., 1995). Ethical leaders use position power to serve others whereas unethical ones use power for personal gain and self-promotion (Conger, 1990; Howell & Avolio, 1992). Unethical leaders use control and coercion to impose their goals while censoring opposing views (Howell & Avolio, 1992; Sankowsky, 1995). Control can be overt, as when neighborhood watch groups spy on citizens (e.g., East Germany, North Korea, Cuba) or it can be a subtle appeal to follower needs for authority, security, belongingness in a safe community, or fear of isolation, imprisonment, or death (Lipman-Blumen, 2005). Destructive leaders describe dissidents and rivals in terms designed to devalue and isolate them while promoting in-group solidarity—e.g., Hitler's portrayal of Jews as unsanitary (Epstein, 2002) or Castro's description of dissidents as immoral (Fuentes, 2004; Pardo Llada, 1976).

McClelland's research (1970, 1975) shows that leaders are characterized by a need for power while drawing careful distinction between socialized and personalized power needs. Leaders with personalized needs for power use authority “...in an impetuously aggressive manner for self-aggrandizing purpose, to the detriment of their subordinates and organizations” (House & Aditya, 1997, p. 414). They are impulsive, irresponsible, and extraordinarily punitive (House & Howell, 1992; McClelland, 1975). Destructive leadership outcomes, whether in Stalin's Russia or Ken Lay's Enron, are often associated with leaders with acute personalized needs for power.

### 3.1.3. *Narcissism*

Narcissism is closely linked to charisma and the personalized use of power, and involves dominance, grandiosity, arrogance, entitlement, and the selfish pursuit of pleasure (American Psychiatric Association, 2000; Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006). Many authors argue narcissism is correlated with destructive leadership (Conger, 1990; Hogan et al., 1990; House & Howell, 1992; Maccoby, 2000; O'Connor et al., 1995; Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006; Sankowsky, 1995). In extreme cases—Hitler, Stalin, Saddam Hussein—“malignant narcissism” is associated with hyper-aggressiveness and sadistic, exploitative personal relationships (Glad, 2002). Narcissistic leaders are self-absorbed, attention-seeking, and ignore other's viewpoints or welfare (Conger & Kanungo, 1998). They often claim special knowledge or privilege and demand unquestioning obedience (O'Connor et al., 1995) and their sense of entitlement often leads to self-serving abuses of power (Conger, 1990; Maccoby, 2000; Sankowsky, 1995), and their leadership style is typically autocratic (Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006).

Their grandiose dreams of power and success cause narcissists to ignore the external environment or test their judgment (Conger, 1990; Kets de Vries & Miller, 1985), and their grand visions often defy successful implementation. Narcissism seems related to historian Paul Kennedy's (1987) notion of imperial overstretch—stretching a country or empire's resources to dangerous vulnerability (e.g., Napoleonic France or Hitler's Germany at the end of World War II). Narcissism has also been linked to overreach in business—making ill-advised acquisitions of firms in unrelated sectors and paying more than market value to acquire them (Hayward & Hambrick, 1997; Malmendier & Tate, 2005).

### 3.1.4. *Negative life themes*

O'Connor et al. (1995) observed that leaders who harm their organizations or social systems also speak about themselves in terms of negative life stories. A negative life story reflects “the extent to which the leader had a destructive image of the world and his or her role in the world” (O'Connor et al., 1995, p. 539) and can be traced to early life experiences. Childhood adversity is sometimes associated with positive lessons for those who overcome them (Garmezy & Masten, 1994; Vaillant, 1977). However, parental discord, low socioeconomic status, paternal criminality, maternal psychiatric disorder, and child abuse are common themes for exploitive adults (Hare, 1993; Katz, 1997; Vaillant, 1977). Josef Stalin's childhood was characterized by an abusive and alcoholic father who beat his wife and young son (Montefiore, 2004). A childhood friend described how the beatings made Stalin as cruel as his father. Hitler, Mussolini, and Castro also experienced considerable childhood distress (Raffy, 2004; Redlich, 1999).

O'Connor et al. (1995) describe how a traumatic childhood can dispose individuals to destructive leadership. A leader's vision typically reflects enduring life themes (Zaleznick & Kets de Vries, 1985). Moreover, childhood experiences of powerlessness are associated with using coercive influence techniques (Goodstadt & Hjelle, 1973). Abused children often distance themselves from others and compartmentalize (or disassociate) painful issues (Cramer, 2000; Vaillant, 1977). For example, former U.S. President William Clinton describes the “parallel lives” he lived while dealing with his alcoholic and violent father (Clinton, 2004). This allowed young Clinton to ignore intractable problems while addressing other challenges, and might explain his apparent indifference to the genocide in Rwanda during his second term (Kellerman, 2004).

The ability to ignore the feelings of others and exploit them for personal gain is a defining feature of psychopathy (Gustaffson & Ritzer, 1995; Hare, 1993), but is also associated with narcissism and the unsocialized use of power (McClelland, 1970; 1975; Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006).

### 3.1.5. *Ideology of hate*

A comparison of destructive and constructive leaders suggests that the rhetoric, vision, and worldview of destructive leaders contain images of hate—vanquishing rivals and destroying despised enemies. The anti-semitic fomentations of Hitler and Foday Sankoh's hatred of the urban elite of Sierra Leone contrast sharply with Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream of racial equality and Gandhi's model of passive resistance.

Childhood hardships seem to lead to an ideology of hate—and perhaps a reaction formation in which self-hatred is turned outward (Cramer, 2000; Freud, 1966; Garmezy & Masten, 1994; Vaillant, 1977). For example, Stalin hated authority, in part because persons with power reminded Stalin of his father (Montefiore, 2004). Stalin engaged in many violent acts as he climbed the Bolshevik hierarchy, and his rule was merciless and cruel; he routinely authorized the murder of fellow Russians—including members of his own cabinet (Montefiore, 2004). Whatever the source of the anger and resentment, hate is a key component of the worldview of destructive leaders and it legitimizes the use of violence and retribution (Strange & Mumford, 2002). Hateful themes also emerge in the world of business. An article in the *Wall Street Journal* described how senior managers at Enron created a culture of intimidation (Raghavan, 2002, p. A1). CFO Andrew Fastow had a cube on his desk with the inscription: “When ENRON says it's going to ‘rip your face off’... it means it will rip your face off!”

### 3.1.6. *Summary*

Destructive leaders are characterized by charisma, personalized needs for power, narcissism, negative life history, and an ideology of hate. A single element is probably insufficient: hateful individuals driven by a selfish need for power but lacking rhetorical skills and stamina might not achieve significant power. Similarly, skilled public speakers with a benevolent worldview and socialized motives are less likely to be destructive. Although these characteristics might be necessary for destructive leadership, they are not sufficient. In many contexts, and in conjunction with particular followers, potentially destructive leaders might not achieve power. This raises the topics of followers and the environmental contexts.

## 3.2. *Susceptible followers*

Followers have been studied less often than leaders, yet their role in the leadership process is obviously pivotal (Boccialetti, 1995; Hollander, 1992; Hollander & Offermann, 1990; Lord & Brown, 2004; Yukl, 2005). Barnard (1938)

emphasized the need for followers to accept a leader's authority. Modern relational theories (e.g., Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) also recognize the role of followers in the leadership process. But why are certain followers unable or unwilling to resist domineering and abusive leaders? Kellerman (2004) and Lipman-Blumen (2005) suggest that they need safety, security, group membership, and predictability in an uncertain world. Some followers actually benefit from destructive activities and thus contribute to the toxic vision of the leader. At the group level are needs for social order, cohesion, identity, and the coordination of collective activity. There is also a natural tendency for people to obey authority figures (Milgram, 1974), imitate higher-status individuals (Baharody & Stoneman, 1985), and conform to group norms (Asch, 1951).

It is useful to distinguish among different types of susceptible individuals. Weierter (1997) differentiated between followers who lack a clearly defined self-concept from those who share the leader's values. Kellerman (2004, p. 26–27) distinguished between bystanders, who allow bad leadership to happen, and acolytes, "true believers" who join in the destruction. Combining these concepts, we find two groups of followers: *conformers* and *colluders*. Conformers comply with destructive leaders out of fear whereas colluders actively participate in a destructive leader's agenda. Both types are motivated by self-interest, but their concerns are different (Higgins, 1997): conformers try to minimize the consequences of *not* going along while colluders seek personal gain through association with a destructive leader (cf. prevention and promotion motivation, Higgins, 1997). The vulnerability of conformers is based on unmet basic needs, negative self-evaluations, and psychological immaturity. In contrast, colluders are ambitious, selfish and share the destructive leader's world views.

### 3.2.1. *Unmet basic needs*

Drawing on Maslow (1954), Burns (1978) argued that the basic needs of followers must be met before their higher aspirations can be engaged. The same holds for destructive leadership. The global economic depression of the 1930s and the aftermaths of World War I left many citizens of Germany, Russia, and Italy on the brink of poverty and starvation prior to the rise of Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini (Arendt, 1951; Tuchman, 1984). Today, the most impoverished countries in the world (e.g., much of Central and West Africa, portions of South America) are also ruled by the most corrupt governments (Transparency International, 2005). Evidently, poor people living in daily fear are easier to control.

In addition to food and safety, isolation and loneliness pave the way for totalitarian regimes (Arendt, 1951). Eric Hoffer's (1951) analysis of mass movements led to a similar conclusion. Charles Manson's followers, although from privileged backgrounds, were characterized by feelings of emptiness and alienation from mainstream society (Popper, 2001). Destructive leaders can attract followers by offering them a sense of community and a group in which to belong.

### 3.2.2. *Negative core self-evaluations*

According to Judge, Locke, & Durham (1997), self-esteem, locus of control, and self-efficacy form a higher-order personality factor they call *core self-evaluations*. It is defined as "basic conclusions or bottom-line evaluations that individuals hold about themselves" (Judge & Bono, 2001, p. 81). These beliefs influence the processing of self-relevant information and affect individual responses to environmental demands. Core self-evaluations are related to life satisfaction, job satisfaction, motivation, and occupational performance (Judge & Bono, 2001). Moreover, research indicates that self-esteem, locus of control, and self-efficacy are linked to a vulnerability to destructive leadership (e.g., Luthans et al., 1998).

Self-esteem concerns the basic appraisal people make of their overall value as human beings (Harter, 1990). Low self-esteem distinguishes followers from leaders (Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002). Individuals with low self-esteem often wish to be someone more desirable, which prompts them to identify with charismatic leaders (Hoffer, 1951; Shamir, Arthur, & House, 1994). Weierter (1997) argued that persons with low self-esteem are more likely to identify with a charismatic person because such leaders want to control and manipulate others, and these followers feel they deserve such treatment.

Self-efficacy refers to beliefs about one's capability to perform well (Bandura, 1986); it determines decisions about what activities to undertake and how much effort to spend on them. Finally, locus of control concerns the belief that one determines one's fate versus the belief that outcomes are determined by external factors; individuals with an external locus of control do not see themselves as leaders (Rotter, 1966). Followers with an external locus of control are easier to manipulate and are attracted to others who seem powerful and willing to care for them

(Luthans et al., 1998). Thus, persons with low self-esteem, low self-efficacy, and an external locus of control are susceptible to destructive leaders. Totalitarian regimes, through propaganda, control of the media, societal controls, and persecution of dissidents reinforce this sense of powerlessness and passivity (Arendt, 1951).

### 3.2.3. *Low maturity*

Research on ego development, moral reasoning, and the self-concept suggest that psychologically immature individuals are more likely to conform to authority and to participate in destructive acts. Freud (1921) argued that, in a crowd, peoples' superegos collapse and are replaced symbolically by the leader, who then becomes the individual's guide to action. Conformity can lead to immoral behavior and, consequently, according to Freud, mature adults must be prepared to oppose their leaders. This is the point of Milgram's (1963, 1974) still relevant work suggesting that conforming people are at risk for harming others (e.g., shocking a stranger to death). In a direct extension of Milgram's argument, Kohlberg's theory of moral development states that people who respect rules are capable of immoral behavior in the name of authority (Kohlberg, 1969). According to Kohlberg, such behavior is most likely among adults in the "conventional" ranges of ego development, which includes between 60 and 75% of Western adults (Cook-Greuter, 1999; Loevinger, 1976). Thus, psychological maturity is needed to oppose destructive authority.

Erikson's (1959) developmental theory indicates that maturity involves forming an integrated and socially valued identity. Persons lacking a firm sense of self tend to identify with cultural heroes and to internalize their values. Weierter's (1997) model of charismatic relationships also proposes that followers who lack a clear sense of self will adopt the values of charismatic leaders, which then enhances their self-esteem. Although these vulnerabilities might apply to any immature adult, they apply well to the young (Popper, 2001)—for instance, the Hitler Youth, the Manson family, or Mao's Red Guard. When impressionable followers internalize a destructive leader's vision, they can become committed to a destructive enterprise—conformers can become colluders (Hoffer, 1951; Kets de Vries, 1989; Weierter, 1997).

### 3.2.4. *Ambition*

Although destructive leadership creates negative outcomes for organizations, some members might prosper (Offerman, 2004). They will be individuals close to the leader and others willing to implement the destructive vision (Kellerman, 2004; Offerman, 2004). Ambitious people for status and sometimes engage in exploitative relations, and may be willing to follow coercive policies if it will advance their personal agendas (McClelland, 1975).

The notion that ambitious people will follow destructive leaders in pursuit of status contradicts the view that normal German citizens were duped into supporting Hitler's genocidal policies (cf. Kellman & Hamilton, 1989). Others have noted that Hitler's staff, and other parts of the German government contained ambitious people who understood that status in the Nazi hierarchy depended on pleasing Hitler. As Adams & Balfour (1998) note: "...routine administrative processes [were central] to the implementation of the Holocaust... the nature and dynamics of these bureaucratic processes are not unique to Nazi Germany... but instead are entirely consistent with modern organizations and the technical-rational approach to administration (p. 54)." References to the "final solution" came from the top of the Nazi hierarchy, and certain officials began to compete by implementing policies designed to please der Führer. "Participation in the Final Solution did not result so much from explicit orders systematically disseminated, as through self-recruitment by the zealous and ambitious servants of the Third Reich in response to the impulses and hints they perceived emanating from the center of power" (Browning, 1989, pp. 98–99).

Viewed this way, the dynamics of the holocaust were less a matter of mindless conformity, and than a function of individual efforts to get ahead, regardless of the human cost. The same dynamics are potentially at work in every organization; the collapse of Enron shows that, when there are opportunities to profit, ambitious colluders are easy to recruit (Kellerman, 2004; McLean & Elkind, 2005).

### 3.2.5. *Congruent values and beliefs*

Individuals whose beliefs are consistent with those of a destructive leader are likely to commit to his or her cause (Lord & Brown, 2004; Shamir et al., 1993). Burns (1978) suggested that the power of transformational leadership comes from the alignment of the goals of leaders and followers. The link between similarity and attraction is a robust social psychological phenomenon (Byrne, 1971). Empirical studies show that greater leader-follower value similarity

leads to greater follower satisfaction, commitment, and motivation (Jung & Avolio, 2000; Meglino, Ravlin, & Adkins, 1989).

When followers link leaders with salient aspects of their own self-concept, emotional attachments form (Lord & Brown, 2004; Shamir et al., 1993). The closer the leader is to the follower's self-concept, the stronger the bond and the greater the motivation to follow. To complete the cycle, behaving in ways that are consistent with the leader's vision and the follower's self-concept boosts self-esteem and self-efficacy (Shamir et al., 1993; Weierter, 1997). Thus, followers (e.g., Ernesto "Ché" Guevara) with worldviews that are similar to those of a destructive leader (Castro) are more likely to join the cause (Quirk, 1993; Raffy, 2004).

### 3.2.6. *Unsocialized values*

Followers' values are also relevant in their own right. Specifically, individuals who endorse unsocialized values such as greed and selfishness are more likely to follow destructive leaders and engage in destructive behavior (Hogan, 2006). Ambitious but under-socialized followers are likely to engage in destructive acts, especially if they are sanctioned or encouraged by a leader (McClelland, 1975).

### 3.2.7. *Summary*

Two types of followers support destructive leadership. Conformers passively allow bad leaders to assume power because their unmet needs and immaturity make them vulnerable to such influences. Colluders support destructive leaders because they want to promote themselves in an enterprise consistent with their worldview.

## 3.3. *Conducive environments*

The third domain in the toxic triangle is the environmental context that envelops leaders, followers, and their interactions. Most leadership scholars recognize that the "situation" matters. Our review suggests that four environmental factors are important for destructive leadership: instability, perceived threat, cultural values, and absence of checks and balances and institutionalization.

### 3.3.1. *Instability*

During times of instability, leaders can enhance their power by advocating radical change to restore order (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978; Conger & Kanungo, 1987). Leaders taking power in unstable environments are also granted more authority because instability demands quick action and unilateral decision making (Janis & Mann, 1977; Vroom & Jago, 1974). But once decision-making becomes centralized, it is often difficult to take back (Kipnis, 1972). The structural stability of the social system (Cell, 1974; Conger & Kanungo, 1998; Simonton, 1988)—the extent to which rules of governance are clearly defined and consistently applied over time—is also important. For example, in modern post-communist countries, major policy decisions are frequently based on ad hoc negotiations among elites (Kornai, 1995). Shrewd leaders can exploit fluid and transient structures closed to external scrutiny.

### 3.3.2. *Perceived threat*

Related to structural and organizational instability is the perception of imminent threat. This can range from feelings of mistreatment (e.g., Germans after Versailles) to the desperate economic and social situations in Somalia and Zimbabwe to a beleaguered corporation facing bankruptcy. When people feel threatened, they are more willing to accept assertive leadership. Research on terror management theory illustrates how threat increases followers' support and identification with charismatic leaders, particularly non-participative leaders (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991). One study found that when people were made more aware of their own death, their preference for charismatic leaders increased and preferences for participative leaders declined (Cohen, Solomon, Maxfield, Pyszczynski, & Greenberg, 2004). Another study suggested that reminding people about the mortal dangers of terrorism increased support for U.S. President George W. Bush and his counter-terrorism policies (Landau et al., 2004).

Two points about the role of environmental threats are important. First, objective threats are not necessary; all that is needed is the perception of threat. Second, leaders often perpetuate the perception of threat or an external "enemy" (e.g., Bush's references to the war on terror or Apple's Steve Jobs reference to IBM as "Big Brother") in order to strengthen their power and motivate followers.

### 3.3.3. Cultural values

Culture concerns preferences for certain social conditions and therefore shapes emergent leadership (Hofstede, 1991). Luthans et al. (1998) propose that “dark leaders” are likely to emerge in cultures that endorse the avoidance of uncertainty, collectivism (as opposed to individualism), and high power distance. Uncertainty avoidance involves the extent to which a society feels threatened by ambiguous situations; in such societies, people look to strong leaders to provide hope. Dictators exploit followers’ needs for security by providing structure, rituals, and rules that offer easy solutions to complex problems (Heifetz, 1994; Luthans et al., 1998).

Cultures that emphasize cooperation and group loyalty, as well as in-group/out-group distinctions, are defined as collective (Hofstede, 1991). Such cultures prefer strong leaders to bring people together, in part to absolve the citizens of working out conflicts directly and to provide solidarity and group identity. Finally, Hofstede (1991) defines “power distance” as the difference in privilege and authority between high- and low-status individuals. In high power-distance cultures, especially those with low educational levels and large disparities in wealth distribution, followers are more tolerant of the power asymmetries that characterize tyranny and despotism.

### 3.3.4. Absence of checks and balances and institutionalization

Strong organizations (and nations) tend to have strong institutions and strong countervailing centers of power. The *Federalist Papers*, where Madison suggested the need for checks and balances to avoid the abuses of absolute power, highlight the dangers of unilateral control. (Hamilton, Jay, & Madison, 2000). In this model, multiple branches of government have independent authority and responsibility; each branch can also place limits on the power of others. Systems without such sharing of control—for example, corporations lacking independent board oversight—allow individuals or parties to usurp power (Gandossy & Sonnenfeldt, 2004).

In the management literature, “discretion” concerns the degree to which managers are free from institutional constraints (Finkelstein & Hambrick, 1990). Although leaders need discretion to do their jobs, discretion also allows destructive leaders to abuse their power (Kaiser & Hogan, 2007). The concept of managerial discretion suggests that destructive leadership is most likely in senior jobs (where there is less supervision), in younger and smaller organizations with limited governance mechanisms, and in high-growth and rapidly transforming industries (Hambrick & Abrahamson, 1995). These conditions characterized Enron at the height of its popularity on Wall Street (McLean & Elkind, 2005).

A culture of dependency and apathy among followers can also contribute to the centralization of power. Such an ethos, particularly when combined with instability and ineffective institutions, concentrates power in a leader, leading to greater follower dependence and weakening of opposition and dissidence. The political science literature discusses centralization under the concept of “presidentialism” (Linz, 1994; Mainwaring & Scully, 1995; Shugart & Mainwaring, 1997; Zakaria, 1997). While there is no directly analogous notion in the management literature, the work on empowerment and decentralization of authority (e.g., Argyris, 1998; Conger & Kanungo, 1988) is similar. Centralized governance systems that rely on the top of the organization for decisions stand in sharp contrast to structures based on autonomous political units with effective and professional institutions that share responsibility and authority for governance.

### 3.3.5. Summary

The third leg of the toxic triangle concerns contextual factors that support destructive leadership. It is hard for destructive leaders to succeed in stable systems with strong institutions and adequate checks and balances on power and control. Effective institutions, system stability, and proper checks and balances, along with strong followers, will tend to trump attempts to take over the system.

This, however, is not the entire story about conducive environments. Conducive environments contribute to the emergence of destructive leadership but destructive leaders and colluding followers are sometimes able to take over. Once destructive administrations achieve power, they will consolidate their control by undermining existing institutions and laws. Our distinction here entails both a temporal dimension and the interaction among the elements of the toxic triangle model. They do this by replacing constructive institutions with those designed to enhance central control; by eliminating rivals and dissidents; by manipulating the media and exploiting educational systems, using propaganda to legitimize the process.

The new policies soon become ingrained in the culture (Gersick & Hackman, 1990); people carrying out unconscionable orders sanctioned by a higher authority eventually accept the situation as normal (Kellman &

Hamilton, 1989). The way Enron executives exercised political influence by lobbying politicians to change regulations and laws and nurtured a compliant board of directors, illustrate these practices in a business setting.

### 3.4. *The toxic triangle*

Fig. 1 summarizes the model. Our primary point is that destructive leadership is a function of elements in three domains (leader, followers, and environment). However, there is very little systematic research on interactions among these elements. Conger (1998) suggests that qualitative methods might be useful in early stages of development in leadership theories. Toward that end, we turn to the case of the Cuban dictator, Fidel Castro, to illustrate the dynamics of the toxic triangle.

## 4. Castro and Cuba: an illustration of the toxic triangle

A considerable scholarly and popular literature on Fidel Castro and his Cuban regime has built up over the past 50 years, including 20 major biographies (e.g., Fuentes, 2004; Geyer, 1991; Quirk, 1993; Raffy, 2004). Castro and Cuba provide a useful illustration of the foregoing themes.

### 4.1. *Castro as a destructive leader*

Castro is one of the iconic figures and longest serving dictators in modern history. As a teenager he displayed intelligence, unusual memory, remarkable energy, physical courage, and talent for self-promotion. During his college days, he tried repeatedly to lead various student groups, with no success. These student groups, moreover, were characterized by a propensity for serious violence (Ros, 2003). He identified the previous Cuban dictator, Fulgencio Batista, as an expedient political target for his ambitions. In his early 20s, Castro became a principal opponent of Batista, competing for the public's attention with Batista's other political opponents. After the successful overthrow of the dictatorship at the end of 1958, the 32-year-old Castro and his supporters swiftly extended their control, rapidly suppressing dissent while simultaneously promising free elections, democracy, as well as a better life to the peasant underclass. He embarked on a triumphant US tour and media blitz within weeks of seizing power. All of this prompted one State Department observer to note: "It would be a mistake to underestimate this man...He [is] clearly a strong personality and a born leader..." (Quirk, 1993, p. 243).

As a young man, Castro was seen as bright, charismatic, idealistic, courageous, bold, ruthless, skilled at self-promotion, and able to attract a band of capable and equally ruthless and bloody minded supporters. His charisma is apparent in newsreel clippings. His personalized use of power is seen in the way he enriched himself, and in his lifestyle compared to his citizens. Castro's narcissism is evident from his exhibitionism (long speeches starring him), grandiosity (sending troops to Africa and Central America), and unwillingness to admit to any mistakes (Geyer, 1991; Montaner, 1983, 1999; Pardo Llada, 1976; Raffy, 2004). The negative life themes appear in his fractious relations with his father, difficult upbringing in several foster homes, and ridicule and mocking by schoolmates for his illegitimacy and his rural upbringing (Montaner, 1999; Pardo Llada, 1976, 1988; Raffy, 2004). Castro's several wives and mistresses report that an ideology of hatred for the United States was a constant theme in his private life (Geyer, 1991; Fuentes, 2004; Raffy, 2004).

### 4.2. *Cubans as susceptible followers*

Two groups of Cubans were positioned to profit from a Castro-led revolution. The first, and quite small group, consisted of Castro's inner circle: backers and fellow revolutionaries (e.g., Ernesto "Ché" Guevara, brother Raúl Castro) who shared Castro's worldview and would themselves accede to power—always a desirable outcome for political operatives. The second was Cuban rural residents and the uneducated urban poor, a large group for whom the promise of escape from poverty was alluring. The first group did indeed gain power; the degree to which the second group profited from the Castro regime is highly debatable (Fuentes, 2004; Latell, 2005; Raffy, 2004). A third group—a relatively large and mostly apolitical professional middle class—opposed Batista's corrupt dictatorship and initially backed Castro's revolution. Their support vanished as it became obvious that elections and democracy would not materialize (Montaner, 1983; Pardo Llada, 1988; Quirk, 1993). Many of them, or their unaccompanied children, fled to

the US and Europe during the 1960s (Thomas, 1998; Triay, 1999). Their departure drastically reduced the number of potential dissidents and further consolidated Castro's influence.

#### 4.3. Cuba's propitious environment

Cuban history prior to Castro was a story of political dysfunction in the midst of economic prosperity, resulting in: (a) the typical Latin American income inequalities; and (b) political instability with coups and revolts occurring every few years (Thomas, 1998). Cuban political and legal institutions were ineffective and corrupt. A culture of presidentialism and a concentration of power at the top of the political structures existed (Geyer, 1991; Thomas, 1998). Crisis and governmental instability were the norm. A small inner circle, including high officers in the police and the military, supported the dictator Batista, who left them alone to do business. Most of the rest of the population, including the large middle class and the larger poor and uneducated segments, chafed at the violence and corruption and resented the status quo. A long history of instability and ineffective governmental institutions made the Cuban population ripe for revolution.

After seizing power, Castro and his supporters consolidated their authority by swiftly dismantling democratic and social institutions and replacing them with powerful police and surveillance systems to control dissent (Latell, 2005; Fuentes, 2004; Quirk, 1993; Thomas, 1998). The Castro regime has perpetuated a sense of insecurity with recurrent references to external threats in the form of invasion from the US or the return of Cuban Americans who would take back their homes and property (Alarcón, 2006).

#### 4.4. Destructive outcomes

We have a charismatic and determined ruler, susceptible followers, and an oppressive and unresponsive government often operating in situations of crisis and urgency. What followed was a revolution initially hailed by leftist thinkers in the U.S., Latin America, and Europe as a paragon of freedom, economic justice, and human rights (DePalma, 2006; Matthews, 1961).

The problem was Castro and his followers. Like Stalin, Mao, and all the former Communist leaders of Eastern Europe, Castro was motivated by self-interest and a narcissistic need for power. There were some positive developments for the Cuban poor, notably in health care and education, but at great cost to their freedom and human rights. The overall consequences of Castro's regime have been an economic disaster, and for all the predictable reasons. On the one hand, Forbes magazine has estimated conservatively that Castro is personally worth nearly \$ 1 billion (Kroll, 2006), with extensive accounts in Swiss banks (Latell, 2005; Fuentes, 2004). On the other hand, pre-Castro Cuba ranked third in Latin America in per capita food consumption; today it ranks last. Telephone service is at 1950s levels, electric power generation is only ahead of Haiti (U.S. Department of State, 2002). In the 1960s and 1970s, one quarter of the population fled, and many more would leave today if they could (Fontova, 2005; Thomas, 1998). It is not the case that economic sanctions by the U.S. have caused this decline in Cuban wellbeing. The wrong-headed policies of a corrupt Cuban regime and a non-functioning economy are largely to blame.

### 5. Implications for further study

We have tried to make two points in this paper. First, destructive leadership should be defined in terms of negative group and organizational outcomes. Second, these outcomes result from a confluence of factors concerning destructive leaders, susceptible followers, and conducive environments. We encourage a more holistic, systems view of destructive leadership. More work is obviously needed to test and further develop this perspective. We thus propose three areas for further study.

#### 5.1. Interactions within domains

The elements listed in Fig. 1 are based on conceptual analysis and a review of the literature on destructive leadership. Our review mostly identified factors that have a bivariate relationship with destructive leadership. This leaves open the question of relationships among elements within each domain. For instance, what is the relative strength of the relationships between indices of destructive leadership and charisma, personalized use of power,

narcissism, negative life themes, and ideology of hate? O'Connor et al. (1995) report that negative life themes are most important among the leader variables they studied. Political theories suggest that a lack of checks and balances might be the most conducive of the environmental factors (Diamond, 2002; Zakaria, 1997).

There is also the question of whether the elements within each domain are additive or interactive. In additive models, only the main effects are considered. The more factors present, the more likely destructive leadership is to emerge—but each characteristic is independent of the others. In interactive models, the effect of one leader characteristic depends on the level of other characteristics. It is improbable that charisma by itself, for example, would lead to destructive outcomes. Rather, interactions among multiple factors, such as charisma, personalized values, and ideology of hate, are likely responsible for destructive results (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Conger, 1990; Howell & Avolio, 1992).

### 5.2. *Interactions between domains*

Most studies of leadership emphasize the role of the individual leader. A few studies focus on the role of followers (e.g., Boccialetti, 1995; Offerman, 2004; Weierner, 1997). Social psychological studies consider the situational forces that promote individuals to go along with destructive authority (e.g., Asch, 1951; Milgram, 1974). Lacking is research that examines leaders, followers, and environments at the same time. At a minimum, it would be beneficial to study two domains at the same time (e.g., leaders and followers).

The question of additive versus interactive is relevant. We assume that destructive leadership is an interaction between leaders, followers, and environments. But there is little research on the point. For example, it is possible that a group of mature, confident, and socialized followers could nullify the potentially destructive effects of a hateful narcissist? Future research needs to explore how follower and situational features moderate the relationship between toxic leader characteristics and destructive outcomes.

### 5.3. *Boundary conditions*

Finally, we have reviewed information from politics, business, and religion because we assume that destructive leadership is the same regardless of the macro-context (Hogan, 2006). Nonetheless, we are unaware of research testing this assumption directly. As empirical work accumulates, comparisons of results across different environments will determine the degree to which research results generalize. For instance, charisma could be a more potent factor in destructive political leadership; fear and mortality salience might be more relevant in military settings; greed and ambition might be a pronounced follower factor in business; and as the Catholic priest abuse scandals suggest, young, impressionable followers could be pivotal in religious contexts. These questions await further study.

## 6. **Implications for practice**

Destructive leadership is as much a practical problem as it is a theoretical one. Based on our three-part framework, we close with three sets of suggestions: leader selection and development; follower strengthening and empowerment; and organizational improvement. First, effective procedures to identify potentially destructive individuals can be taken in leader selection and development. Studies of how corporate executives are hired indicate that validated psychometric assessment tools are rarely used (Sessa, Kaiser, Taylor, & Campbell, 1998). Potentially destructive leaders might be identified in the hiring and promotion process by including assessments of narcissism and other dark side personality factors (e.g., Hogan & Hogan, 2001), selfish versus socialized motives (McClelland, 1961), and moral and ethical standards (Craig & Gustafson, 1998; Rest, 1979). In terms of development, feedback and assessment tools are typically based on competency models, which focus on positive attributes associated with effective leaders and desirable leader qualities (Shippmann et al., 2000). Expanding this domain to include undesirable leader behaviors and attributes (cf. Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000) might lead to remedial activities to stave off destructive tendencies in leaders. A greater focus on ethical standards in management training and education is not a guarantee, but it could minimize destructive consequences.

Developing stronger followers by promoting a culture of empowerment is important in managing potential destructiveness (Hollander & Offermann, 1990). Destructive leaders exert their influence through unilateral power (Conger, 1990; Howell & Avolio, 1992). Cultures that reinforce collaboration and employee initiative and involvement maintain balance and control over authoritarian power. A related strategy is to reward leaders who develop the

leadership potential of their subordinates. Destructive leaders, particularly those who are unethical charismatics, neglect staff development (Conger, 1990; Howell & Avolio, 1992). Making follower development an explicit criterion for promotion could reduce the likelihood that destructive individuals will emerge. In addition, by encouraging managers to develop subordinates, organizations might make their employees less likely to conform to destructive influences.

Perhaps the most important environmental factor for preventing destructive leadership is the presence of checks and balances. Hierarchy, accountability, and a chain of command often provide needed controls at the lower organizational levels. But at the top of organizations, strong oversight by a board of directors is necessary (Kaiser & Hogan, 2007). For boards to govern effectively, certain conditions are essential. They include board independence, with a critical mass of outside members not hand-picked by the CEO; policy-level oversight by the board in company affairs, including performance reviews and succession processes; and board accountability, where the board is responsible for executive and organizational performance and also has the power to sanction executives. These conditions, however, have not been the norm, perhaps because as board control increases, top management power and autonomy tend to decline (Gandossy & Sonnenfeld, 2004).

As Howell & Avolio (1992) suggest, promoting ethical and moral behavior through policies and visible enforcement can deter unethical and destructive activities. Moreover, organizations endorsing cultural values such as uncertainty avoidance, collectivism, and power distance are more likely to experience destructive leadership (Luthans et al., 1998). Finally, organizational crisis and turmoil call for increased vigilance in selecting leaders to avoid hasty decisions during desperate times (Gladstein & Reilly, 1985).

## 7. Conclusion

Further development in the study of leadership depends on taking a less ideological perspective, one that acknowledges that effective leadership can yield results ranging from constructive to destructive. The definition of destructive leadership should emphasize negative outcomes that compromise the quality of life for constituents and the fate of the larger social organization, rather than focusing on the characteristics of individual leaders (cf. Kaiser & Hogan, submitted for publication). Moreover, destructive leadership should be studied in its natural ecology, in terms of the interactions among leaders, followers, and contexts. The toxic triangle calls attention to this and offers some insight into the more important elements within each of these three domains.

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