Leader as Anti-Hero:
Decoding Nuances of Dysfunctional Leadership

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Abstract

Leaders behaving like villains or anti-hero are most appalling in social as well as organizational contexts. On large number of occasions, high-handed behaviour of leaders remains unreported thus reinforcing dysfunctional leadership patterns at the cost of organizational success and employee well-being. The consequences of dysfunctional leadership behaviour are beyond measure. Organizations lose out on competitiveness due to withholding of discretionary efforts on the part of the employees as a result of being victimized by their toxic bosses without any valid grounds. On the other hand, the employees working under dysfunctional leaders suffer from annoyance, psychological stress and trauma and transfer their frustration on to their family members in terms of being indifferent and violent. This paper provides perceptive view on the issue and suggests curative strategies to mitigate ill-effects of dysfunctional leadership.

Keywords: leadership, dysfunction, organizational performance

Introduction

Traditionally leaders have been regarded as fountainhead of energy and motivation, enabling their followers to transcend all limitations in order to realize the vision and mission of any organization. For long, leadership has been viewed as fundamentally benevolent act aimed at benefitting all the stakeholders. Such glorification of leadership roles has clouded great number of instances of high-handed behaviour of the leaders. Hence undesirable leadership patterns (which are just opposite the core values on which leadership is based) often get overlooked in rigorous academic scrutiny. No wonder, literature on dysfunctional leadership is abysmally low in terms of number of books and research papers published in peer-reviewed journals. There are a few reports based on anecdotes and reflective articles in newspapers and magazine which tend to keep the theme alive. It is therefore imperative that a comprehensive study on the

theme of dysfunctional leadership is presented to the scholarly community so as to ignite research interest in the fast changing organizational contexts driven more actively by the followers rather than the leaders as in the traditional paradigm.

Darker side of leaders where they come across to their followers more as monsters thrives on the power that comes with the role and grows out of personality traits such as self-aggrandizement, entitlement, narcissism, self-deceit and abuse of power (Kets de Vries, 2004). Deadly combination of neurotic personality and personal power often unleash worst kinds of disasters at workplace as well as in social arena (Kets de Vries, 2004). Whicker tried to frame such leaders as 'toxic leaders' almost three decades ago. The toxic leaders were visualized as bullies, enforcers and street fighters who are maladjusted, malcontent, and often malevolent and malicious people and who succeed by tearing others down and controlling others rather than uplifting followers (Whicker, 1996). Such leaders have deep–seated but well–disguised sense of personal inadequacy, selfish values, and cleverness at concealing deceit (Whicker, 1996). Lipman-Blumen (2005) labelled toxic leaders as those individuals who, by virtue of their destructive behaviors and their dysfunctional personal qualities or characteristics, inflict serious and enduring harm on the individuals, groups, organizations, communities and even the nations that they lead Indeed, the idea of toxic leaders gave a fillip to studies on dysfunctional leadership patterns.

In spite of recognition of darker side of leadership as an emerging research theme in human resource management, not much is known about the fundamental thought processes with which employees develop perceptions of supervisory abuse and how these attributions are associated with psychological and behavioural reactions (Martinko, Harvey, Sikora, & Douglas, 2011). Further, there are several questions that merit attention of researchers: Why do some leaders, either consciously or unconsciously, make work more difficult for everyone around them? Why do some people, instead of promoting leadership in others, appear to rejoice in the struggles of others? What are the dynamics that drive a leader to become toxic for the people around him? (Tavanti, 2011). Obviously, there are great research opportunities to explore the theme of dysfunctional leadership both conceptually as well as empirical. At the same time there is huge cost in ignoring this in terms of poor organizational performance, low employee morale, high employee turnover, and above all negative organizational climate.

Defining Dysfunctional Leadership
In simple terms, dysfunctional leadership can be equated with 'abusive supervision' –a phrase popularized by Tepper. Abusive supervision may be explained as subordinates' perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and non-verbal behaviours, excluding physical contact (Tepper, 2000). It is manifested in terms of use of authority and position for personal gains, administering organizational policies unfairly, discouraging initiatives, wilful hostility, mimicry, public

criticism, silencing, undermining, public denigration, and explosive outbursts, loud and angry tantrums, rudeness, inconsiderate actions, and coercion (Ashforth, 1994; Bies & Tripp, 1998; Tepper, 2000; Tepper 2007). Abusive supervision –a hallmark of dysfunctional leadership patterns –may also be explained in terms of interpersonal deviance i.e. voluntary behaviour that violates significant organizational norms and threatens the well-being of one or more organizational members (Robinson & Bennett, 1995).

Indeed, dysfunctional behaviour impairs function of performance or operation of individuals, teams and organizations (Burton & Hoobler, 2006). Further, dysfunctional leadership is ill-disposed form of aggression such as conniving, humiliating, and oppressive behaviour that undermine performance, belittle and contribute towards workplace and personal demoralization (Burton & Hoobler, 2006). According to Tepper (2000), dysfunctional leadership is characterized by

- Hostility: use of authority for personal gain, general sense of argumentativeness, application of organizational policies to employees in an unfair manner;
- Conformity: slowing progress or putting someone down in the garb of conforming to organizational policies;
- Indifference: speaking rudely as well as taking purposeful action to cause emotional, social or psychological hurt as a means to elicit desired levels of performance.

Rose et al (2015) have tried to develop a comprehensive taxonomy of dysfunctional behaviour by labelling certain behaviours as low dysfunction and others as high dysfunction resulting into annoyance or trauma. Dysfunctional behaviour causing annoyance include (from low to high) rude behaviour, unrealistically high or unfair expectations, taking undue credit for work, undermining, withholding information, concentration on employee weaknesses, holding favours hostage, giving someone the silent treatment, intentionally lying and angry tantrums. On the other, dysfunctional behaviour causing trauma include (from low to high) over-work, public ridicule, controlling behaviour, disrespect, social isolation, public scorn, invasion of privacy, threat, coercing, public denigration, yelling, inappropriately assigning blame, denigrating behaviour, demeaning capabilities, insults, deception, telling employees they are stupid, abusive language, vindictiveness, intimidation, derision, bribes, destructive criticism, explosive outburst, physical mistreatment and pressuring employees to drink or abuse drugs (see Figure I).

Impact of Dysfunctional Leadership
Victims of dysfunctional leaders' abuse endure such demeaning behaviour because they feel powerless to take corrective action, are economically dependent on the abusers, or fear the unknown associated with separation more than they fear the abuse, and they may tolerate for long as the leaders/supervisors often intersperse abusive behaviour with normal behaviour, in effect intermittently reinforcing the victims' hope the abuse

will end someday (Walker, 1979). However, endurance on the part of victims does not entail that dysfunctional leadership patterns have zero negative impact on the employees. What can be expected from employees who are constantly disrespected, berated, disparaged and looked down upon by their bosses?

Dysfunctional leadership invariably augments job-related dissatisfaction and psychological distress, counterproductive work behaviours, withholding of organizational citizenship behaviours, anxiety, depression, anxiety, depression, and emotional exhaustion, emotional exhaustion, role conflicts, turnover intentions, etc. (Richman, Flaherty, Rospenda, & Christensen, 1992; Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 1998, Tepper, 2007). It is a source of chronic stress that produces serious negative consequences for the victims as well as the organizations (Tepper, 2007). Unruly behaviour of the leaders towards their team-members often results in higher turnover, withdrawal of discretionary efforts lower goal attainments (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007; Tepper, 2000).

High Dysfunction

A n n o y a n c e	Angry tantrums Intentionally lying Giving someone the silent treatment Holding favours hostage Concentration on employee weaknesses Concentration on employee weaknesses	Pressuring employees to drink or abuse drugs 　　Physical mistreatment　Explosive outburst　Destructive criticism 　　Bribes　Derision　Intimidation　vindictiveness　Abusive language Telling employees they are stupid deception Insults　Demeaning capabilities Denigrating behaviour Inappropriately assigning blame　Yelling Public denigration	**T r a u m a**
	Withholding information Undermining Taking undue credit for work Unrealistically high or unfair expectations Rude behaviour	Disrespect Controlling behaviour Public ridicule Over-work	

Low Dysfunction

Figure I: Visual taxonomy of dysfunctional leader behaviour as developed by Rose et al. (2015)

Impact of dysfunctional leadership behaviour is not limited to the workplace. Victims of abusive/toxic bosses display unrelenting negative emotions at home in terms of reduced family interactions, missing important family events, and negative evaluations of family members (Hoobler & Brass, 2006). While physical presence of a dysfunctional leader is confined to office, his/her reach is almost without boundary (Schyns & Schlling, 2013). As a consequence of workplace abuse, individuals often suffer from work-life conflict (Hoobler & Hu, 2012). Family members of abuse victims are more likely face misplaced aggression (Restubog, Scott & Zagenczyk, 2011). Dysfunctional leadership has the potential to affect marital life of the employees as they may resort to confrontational behaviour with spouse due to undesirable experiences at workplace (Tepper, Duffy & Shaw, 2001).

Corrective Measures
Best possible way to manage dysfunctional leadership patterns in organizations is to refrain from hiring individuals for managerial positions who are dispositionally inclined to have a narrow scope of justice and to execute hostile acts (Tepper, Moss and Duffy, 2011). It has been observed that individuals with low-empathy are more likely to perceive that others deserve harmful treatment (Detert, Trevino, & Sweitzer, 2008). Further, low-empathy individuals are more hostile than those who are higher in trait empathy (Miller & Eisenberg, 1988). Hence it is worthwhile that individual traits and disposition are explored thoroughly before assigning leadership roles to individuals in any organization. Indeed, organizations may be able to reduce the pool of managers who are inclined to put subordinates beyond the scope of justice and to abuse them by selecting personnel for trait empathy (Tepper, Moss and Duffy, 2011).

Another appropriate intervention to reduce dysfunctional leadership behaviour in organizations may be effective use of justice training to help supervisors interact constructively with all subordinates, particularly those whom the supervisors perceive to be dissimilar, those with whom they have relationship conflict, and those they perceive to be lower performers (Tepper, Moss and Duffy, 2011). Justice training enables the supervisors to use techniques that reduce psychological distance with employees, promote the perception that employees have 'voice', and equitably apply decision-making criteria (Greenberg, 2006). Leaders without a fair sense of justice are likely to display undesirable traits and repressive behaviour against the team-members/subordinates at the greater risk of organizational downfall due to alienation of employees induced by dysfunctional leadership.

Encouraging leaders to engage in constant self-monitoring and feedback seeking after the training programmes might help in correcting the dysfunctional behaviours (Harris et al. 2007). However, it is better said than done. Dysfunctional leaders generally act on their conviction in sync with purpose of the organizations. Hence it will be a great idea to educate them about personality traits of their subordinates so that they are able to

gauge how the team members might react to harsh treatment even if such supervisory behaviour is apparently in the interest of the organization (Henle & Gross, 2013).

In extreme cases where incidence of dysfunctional leadership behaviour is on higher side pushing the employees towards traumatic experiences, the top management needs to work on organizational structure and culture. Such interventions are likely to reduce or eliminate dysfunctional leadership behaviour and ensure sustained organizational competitiveness. It goes without saying that a mechanistic organizational structure, characterized by close supervision and centralized decision-making may facilitate an environment in which dysfunctional leadership thrives (Aryee et al., 2008). If such organizational structure is reversed in manner that employees feel empowered in real sense, supervisory behaviour will automatically turn out to be cordial, less intimidating and mutually rewarding. At the same time, organization needs to ensure that its culture cultivates a sense of belongingness (Decoster et al., 2013). Besides, values such as transparency, reciprocal respect, empathy and camaraderie should be inculcated in the organization as a protective mechanism to ward off dysfunctional behaviour.

Conclusion

Leaders behaving like villains or anti-hero are most appalling in social as well as organizational contexts. On large number of occasions, high-handed behaviour of leaders remains unreported thus reinforcing dysfunctional leadership patterns at the cost of organizational success and employee well-being. The consequences of dysfunctional leadership behaviour are beyond measure. Organizations lose out on competitiveness due to withholding of discretionary efforts on the part of the employees as a result of being victimized by their toxic bosses without any valid grounds. On the other hand, the employees working under dysfunctional leaders suffer from annoyance, psychological stress and trauma and transfer their frustration on to their family members in terms of being indifferent and violent.

Costs of dysfunctional leadership warrant holistic interventions so as to help the dysfunctional leaders modify their behaviour in sync with civility by making necessary changes in the organizational structure and culture. Setting up an empowering structure would be a befitting strategy to eliminate devilish behaviour of the bosses. Empowered employees are less likely to endure mistreatment at the hands of their supervisors. Besides, organizational culture should be woven around such values as transparency, mutual admiration, compassion and fellowship in order to checkmate dysfunctional leaders. Indeed, elimination of dysfunctional leadership is essential for fostering positive organizational climate for sustained competitiveness and long-term success.

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