

Bad boss? You may be making things better—or worse

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Disagreeable, dishonest and careless bosses can mean bad outcomes for organizations and work groups. However, new research highlights that the employees they work with also play a major role in this. Employee anxiety, self-esteem and how leadership behavior is perceived can all affect the leader's influence on outcomes—and both followers and leaders can buffer against the effects of certain undesirable traits.

Published in [Frontiers in Psychology](#) as a special article collection on the 'dark side' of leadership, the research can help organizations identify potentially problematic leaders or followers to reduce their negative effects.

"Surprisingly, not only [leaders](#)' but also [followers](#)' dark-sides have emerged as hindering factors for organizational functioning. We are moving away from the somewhat unidimensional view that leaders are omnipotent and solely to blame for negative outcomes in organizations," says Professor Susanne Braun of Durham University, UK, who co-edited the research collection together with Professor Ronit Kark, based at Bar-Ilan University, Israel, and Professor Barbara Wisse, based at the University of Groningen, Netherlands, and Durham University, UK.

Leadership and followership are crucial aspects of organizational functioning and can affect our society at all levels. Studies integrating leader personality traits and styles, follower personality traits and behaviors as well as their contexts are rare—and most studies focus on good traits rather than 'dark' [leadership](#) or followership.

"In the wake of various scandals involving misbehavior of leaders and rank-and-file employees, more attention has been given to the dark aspects of leadership," explains Wisse. "There is a growing awareness that the positive side of leadership and followership should be complemented by a focus on the darker side. There are also plenty of 'grey areas' in-between, where further insights are needed."

The research highlights ['Three Nightmare Traits'](#) at the core of dark leadership: dishonesty, disagreeableness and carelessness. When coupled with a leader who is highly extroverted and low in emotionality, serious negative consequences for employees and organizations can occur, including absenteeism, turnover, stress and poor performance.

How the traits of leaders and followers interact to mediate these bad outcomes, an overlooked aspect in the past, is the focus of other studies. Using a range of techniques, ranging from experimental evidence to real-life observations, this research reveals that certain characteristics combine to produce different outcomes.

For example, followers with [high Machiavellianism](#) use all possible means to achieve desired ends, such as hiding knowledge or using emotional manipulation. However, this negative behavior can be effectively reduced by ethical leadership—leaders demonstrating appropriate conduct through actions and interpersonal relationships.

"Another study positioned followers as buffers to negative leadership," says Wisse. "It found that when followers had higher self-esteem, leaders with psychopathic traits behaved less self-servingly."

Employee self-esteem is also linked to how a leader's behavior is perceived and the subsequent consequences. [Narcissistic leaders](#) were rated as more abusive by followers with low self-esteem and in turn, this was related to lower [employee](#) performance and the experience of

burnout symptoms.

The nuanced impact of destructive leadership was also assessed. One study found, for example, that employees who feel [abused by leaders](#) have a higher urgency to leave the organization in comparison to those experiencing embezzlement and exploitative leader behavior. Another revealed that [strict tyrannical leadership](#) can lead to employee work-family conflict, which in turn is related to employees' emotional exhaustion. Furthermore, this can be made worse if the employee suffers from anxiety.

The findings from this research collection will be useful to advise businesses and practitioners on what drives leaders and followers towards dark-side behaviors—as well as point them to potential remedies to the problem.

"A good start could be a positive organizational culture that [buffers against negative leadership](#). Perceived accountability, organizational transparency, and values such as trust, respect and support can offset some of the [negative effects](#) a few individuals may have on the overall organization," explains Kark.

Another approach could be to identify individuals with dark-side traits and prevent them from entering an organization. For example, the Three Nightmare Traits can be aligned with specific personality profiles. This can allow organizations to put specific actions in place to highlight problematic leaders and employees at various stages of their career.

"Diligence is required in early hiring and selection stages, when candidates with dark-side traits may seek to take control of the process," she adds. "Structured interviews, work samples, and focus on actions and feelings can help to spot inconsistencies. Checking the facts through information from previous employers is a must."

The dark-sides of leadership and followership will always be a natural part of an organizational reality that many employees face day in and day out. It is hoped this collection of research will encourage an integrative view of leadership and followership, leading to better outcomes for organizations and employees alike.

More information: Susanne Braun et al, Editorial: Fifty Shades of Grey: Exploring the Dark Sides of Leadership and Followership, *Frontiers in Psychology* (2018). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01877](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01877)

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