

Running Head: Destructive Leader Behavior in the Norwegian Armed Forces

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Abstract

Recent research indicates that destructive leadership might have a detrimental effect on a wide range of outcomes across the organization. However, few studies have focused on the military context. The present study examined the extent to which destructive leader behavior was related to individual work-related attitudes and feelings among military personnel in the Norwegian Armed forces (N=170). Dependent variables were (1) Burnout, (2) Work Engagement, and (3) Organizational Commitment. Hierarchical regression analyses showed that destructive leader behavior significantly predicted Burnout and Work Engagement. This is the first study that examines, and in parallel confirms the unique influence of destructive leadership on important work environment variables among members of the Norwegian armed forces. Despite the fact that the respondents in this sample most likely have above average psychological robustness, they still appear to be significantly influenced by destructive leader behavior. At the same time, our findings also indicate that respondents are able to maintain their organizational commitment despite destructive leader behavior. This study thus represents a unique step towards establishing knowledge about the interplay between destructive leader behavior and psychosocial related phenomena, forming a potential basis for theoretical and practical developments.

Keywords: Military; Destructive leader behavior; Burnout; Work engagement; Organizational commitment

Introduction

Background

Leadership research has traditionally been aimed at positive aspects of styles and behavior, which contribute to increased productivity and other positive organizational outcomes. However, the last 20 years we have seen an increased focus on negative and destructive aspects of leadership at both individual and organizational levels [1-3]. Organizational outcomes of destructive leadership behavior include poorer organizational functioning and financial performance, more counterproductive work behavior including interpersonal deviance and increased work withdrawal behavior like turnover intention [4-7]. Individual level outcomes could include sexual harassment, decreased job satisfaction, and decreased psychological wellbeing [8,9]. Destructive leadership might thus have a detrimental effect on a wide range of outcomes across the organization [10-12]. Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, and Vohs found in their comprehensive review that the negative impact of negative events in social and interpersonal relations is far greater than the positive impact of positive events [13]. It is thus important to eliminate destructive leader behavior rather than simply to focus on leaders who function well. However, identification and elimination of destructive leaders is rarely a target when developing individual and organizational leadership.

Despite the increased interest in negative aspects of leadership, few studies have focused on the military context, even if leadership is being considered a cornerstone of the military profession [3,14]. One reason for this might be that leadership is seen as an exclusively positive

entity, regarded as a universal ambition for all military leaders [15]. The perception of military leadership as aspirational might in fact appear so indisputable that questioning it would cause considerable organizational disturbance [16]. However, given that the negative impact of toxic leaders is greater for subordinates who have a strong sense of value and meaning in their jobs, destructive leadership may be especially damaging in military settings as this means that the best soldiers are most likely to be affected by destructive leaders [17]. As this overview highlights that destructive leadership is known to affect soldier well-being, retention, and mission accomplishment, the aim of the present study was to study the influence of destructive leadership behavior in a military context. We wished to examine the extent to which destructive leader behavior is associated with the individual outcomes of burnout, work engagement and organizational commitment among military personnel in the Norwegian Armed forces.

Why study destructive leadership in a military context?

The consequences of poor leadership in the Armed Forces are great, with Bass [14] highlighting leadership as a decisive factor in achieving military success. In a worst case scenario, bad leadership in the Armed Forces could lead to mutiny and death, as well as a whole host of less serious, but still problematic outcomes [15]. This necessitates a focus on the quality of leadership in the Armed Forces.

For the Norwegian Armed Forces, leadership has been institutionalized through a well-structured system of selection, education, and training. A good reputation, combined with the fact that large civilian organizations have recruited officers from the Norwegian military system for decades, indicates that military leaders perform well [18]. However, a recent report from a work environment

study in the Norwegian Armed Forces indicated that up to 20% of the employees in the Armed Forces had experienced aspects of destructive leader behavior [19]. These findings are supported by studies in the US Armed Forces providing data of 172 participants from the class of 2008 at a military senior service college, indicating that all of the respondents had experienced toxic leadership during their careers [15]. Further, in a US Army Technical Report [20] it is reported that the Army needs to be concerned with toxic leadership because of its prevalence and serious consequences. It is emphasized that perceptions of toxic leadership were more negative in lower rank cohorts, and that data from 2009 and 2010 showed that the vast majority (83%) of respondents indicated having encountered leaders who were over-controlling, inhibitive of innovative thinking, or whom generally created a negative working environment in the last year. In the same report, very few denied negative leadership being a problem, with most saying that destructive leader behavior had a severely negative impact on the command climate. These examples indicate the existence of destructive leadership within the military organization, which potentially might have negative effects at both organizational and individual levels. It is therefore important to further investigate the extent to which destructive leader behavior is related to central outcomes in the Armed Forces, such as erosion of trust, reduced effectiveness, commitment and retention, break-down in essential communication, and diminished follower well-being [4].

Few studies have examined destructive leadership in a military context although some have explored prevalence and investigated the relationship between destructive leader behavior and work environment factors. Kelly and Barsade [21] claimed that toxic leadership could be contagious, in that one toxic leader has the potential to negatively affect dozens or even hundreds of soldiers, whom in turn might affect even more personnel. In their study of officers at military senior service colleges, Reed and Bullis found that destructive leader behavior was negatively related to outcomes such as turnover intention, stress, and organizational commitment [15]. Further, Hannah et al. found that at the platoon level, abusive supervisors affected social and task cohesion, and were the best predictor of average disciplinary actions and reprimands received [22]. In a sample of air National Guard members, Zellars et al. found that the relationship between abusive supervision and subordinates' organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) was stronger among subordinates who defined OCB as extra-role behavior [23]. To the best of our knowledge, no studies have explored the impact of destructive leadership behavior in the Norwegian Armed forces.

The influence of destructive leadership on burnout, work engagement and organizational commitment

Serving in the Armed forces requires both willingness and capacity to engage in complex and dangerous situations, which demands psychological robustness beyond the general norm. Good leadership is seen as important in maintaining and even reinforcing psychological robustness [24]. Destructive leadership is expected to have the opposite effect, with serious consequences ranging from the life loss of personnel to losing the war [25]. Destructive leadership may also affect the work environment, damaging the employees' wellbeing, health, commitment, and desire for work, which are all necessary components for optimal military functioning. Aspects of negative leadership all appear destructive to motivation, health and efficiency [26]. This notion is supported by two recent meta-analyses that investigate the correlation between destructive leadership and job satisfaction,

emotional exhaustion, and organizational commitment [1,27]. Destructive leadership might therefore influence factors like burnout, work engagement and organizational commitment in the Armed Forces.

Burnout

Research indicates that work life burnout is on the rise, and may exist in all occupations [28,29]. Burnout may also be a consequence of overly demanding work environments including destructive leadership, but also appears related to personality traits [30-32]. Burnout is often described as three-dimensional, consisting of a) exhaustion (considered the core component of burnout [33], b) cynicism, and c) professional efficacy [34]. Symptoms include extreme fatigue, indifference and distancing which may cause absenteeism and somatic symptoms as well as reduced work performance [32,35]. Meta-analysis has also indicated a negative relationship between burnout and organizational commitment [31]. Several studies have supported a positive relationship between destructive leadership and burnout, mostly in health care contexts. Kanste et al. found that the experience of laissez-faire leadership in the health care sector correlated positively with all the three dimensions of burnout, while Hetland et al. found destructive leadership to increase the risk of burnout among subordinates [33,36]. However, the influence of destructive leadership on burnout in a military context requires further exploration.

Work engagement

Work engagement may be seen as the conceptual opposite of burnout, described as a three-dimensional positive emotional state [37,38]. The first dimension is vigor, characterized by high energy levels and the mental ability to focus this energy. Vigor also includes willingness to perform, even during adverse conditions. The second dimension, dedication, is characterized by inspiration and pride, including a prominent inclination to be involved in the employer organization. Dedication may be regarded as fundamental trait in an altruistic organization like the Armed forces [39]. The third dimension is absorption, i.e. the ability to immerse oneself in work [38]. These abilities may all be seen as critical to successful military operations.

Work engagement is important to employee wellbeing at the work place and is found to correlate positively with good health among the employees [40]. Considering that constructive leader behavior has positive effects on work engagement, it would be reasonable to assume that destructive leadership might reversely reduce work engagement among employees [41,42].

Organizational commitment

Organizational commitment is a measure of an individual's tendency to identify with and seek involvement in their organization [30,43], and may be described by a three-component model comprising affective, contingency, and normative aspects [30,43,44]. Normative commitment appears to play the most important part in a military setting [45].

Given the collaborative nature of the Norwegian Armed Forces, strong organizational commitment is required [39]. The close relationship between commitment and leadership is clearly expressed in the Norwegian Joint Operational Doctrine, where commitment is highlighted as one of the fundamental factors in its leadership philosophy "Mission Command" [46]. A number of studies have suggested a significant negative relationship between destructive

leadership and organizational commitment [2,47]. Additionally, studies indicate a significant negative relationship between burnout and organizational commitment [30,48]. Reversely, employees with low rates of sick leave report high levels of both commitment and work engagement [40]. In their meta-analysis, Meyer et al. found that employees experiencing support from their superiors also report higher levels of affective commitment [44]. These findings indicate a positive relationship between constructive leader behavior and organizational commitment. Destructive leadership behavior might thus reasonably be expected to negatively affect organizational commitment.

The present study

Destructive leadership behavior is known to negatively affect various psychosocial work environmental factors. Although much research has focused on burnout, work engagement and commitment, few studies have explored their relationship with negative leadership behavior. With most studies using civilian samples, little is known about these mechanisms in a military context. The present study thus aimed to examine the influence of destructive leader behavior on burnout, work engagement and organizational commitment among military personnel participating in leadership development programs in the Norwegian Armed Forces.

The three following hypotheses were tested:

H1. Destructive leader behavior is positively related to burnout

H2. Destructive leader behavior is negatively related to work engagement

H3. Destructive leader behavior is negatively related to organizational commitment.

Methods

Participants

A total of 203 candidates were invited to participate in the study. The sample consisted of two classes of students from the Norwegian Defense University College (n=140, of whom 70 graduated in June 2014 and 70 in June 2015), and three classes from the Norwegian Armed forces' leadership development program (n=63 of whom 42 graduated in June 2014 and 21 graduated in June 2015). The student group was selected for enrollment at their respective institutions based on criteria including motivation, leader experience, and future leader potential. All students were previously selected and screened for general enrollment in the Norwegian Armed Forces, implying sound levels of psychological robustness. Questionnaires were distributed to all 203 students at the end of their respective education programs in June 2014 and 2015. A total of 170 students returned the questionnaire, yielding a response rate of 83% of which 138 (81%) were male. Average age was 42.1 years (SD=5.37), ranging from 27 to 51. The study was approved by the Norwegian Social Science Data Service.

Measures:

Demographics-Age and gender were assessed.

Destructive leader behavior: The Destrudo-L scale (20 items) was used to measure the participants' perception of their leaders' destructive leader behavior [49]. This instrument is developed as a context-specific instrument to examine aspects of destructive

leadership in a military context. Participants were asked to assess their previous leader (before they attended the program) within five sub domains, each consisting of four items: a) Arrogant and unjust, b) threat, punishment and demands, c) ego centric and false, d) passive and cowardly, e) indecisive and scatter-brained. Items were rated on a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 "never/almost never" to 6 "often/quite often". Examples of items: «Behaves arrogantly», «does not trust co-workers», and «gives vague instructions». Only the total score was used for the purposes of this study.

Burnout:

Burnout was measured by the Maslach Burnout Inventory-General Survey (MBI-GS, 6 items) [50]. Only the exhaustion sub scale was used as it is regarded as the core dimension of burnout. Items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 "never the last year" to 6 "daily". Sample item: «To work a full day really wears me out». Cronbach's alpha value of the scale is displayed in Table 1. Work engagement: Work engagement was measured using a short version of The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES, 9 items) [38]. The inventory comprises three subscales: a) vitality (3 items), b) enthusiasm (3 items) and c) ability to become absorbed in work (3 items) although only the total score was used for the purposes of this study. Items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 "never in the last year" to 6 "daily". Examples of items are: «I am full of energy at work», and «I am inspired by my work».

Organizational Commitment: Organizational commitment was measured by the Organizational Commitment Questionnaire short form (OCQ, 9 items) [51]. Items are scored on a 7-point Likert scale, indicating the degree to which people value the organization they work for, and how strongly they wish to maintain organizational membership. Sample item: «To me, the Armed Forces would be the best organization to work for».

Procedure and statistical analyses

SPSS 21.0 was used for all statistical analyses. Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations were computed for all study variables. Correlations and regression analyses were computed using list-wise deletion of missing data, and Cronbach's alpha was used to estimate internal consistency for the scales included in the study. Separate hierarchical regression models were computed for each dependent variable (Burnout, Work engagement, and Organizational commitment). The first step in each regression model included Age and Gender as control variables. For step two, Destructive leader behavior was entered to test for any influence on Burnout, Work engagement, and Organizational commitment after controlling for the effects of Age and Gender. Individual predictors were only interpreted if the corresponding step was significant.

Results

Descriptive statistics, including Cronbach's alpha values, mean values and correlations between the studied variables, are presented in Table 1. All hypotheses were initially tested by investigating correlations. Gender showed a low to moderate yet significant positive correlation with Destructive Leader Behavior ($r=0.18^{**}$) and Organizational Commitment ($r=0.25^{**}$). Destructive Leader Behavior was negatively and significantly correlated with Work Engagement ($r=-0.19^*$), and positively and significantly correlated with Burnout ($r=0.29^{**}$). Correlation analyses were followed up with three

hierarchical regression analyses, the results of which are presented in Table 2.

Burnout

Demographic variables (age and gender) were entered in the first step as control variables, but failed to predict a significant part of the variance in Burnout. In step 2, Destructive Leader Behavior explained a moderate, significant part of the variance in Burnout (8.7%) with higher levels of Destructive Leader Behavior associated with increased levels of Burnout.

Work engagement

Age and gender were entered in the first step as control variables, but failed to predict a significant part of the variance in Work Engagement. The contribution of Destructive Leader Behavior in step 2 was significant (4.7%), with lower levels of Destructive Leader Behavior associated with increased levels of Work Engagement.

Organizational commitment

Age and gender were again entered in the first step as control variables, explaining a significant part of the variance (6.3%). As an individual predictor, gender explained a significant part of the variance, indicating higher levels of Organizational Commitment among males. Finally, the contribution of Destructive Leader Behavior in step 2 was not significant.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which destructive leader behavior was related to outcomes, such as burnout, work engagement and organizational commitment among military personnel. Age and gender were used as control variables. We found

destructive leader behavior to be negatively and significantly correlated with work engagement, and positively and significantly correlated with burnout.

Despite the low to medium sizes of the correlations, Hypothesis 1 and 2 were supported. Hypothesis 3 was not supported as no significant correlation was found between destructive leader behavior and organizational commitment. Demographic variables predicted a small, yet significant amount of the variance in organizational commitment (6.3%).

The single predictor of gender had a significant effect on organizational commitment, with females scoring slightly higher than males. Previous research on gender differences in organizational commitment has produced inconsistent results regarding the strength and direction of this relationship [34,52,53].

Marsden et al. also concluded in their study that gender differences in terms of organizational commitment can be regarded minimal [54]. Additionally, as the number of females in this sample appeared is small (n=32), these results should be interpreted with care.

Destructive leader behavior added significantly to the prediction of burnout (8.7%), indicating that exposure to destructive leader behavior is associated with a higher degree of burnout in respondents.

This lends support to both Hypothesis 1 and existing research [33,36,55]. Further, destructive leader behavior also added significantly to the prediction of work engagement (4.7%), indicating that exposure to destructive leadership is associated with a lower degree of work engagement in the respondents and supporting our Hypothesis 2. A number of studies have indicated a positive significant relation between constructive leader behavior and work engagement [41,42], with our findings giving reason to believe that destructive leader behavior would have an opposite, negative effect (Table 1).

Demogr		Alpha	M	SD	Age	Gender	1	2	3
Age		-	42.07	5.37	-				
Gender		-	-	-	-0.02	-			
Burnout	1	-0.84	1.28	0.97	-0.13	-0.05	-		
Work Engagement	2	-0.92	4.62	0.86	0.03	0.13	-0.37**	-	
Organization Commitment	3	-0.83	5.23	0.71	-0.01	0.25**	-0.09	.43**	-
Destructive Leader Behavior	4	-0.93	2.05	0.81	-0.06	0.18*	.29**	-0.19*	-0.05

Note: * p<0.05. **p<0.01 (two-tailed). Gender was coded 0=male and 1=female.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Variables in the Study (N=167).

It should be noted that although individual psychological robustness is thought to buffer the influence of destructive leader behavior [56], respondents in this study still appear to be significantly influenced by such behavior, despite being selected for robustness at several instances during their training and career. Finally, destructive leader behavior failed to explain significant amounts of variance in organizational commitment, and our Hypothesis 3 was not supported. This finding is somewhat surprising as several previous studies have found significant correlations between these two variables [2,47].

Based on civilian samples, these studies argue that negative attitudes against a leader may develop into negative attitudes against the organization, due to the leader being viewed as a representative of that organization. However, in the armed forces, personnel often experience rapid changes of leaders due to the service pattern. This might drive a separation of negative attitudes against a leader from attitudes against the organization at large, thus allowing the maintenance of strong commitment to the Armed Forces at the organizational level despite encountering destructive leadership behavior (Table 2).

Variables		Burnout		Work engagement		Organizational commitment	
		β	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2
Step 1	Demographics		0.019		0.019		.063**
	Age	-0.13		0.02		-0.001	
	Gender	-0.51		0.15**		.027**	
Step 2	Destructive		.087***		.047**		0.003
	Leader Behavior	0.32***		-0.22**		-0.05	
	R ²		0.106		0.066		0.066
	N		167		167		167

Note: All coefficients were taken from the last step of the regression analysis. *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001. Gender was coded 0=male and 1=female.

Table 2: Hierarchical multiple regression analysis for predicting burnout, work engagement, and organizational commitment.

Study Strengths and Limitations

One strength of this study is that it is the first to explore the effect of destructive leader behavior in the Norwegian Armed Forces. It also broadens general knowledge of the interplay between destructive leader behavior and individual and organizational outcomes in the military organization.

A limitation of this study is its cross-sectional design, which precludes the drawing of firm conclusions as to causality. Further, despite the identification of statistically significant predictors of burnout and work engagement in this study, the overall amount of variance accounted for is modest, leaving much of the variance unexplained. The study also relies to a large extent on self-report, which may increase common method variance (CMV) [57-59]. However, the destructive leader behavior ratings are scored by objective sources, represented by the employees.

Conclusion

This study confirms the influence of destructive leader behavior on the work related indicators of burnout and work engagement. Despite the fact that the respondents in this sample most likely have above average psychological robustness, they still appear to be significantly influenced by destructive leader behavior.

Our findings thus clearly indicate that destructive leader behavior should be taken seriously in the Norwegian Armed forces, with appropriate measures applied, both at individual and organizational levels. Reed and Bullis also noted that toxic leadership remains underreported in both corporate and military settings, given that data are obtained only from the “survivors” [15]. Conceivably, the worst leaders have driven away personnel, while stayers have become less sensitive to it; however, reporting is also limited because the most serious offenders have likely been relieved of duty as well.

At the same time, findings also indicate that respondents are able to maintain their organizational commitment despite destructive leader behavior. This is promising, especially since organizational commitment is related to a number of positive organizational outcomes [39].

This study thus represents a unique step towards establishing knowledge about the interplay between destructive leader behavior and psychosocial related phenomena, forming a potential basis for theoretical and practical developments. However, additional work is needed to explore and evaluate other aspects of destructive leader behavior in the Norwegian Armed forces. Further research should investigate the influence of destructive leader behavior over time, and seek to include a wider range of variables related to coping and performance.

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