

How contextual is destructive leadership? A comparison of how destructive leadership is perceived in usual circumstances versus crisis

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to investigate the differences between destructive leadership in two different contexts: crisis management and usual circumstances. The specific research questions are as follows: What is the relationship between destructive leadership behaviours in usual circumstances and destructive leadership behaviours in crisis management? Are destructive leadership behaviours in usual circumstances or in crisis management the best predictors of trust in the leader and subordinate performance?

Design/methodology/approach – Questionnaire responses were obtained from 337 individuals who had experience from handling various societal crises, such as terror attacks and forest fires. The respondents represented four different organisations: municipalities, county administrative boards, the police and the emergency service.

Findings – The results from the study reveal that there is a strong association between destructive leadership in usual circumstances and destructive leadership during crisis management. The study indicates that everyday leadership matters the most. It is above all behaviours in usual circumstances that show the strongest associations with trust in the leader and subordinate performance. The results also show that it is especially task-related, passive forms of destructive leadership behaviours that show the strongest association with the studied outcome variables.

Research limitations/implications – Limitations related to measurements and self-reported data are discussed.

Practical implications – The study emphasises the importance of paying attention to leaders' task- and strategic-oriented behaviour as well as the importance of building trusting relationships with the subordinates.

Originality/value – The need for industry-specific studies of destructive leadership has been highlighted and this study contributes with knowledge from the crisis management context.

Keywords Performance, Crisis management, Trust, Destructive leadership

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

How contextual are destructive leadership behaviours? The need for industry-specific studies on negative aspects of leadership has been highlighted suggesting that different organisations' hierarchy, socialisation and adherence to rules may lead to different susceptibility to this type



of behaviour (Tepper, 2007). Can we expect that destructive leadership is reflected and perceived differently in different contexts? The comparison between different contexts in this paper is not related to different cultural contexts but to different contexts in terms of requirements, structures and expectations. Leadership has been argued to be embedded in the context (Osborn *et al.*, 2002), implying that leadership behaviours may change when the context changes. There is a limited number of studies that investigate if and how destructive leadership behaviours change because of contextual factors but results from a few studies indicate that it might be the case. For example, a study revealed that passive-corrective and *laissez-faire* leadership behaviours were negatively associated with trust in the leader. Active-corrective behaviours, on the other hand, had little association with trust (Gillespie and Mann, 2004). This was related to the specific context. The study was conducted in research and development organisations which are characterised by rules and procedures most likely leading to active-corrective behaviours being judged as appropriate behaviour.

Research in a military context suggests that behaviours considered destructive in that specific context to a large extent correspond to behaviours suggested as destructive in more general contexts (the private and the public sector) with a few exceptions (Larsson *et al.*, 2012). A comparison with the destructive leadership model developed by Einarsen *et al.* (2007) revealed that supportive-disloyal behaviour was not found to have a counterpart in the military. Supportive-disloyal behaviour is in turn related to what Schilling (2009) terms avoiding leadership, suggesting that it may be a common destructive behaviour in a more regular context but not in the military context (Larsson *et al.*, 2012).

The study aims to investigate differences between destructive leadership in two different contexts: in crisis management and usual circumstances. Crisis management “is an ongoing process to prevent or reduce negative consequences involving activities before, during and after a crisis” (Hede, 2018, p. 4). In this paper, a crisis is defined as a societal collective crisis, which is a crisis that collectively affects several individuals at the same time and that is handled by societal organisations and institutions (Hede, 2018). These organisations and institution can be on regional, local or operational levels. Examples of societal crises are terror attacks, social unrest, forest fires, hurricanes or transport accidents. Usual circumstances in this study refer to when these organisations/institutions are not involved in a societal crisis but handle their usual tasks and assignments that are not primarily crisis-related.

Research on destructive leadership has increased considerably in the past decades and several definitions have been proposed. This paper takes its point of departure in the definition by Einarsen *et al.* (2007) stating that destructive leadership is

[. . .] the systematic and repeated behaviour by a leader, supervisor or manager that violates the legitimate interest of the organization by undermining and/or sabotaging the organization's goals, tasks, resources and effectiveness and/or the motivation, well-being or job satisfaction of subordinates (p. 208).

This implies that destructive leadership can be directed towards the organisation and/or subordinates. The definition does not take into account that the behaviour should be volitional. It is the consequences of the behaviour that count, regardless of whether the behaviour is intentional or not.

There are different types and constructs of destructive leadership. Some researchers divide behaviours into active and passive forms (Einarsen *et al.*, 2007; Larsson *et al.*, 2012). Active behaviours include, for example, arrogance, unfairness and threatening or punishing subordinates. Passive behaviours can be exemplified by leaders who do not show active interest, do not dare to confront others or structure and plan poorly (Larsson *et al.*, 2012). While active forms represent more deliberate and volitional behaviours, passive forms are

regarded as behaviours leaders use when they have more or less abdicated from supervisor responsibilities and duties (Einarsen *et al.*, 2007).

Before we move forward, it is important to consider differences between leadership in crisis management and leadership in general. How does leadership in the crisis management context differ from leadership in usual circumstances? Research shows that leadership in the event of accidents and public crises means leading under pressure. In these situations, leaders move from an everyday context to a riskier zone characterised by uncertainty and ambiguity. Leaders in crisis management often have to manage two different contexts, the normal and the crisis ones (Boin *et al.*, 2016). Also, the leader must lead within his/her own organisation while at the same time collaborating with other organisations (Uhr, 2017). All of this is often performed under the watchful eye of society and the media, placing extra strain on the leader. Highly dynamic and unpredictable environments imply that leaders and subordinates put their physical and psychological well-being at risk to accomplish the organisation's objectives. In case of failure, it can lead to catastrophic consequences not only for their organisation but also for those the organisation serves, which is society and its citizens (Sweeney *et al.*, 2011). During a crisis, expectations are high on leaders and it has been stated that crises define political leaders (Smee, 2020). Under usual circumstances, the focus is on the normal, everyday, context which can be assumed to be less characterised by uncertainty, stress, extensive collaboration and risk for the well-being. Based on the above, the specific research questions are:

- RQ1. What is the relationship between destructive leadership behaviours in usual circumstances and destructive leadership behaviours in crisis management?
- RQ2. Are destructive leadership behaviours in usual circumstances or in crisis management the best predictors of trust in the leader and subordinate performance?

The study takes its point of departure in seven different destructive leadership behaviours identified in crisis management. These were identified in a qualitative interview study where the informants consisted of individuals involved in crisis management at regional, local, and operational levels (Fors Brandebo, 2018). The behaviours can be divided into task- and relationship-related ones. The task-related behaviours are related to the leaders' competence, that is, perceptions of the leaders' ability to handle the task:

- overcontrolling, not involving others;
- lack of decisiveness;
- ambiguity; and
- becoming stressed, losing control.

The relationship-related behaviours are behaviours related to the leaders' ability to maintain and build relationships with others, behaviours that have negative consequences for subordinates' job satisfaction, well-being and/or sense of meaningfulness. These behaviours are as follows:

- egocentric;
- threats and punishments; and
- does not show respect and understanding.

Another point of departure is to apply attribution theory in the present study to try to explain why certain behaviours are considered destructive. According to attribution theory,

individuals try to understand and explain a person's intentional behaviour by relating the behaviour to the perceived reasons behind the intention, often by making judgements about whether the behaviour is:

- impersonal causal (unintentional); or
- personal causal (intentional; [Heider, 1958](#)).

Locus of causality and stability are two causal dimensions often used in research regarding attribution theory. Locus of causality is related to whether or not the cause of an outcome is inherent in the person (internal) or outside of the person (external). Stability deals with classifying causes as enduring and stable in contrast to unstable and transient. It has been argued that the locus of causality affects emotions while stability affects expectations ([Weiner, 1986](#)).

In leadership research, subordinates' attribution styles have been related to perceptions of negative leadership. For example, [Martinko et al. \(2011\)](#) found that subordinates' hostile attribution styles were positively associated with their perceptions of abusive supervision.

Based on previous research, seven hypotheses were formulated. These are explained below.

Relationship between destructive leadership behaviours in usual circumstances and in crisis management

Destructive leadership behaviours in crisis management have been suggested to be related to the leader's behaviour in usual circumstances ([Fors Brandebo, 2018](#)). It implies that the leadership that is practiced in usual circumstances affects subordinates' perceptions about the leader's behaviour in crisis management. However, some leaders become more constructive during crisis management. They need the stress and the excitement to attain their full potential. Others are more constructive in usual circumstances where the conditions are more stable and predictable. However, a qualitative interview study showed that, generally, informants experienced that leaders mostly exhibited the same behaviour in both contexts ([Fors Brandebo, 2018](#)). Therefore, the following hypothesis is suggested:

- H1.* There is a strong positive association between destructive leadership behaviours in usual circumstances and destructive leadership behaviours during crisis management.

It has been indicated that contexts characterised by, among other things, stress and risk may contribute to leaders more often using destructive leadership behaviours, even if they, under more normal circumstances, would not be prone to this ([Fors Brandebo et al., 2016](#); [Padilla et al., 2007](#)). In line with attribution theory, it can be assumed that leaders' behaviour during crisis situations may be perceived by subordinates as more unintentional (the *locus* of causality is external and unstable) because of the characteristics of the situation (time constraints, uncertainty, etc.) which may influence leaders to behave in ways they normally would not do. However, during usual circumstances, subordinates may perceive the behaviour to be more inherent in the person and stable ([Heider, 1958](#); [Weiner, 1986](#)) because the subordinates are able to observe the leader's behaviour during a longer period of time (the behaviours are more familiar) compared to during crisis management when the leader (as well as the subordinates) has to adjust the behaviour to meet the new demands and conditions. Also, in relation to subordinates assuming the leaders' behaviour to be inherent and stable in usual circumstances, it can be expected that subordinates interpret their

leaders' behaviour as more hostile/negative during crisis management and given the above, it is assumed that:

- H2. Leaders' destructive leadership behaviours are rated higher by subordinates in crisis management compared to in usual circumstances.

Trust in the leader

Destructive leadership behaviours have been shown to negatively impact trust between the leader and his/her subordinates (Fors Brandebo, 2015; Fors Brandebo *et al.*, 2016). Trust in leaders can be studied from several different perspectives. In this paper, the focus is on cognition- and affect-based trust. Cognition-based trust is based on an individual's perception of the leader's integrity, reliability, dependability and/or competence. Affect-based trust is instead based on the individual's relationship to the leader and the experience of the leader's concern for one's welfare and a feeling of benevolence (McAllister, 1995; Schaubroeck *et al.*, 2011). Trust has been suggested to be developed in usual circumstances. A study including military officers from Norway and Sweden, soldiers from Sweden and psychologists from Norway revealed that trust between the leader and his/her subordinates is something that the leader builds upon a day-to-day leadership basis. If trust exists, subordinates do not question the leadership during periods of severe stress (Larsson *et al.*, 2001). The trust that is developed in usual circumstances in turn impacts subordinates' perception of, and relationship with, the leader in crisis management (Fors Brandebo, 2018). Once again in line with attribution theory, it can be expected that the leaders' behaviours in usual circumstances are perceived by subordinates as more stable and inherent, compared to the leaders' behaviour in crisis management (Heider, 1958; Weiner, 1986). The following hypothesis is therefore suggested:

- H3. Destructive leadership behaviours in usual circumstances show stronger negative associations with cognition- and affect-based trust in the leader than destructive leadership behaviours in crisis management.

Performance – passivity and overwork

Destructive leadership has in several studies been related to a decrease in subordinate performance (Burris *et al.*, 2008; Chen and Kao, 2009; Tepper, 2000). Sometimes performance is reduced because of the subordinate being too exhausted to perform well. The subordinates apply more time and energy to their relationship with the leader thus having less time and energy to devote to their own tasks (Xu *et al.*, 2015). However, the subordinates may also repay the leader's behaviour by performing less well (Fors Brandebo, 2018; Harris *et al.*, 2007; Schyns and Schilling, 2013).

Two subordinate performance consequences of destructive leadership have been identified. When an individual is exposed to destructive leadership the individual may react with passivity or overwork (Fors Brandebo, 2018). When subordinates are the objects of this type of behaviour they may use counterproductive work behaviour such as work withdrawal as a coping strategy (Chi and Liang, 2013; Shoss *et al.*, 2016). Passivity, uncertainty and/or paralysis of the decision may be consequences of both active and passive forms of destructive leadership. For example, actively destructive leaders taking over their subordinates' tasks and/or managing in detail may lead to uncertain subordinates who do not know what they can or are allowed to do. Passive destructive leadership behaviours may also lead to passive subordinate reactions when the leader does not make decisions or give

directions, the subordinates risk becoming passive when they do not know what is expected of them (Fors Brandebo, 2018).

Overwork may also be a subordinate consequence when exposed to destructive leadership. Destructive leadership has been related to both high workload and workaholism (Molino *et al.*, 2019) as well as burnout (Tepper, 2000; Yagil, 2006). Underlying reasons for overwork may be a desire to accomplish the task if the leader is passive (the subordinates take over the leaders' tasks in addition to their own) or a fear of being exposed to violations, threats and/or punishments if the subordinates do not put in the extra effort (Fors Brandebo, 2018).

In cases where the subordinates respond to destructive leadership with passivity, the performance can be assumed to immediately decrease. On the other hand, if the subordinates respond with overwork, the performance may increase. However, individuals seldom have the energy to keep up the overwork for longer periods of time. It may instead result in the subordinates becoming stressed, exhausted and/or unmotivated with a decrease in performance as a consequence (the subordinate becomes careless, makes mistakes, etc.). During a crisis, working conditions are characterised by, among other things, stress and high workload. During usual circumstances, it can be assumed that these conditions cannot be related to the situation in the same manner, and therefore can lead to more severe consequences. The subordinates may, for example, not see a clear end for the situation in the same way as they do during a crisis (when the crisis is over the workload and stress diminishes). Again, in relation to attribution theory, if subordinates perceive the leader's behaviour in usual circumstances to be more stable and inherent, it can be assumed that it has a stronger effect on the subordinates. Research has repeatedly found that accumulated daily hassles show stronger associations with physical and psychological symptoms compared to major stressful episodes or chronic stressors (Heron *et al.*, 2013; Larsson *et al.*, 2016; Stefanek *et al.*, 2012). Also, as previously suggested, destructive leadership behaviours in usual circumstances have a greater impact on subordinates than destructive leadership behaviours in crisis management, and therefore, the following hypothesis can be suggested:

- H4.* Destructive leadership behaviours in usual circumstances show stronger negative associations with passivity and overwork both in usual circumstances and during crisis management than destructive leadership behaviours in crisis management.

Method

Participants and procedure

Questionnaire responses were obtained from individuals involved in crisis management in Sweden, that is, individuals who had experience from handling various societal crises, such as terror attacks and forest fires. The respondents represented four different organisations: municipalities, county administrative boards, the police and the emergency service. To be included in the study the respondent was required to have experience of crisis management in his/her organisation, and experience of working with the same leader both in usual circumstances and in times of crisis.

Each municipality in Sweden received a questionnaire addressed to the municipality's emergency coordinator, a total of 290 questionnaires. Before mailing out the questionnaires to the county administrative boards, they were contacted to identify how many officials involved in crisis management they had. Two county administrative boards immediately declined to participate because of a large workload. The remaining 20 county administrative boards received a total of 176 questionnaires.

Regarding the emergency service, the questionnaires were addressed to individuals working with crisis management at Command Level 2 (task force leaders or similar positions). The four largest emergency services received five questionnaires and the smallest received one. The others received two questionnaires. A total of 352 questionnaires were sent out. Some of the emergency services collaborate so it is likely that several questionnaires ended up with the same person. Each local police area received two questionnaires, a total of 188 questionnaires for the police. These were addressed to task force leaders (or similar) with experience of crisis management.

Altogether, 1,006 questionnaires were sent out. Nineteen individuals replied that they did not have relevant experience to participate in the study (and no colleague to hand over the questionnaire to) or that they had received several questionnaires. It can be assumed that not everyone who received several questionnaires informed about it implying that there might be a number of unreported cases regarding how many of the sent out questionnaires actually had an individual recipient. In the end, 987 questionnaires remained. A total of 337 questionnaires were returned resulting in a response rate of 34%. Because several questionnaires probably ended up with the same individual, it can be assumed that the actual response rate is higher.

Of the participants, 70% were men and 30% were women; 49% were 45 years or younger and 50% were 46 years or older; 31% worked in municipalities, 15% in country administrative boards, 31% in emergency services and 23% in the police; and 50% held managerial positions.

Measures

In addition to the background data described above, the following measures were used:

Destructive leadership. Destructive leadership in usual circumstances was measured using 62 items sorted into seven categories. The categories were based on a qualitative model describing destructive leadership in crisis management (Fors Brandebo, 2018). The first four categories measure task-related destructive leadership behaviour:

- (1) Overcontrolling, not involving others (13 items, sample item “Doesn’t make subordinates feel that they are participating”), Cronbach’s alpha 0.70.
- (2) Lack of decisiveness, avoiding responsibility (12 items, sample item “Doesn’t assume responsibility”), Cronbach’s alpha 0.93.
- (3) Ambiguity (seven items, sample item “Does not set up goals and frameworks for the job”), Cronbach’s alpha 0.94.
- (4) Becoming stressed, losing control (five items, sample item “Cannot deal with stress”), Cronbach’s alpha 0.91.

The last three categories measure relationship-related destructive leadership behaviours:

- (1) Egocentric (ten items, sample item “Is selfish”), Cronbach’s alpha 0.92.
- (2) Uses threats and punishments (nine items, sample item “Punishes subordinates who make mistakes”), Cronbach’s alpha 0.95.
- (3) Does not show respect and understanding (six items, sample item “has difficulties cooperating with others”), Cronbach’s alpha 0.90.

Categories 1, 5, 6 and 7 measure active forms of destructive leadership, whereas categories 2, 3 and 4 measure passive forms.

Destructive leadership in crisis management was also measured using the same 62 items sorted into seven categories (in other words, the respondents estimated their leader's behaviours twice – in usual circumstances and crisis management):

- (1) Overcontrolling, not involving others (13 items), Cronbach's alpha 0.90.
- (2) Lack of decisiveness, avoiding responsibility (12 items), Cronbach's alpha 0.94.
- (3) Ambiguity (seven items), Cronbach's alpha 0.94.
- (4) Becoming stressed, losing control (five items), Cronbach's alpha 0.92.
- (5) Egocentric (ten items), Cronbach's alpha 0.93.
- (6) using threats and punishments (nine items), Cronbach's alpha 0.96.
- (7) Not showing respect and understanding (six items), Cronbach's alpha 0.92.

Scale 1 (never, almost never) to 6 (very often/often). All categories and items are reported in [Appendix 1](#).

Affect- and cognition-based trust. Trust in the leader was measured using the instrument affect- and cognition-based trust ([McAllister, 1995](#)). The instrument measures cognition-trust which is an individual's perception of the leader's integrity, dependability, reliability, and/or competence. Affect-based trust is based on the relationship to the leader and the experience of the leader's consideration and benevolence. The instrument consists of two categories:

- (1) Affect-based trust (five items, sample item "I can talk freely to the leader about difficulties I am having at work and know that (s)he will want to listen"), Cronbach's alpha 0.90.
- (2) Cognition-based trust (six items, sample item "I can rely on the leader not to make my job more difficult by careless work"), Cronbach's alpha 0.93.

Scale 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Performance in usual circumstances. The performance was measured using two factors based on a qualitative study of destructive leadership in crisis management ([Fors Brandebo, 2018](#)). The respondents rated how often they experienced a set of reactions/responses in usual circumstances:

- Passivity was measured using five items ("Passivity, I do not dare to act since I do not know if it is the right or wrong thing to do", "Uncertainty", "Paralysis of decision", "Fear of making mistakes" and "Unwillingness to do more than what is expected of me"), Cronbach's alpha 0.80.
- Overwork was measured using two items ("Having to do more than what is expected of me for it to be enough" and "Having to take over my leader's/supervisor's tasks in addition to my own"), Cronbach's alpha 0.61.

Scale 1 (never) to 7 (always).

Performance in crisis management. Performance in crisis management was measured using the same two categories used for measuring performance in usual circumstances. The respondents rated how often they experienced different reactions/responses in crisis management. Passivity (five items), Cronbach's alpha 0.87 and Overwork (two items), Cronbach's alpha 0.61.

Scale 1 (never) to 7 (always).

Statistics

Preliminary analyses were conducted to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity, multicollinearity and homoscedasticity. Pearson's correlation coefficients were computed to assess bivariate associations between variables. Subgroup comparisons were performed using *t*-tests, and one-way analyses of variance. Eta squared was used to measure effect size. Standard multiple regression was used to test the hypotheses.

Ethics

The participants were treated according to the norms of the Swedish Ethical Review Board in Stockholm. The research project underwent ethical vetting by the Board (Protocol EPN 2018/5:9).

Results

In this section, six different regression analyses are presented in a more technical and traditional character. A less technical summary is given in [Appendix 2](#).

Relationship between destructive leadership behaviours in usual circumstances and in crisis management

[Table 1](#) shows bivariate correlations between destructive leadership in usual circumstances and crisis management. Because the correlations are strong, *H1* is confirmed, that is, that there is a strong positive association between destructive leadership in usual circumstances and destructive leadership in crisis management.

[Table 2](#) illustrates that there are significant differences between how the respondents rated their leaders' destructive behaviours in usual circumstances compared to during crisis management. Generally, destructive leadership behaviours are rated higher in usual circumstances than in crisis management, contradicting *H2*. However, the effect size is small (0.02 for overcontrolling, not involving others, 0.03 for lack of decisiveness, avoiding responsibility, 0.01 for ambiguity, 0.03 for egocentric and 0.03 for not showing respect and understanding). [Table 2](#) also shows that, generally, the ratings are relatively low. Unclear, overcontrolling, not involving others and egocentric gain the highest ratings. Lowest ratings are received by threatens, punishes, becomes stressed, loses control and does not show respect and understanding.

Regression analysis

Standard multiple regression analysis was used to assess the ability of:

- destructive leadership in usual circumstances; and
- affect-based trust in the leader;
- cognition-based trust in the leader;
- passivity in usual circumstances;
- passivity during crisis management;
- overwork in usual circumstances; and
- overwork in usual circumstances; and
- overwork during crisis management.

To reduce the number of independent variables regression analysis was conducted for each and every one of the dependent variables using first the seven categories measuring

Scale ^a	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. Overcontrolling, not involving others (uc)	0.70	0.53	0.57	0.51	0.77	0.61	0.67	0.76	0.51	0.58	0.51	0.74	0.58	0.63	2.36	0.93
2. Lack of decisiveness (uc)		0.93	0.83	0.63	0.64	0.50	0.71	0.60	0.86	0.78	0.63	0.60	0.58	0.63	2.05	0.97
3. Ambiguity (uc)			0.94	0.58	0.63	0.51	0.70	0.62	0.76	0.88	0.60	0.59	0.49	0.62	2.36	1.15
4. Becoming stressed, losing control (uc)				0.91	0.66	0.74	0.70	0.67	0.69	0.64	0.84	0.69	0.75	0.69	1.73	0.91
5. Egocentric (uc)					0.92	0.75	0.85	0.79	0.65	0.66	0.66	0.87	0.74	0.78	2.20	1.01
6. Threats and punishments (uc)						0.95	0.81	0.73	0.54	0.56	0.68	0.79	0.92	0.81	1.51	0.86
7. Does not show respect and understanding (uc)							0.90	0.79	0.74	0.74	0.69	0.84	0.79	0.90	1.84	0.96
8. Overcontrolling, not involving others (c)								0.90	0.67	0.71	0.71	0.84	0.76	0.79	2.23	0.87
9. Lack of decisiveness (c)									0.94	0.85	0.73	0.67	0.59	0.71	1.87	0.91
10. Ambiguity (c)										0.94	0.69	0.67	0.58	0.73	2.26	1.14
11. Becoming stressed, losing control (c)											0.92	0.68	0.74	0.73	1.78	0.94
12. Egocentric (c)												0.93	0.79	0.82	1.94	0.97
13. Threats and punishments (c)													0.96	0.86	1.52	0.86
14. Does not show respect and understanding (c)														0.92	1.73	0.92

Notes: ^aThe scale ranged from 1 (never/almost never) to 6 (very often/often). The numbers in italics refer to Cronbach's alpha scores. Statistical significance assumed at $p < 0.01$ uc = usual circumstances; c = crisis management

Table 1.
Means, standard
deviations and
correlations for the
observed variables
($N = 337$)

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destructive leadership in usual circumstances and then using the seven categories measuring destructive leadership in crisis management. Those categories that gave a significant contribution to the regression analysis were then used in the regression analysis reported below.

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Trust in the leader
Affect-based trust in the leader. Table 3 indicates that the five predictors explained 39% of the variance in affect-based trust in the leader. It was found that the category Ambiguity in usual circumstances ($\beta = -0.44, p = 0.000$) best predicted affect-based trust in the leader followed by Threats and punishments in usual circumstances ($\beta = -0.38, p = 0.000$), and overcontrolling, not involving others in usual circumstances ($\beta = -0.13, p = 0.029$).
Cognition-based trust in the leader. Table 4 reveals that the three predictors explained 32% of the variance in cognition-based trust in the leader. The best predictor was the

Table 2.
Means and standard
deviations for
destructive
leadership during
usual circumstances
and during crisis
management

Category ^a	Usual circumstances		Crisis management		Sig
	M	SD	M	SD	
Overcontrolling, not involving others	2.36	0.93	2.23	0.87	0.000
Lack of decisiveness	2.05	0.97	1.87	0.91	0.000
Ambiguity	2.36	1.15	2.26	1.14	0.001
Becoming stressed, losing control	1.73	0.91	1.78	0.94	NS
Egocentric	2.20	1.01	1.94	0.97	0.000
Threats and punishments	1.51	0.86	1.52	0.86	NS
Does not show respect and understanding	1.84	0.96	1.73	0.92	0.000
Note: ^a The scale ranged from 1 (never/almost never) to 6 (very often/often)					

Table 3
Standard multiple
regression to predict
affect-based trust in
leaders

Variable	<i>B</i>	SE	β
Overcontrolling, not involving others (uc)	−0.22	0.10	−0.13*
Ambiguity (uc)	−0.57	0.13	−0.44**
Becoming stressed, losing control (uc)	−0.21	0.12	−0.13
Threats and punishments (uc)	−0.67	0.13	−0.38**
Ambiguity (c)	−0.15	0.14	−0.11
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²		0.39	
<i>F</i>		35.92	
Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; uc = usual circumstances; c = crisis management			

Table 4.
Standard multiple
regression to predict
cognition-based trust

Variable	<i>B</i>	SE	β
Lack of decisiveness (uc)	−0.57	0.17	−0.37**
Lack of decisiveness (c)	−0.03	0.18	−0.02
Ambiguity (c)	−0.29	0.12	−0.22**
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²		0.32	
<i>F</i>		47.20	
Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; uc = usual circumstances; c = crisis management			

category lack of decisiveness in usual circumstances ($\beta = -0.37, p = 0.000$) followed by ambiguity in crisis management ($\beta = -0.22, p = 0.019$). These results lead to the conclusion that *H3* is supported.

Subordinate performance. Table 5 shows that the four predictors explained 22% of the variance in passivity in usual circumstances. The only significant predictor was using threats and punishments in usual circumstances ($\beta = 0.31, p = 0.026$).

Regarding passivity in crisis management, Table 6 reveals that the two predictors explained 17% of the variance. Using threats and punishments in usual circumstances ($\beta = 0.33, p = 0.000$) was the best predictor followed by ambiguity in usual circumstances ($\beta = 0.15, p = 0.015$).

Table 7 reveals that the two predictors explained 28% of the variance in overwork in usual circumstances. The best predictor was lack of decisiveness in usual circumstances ($\beta = 0.28, p = 0.003$) followed by lack of decisiveness in crisis management ($\beta = 0.28, p = 0.004$).

Table 8 shows that two predictors explained 28% of the variance in overwork in crisis management. The only significant predictor was lack of decisiveness in crisis management ($\beta = 0.38, p = 0.000$).

Variable	<i>B</i>	SE	β
Ambiguity (uc)	-0.01	0.08	-0.01
Threats and punishments (uc)	0.28	0.13	0.31*
Ambiguity (c)	0.14	0.08	0.20
Threats and punishments (c)	0.04	0.13	0.05
Adjusted R^2		0.22	
<i>F</i>		21.40	

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; uc = usual circumstances; c = crisis management

Table 5.
Standard multiple
regression to predict
passivity in usual
circumstances

Variable	<i>B</i>	SE	β
Ambiguity (uc)	0.09	0.04	0.15**
Threats and punishments (uc)	0.28	0.05	0.33**
Adjusted R^2		0.17	
<i>F</i>		23.79	

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; uc = usual circumstances; c = crisis management

Table 6.
Standard multiple
regression to predict
passivity in crisis
management

Variable	<i>B</i>	SE	β
Lack of decisiveness (uc)	0.39	0.13	0.28**
Lack of decisiveness (c)	0.41	0.14	0.28**
Adjusted R^2		0.28	
<i>F</i>		58.99	

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; uc = usual circumstances; c = crisis management

Table 7.
Standard multiple
regression to predict
overwork in usual
circumstances

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The results concerning subordinate performance (passivity and overwork) lead to the conclusion that *H4* is partly accepted. Destructive leadership behaviours in usual circumstances show stronger negative associations with passivity and overwork in both usual circumstances and in crisis management compared to destructive leadership behaviours in crisis management with the exception of overwork in crisis management.

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Discussion

The study aimed to investigate differences between destructive leadership in crisis management and in usual circumstances. The specific research questions were as follows: What is the relationship between destructive leadership behaviours in usual circumstances and destructive leadership behaviours during crisis management? Are destructive leadership behaviours in usual circumstances or during crisis management the best predictors of trust in the leader and subordinate performance?

To address the question how context-specific destructive leadership behaviours are, the results from the present study reveal that there is a strong association between destructive leadership in usual circumstances and destructive leadership during crisis management. Even though the behaviours in usual circumstances were, in some cases, rated higher by the subordinates, the effect size was small. This indicates that the leader's behaviour is appraised similarly even when the characteristics of the context change. However, it can also be said that subordinates' appraisal of their leader's behaviour during crisis management is influenced by their general opinion of the leader, which is based on the leader's usual behaviour. Even if the subordinates assess the leader's behaviour differently when the context changes, the assessment is still influenced by the leader's previous track record.

The study indicates that everyday leadership matters the most. It is above all behaviours in usual circumstances that show the strongest associations with trust in the leader and subordinate performance, especially the behaviours lack of decisiveness, ambiguity and using threats and punishments. Attribution theory suggests that individuals try to understand and explain others intentional behaviour by making judgments about whether or not the cause of the behaviour is inherent in the person or outside of the personal as well as if the behaviour is enduring and stable in contrast to unstable and temporary. The crisis management context is characterised by conditions that can be regarded as unstable and temporary. It can be assumed that this may be seen as a cause of the leader's behaviour. In usual, everyday, conditions, the leader's behaviour may instead be considered as volitional, enduring and stable because the conditions of the context do not, in the same manner, force the leader to adapt his or her behaviour as a response to the often rapidly changing requirements and events of the context (crisis). Given this, it may seem reasonable that everyday leadership has the strongest association with trust and subordinate performance.

Table 8.
Standard multiple
regression to predict
overwork in crisis
management

Variable	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>β</i>
Lack of decisiveness (uc)	0.22	0.12	0.17
Lack of decisiveness (c)	0.52	0.13	0.38**
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²		0.28	
<i>F</i>		57.20	
Notes: * <i>p</i> < 0.05; ** <i>p</i> < 0.01; uc = usual circumstances; c = crisis management			

The results show that it is especially task-related, passive forms of destructive leadership behaviours (the categories lack of decisiveness and ambiguity) that show the strongest association with the studied outcome variables. This highlights the importance of leaders who dare to make decisions, can give clear directions, and manage to be decisive both in usual circumstances but also during uncertain and stressful situations. The negative consequences of passive destructive behaviour have been highlighted in several other studies and are also confirmed in the present one (Fors Brandebo *et al.*, 2016; Skogstad *et al.*, 2014).

The importance of paying attention to leaders' task- and strategic-oriented behaviour has been recognised by Antonakis and House (2014). They argue that much leadership research only focuses on transformational leadership without taking into account task-oriented behaviours, such as developing goals and objectives, giving direction and problem-solving. The results of this study also acknowledge the importance of recognizing the leader's task-related behaviour.

These results highlight the importance of building trusting relationships with the subordinates and also recruiting leaders that have sufficient management competence. It has been suggested that some leaders in the crisis management context find usual circumstances boring and unstimulating. They have chosen this job because of an interest in the challenges and demands of an occurring crisis (Fors Brandebo, 2018). The results from this study imply that these types of leaders may not be the most suitable, even if they perform well during crises.

Affect-based trust in the leader was predicted by the leader's behaviour in usual circumstances (ambiguity, threats and punishments and overcontrolling, not involving others). Affect-based trust is based on perceptions about insights into the motives of others as well as interaction frequency (McAllister, 1995). Once again, in relation to attribution theory (Heider, 1958; Weiner, 1986), it can be assumed that affect-based trust is developed based on subordinates perceptions of the motives of the leader, which, as pointed out before, can be perceived as more stable and inherent as well as more predictable during usual, everyday, circumstances. During crisis situations, the leader's motives may be more difficult to predict, as the conditions of the situation to a larger extent dictates the leader's behaviour.

Lack of decisiveness in usual circumstances and ambiguity in crisis management were significant predictors of cognition-based trust. Because of the unpredictable and uncertain characteristics of the crisis management context, it can be expected that trust in the leader's reliability, dependability and competence is highly affected by perceptions of how well and decisively the leader handles that kind of situation. A leader that is indecisive during usual circumstances may most likely be expected to behave indecisively under greater strain and stress.

As noted, especially task-related destructive behaviours show strong associations with trust and subordinate performance. The only exception is subordinate passivity both in usual circumstances and during crisis management. In this case, it is the relationship-related behaviour (using threats and punishments) that shows the strongest association with passivity. This implies that leaders who damage the relationship between them and their subordinates by threatening and frightening them make subordinates avoid daring to act or take initiative. In any context, this can be expected to lead to negative results for the organisation, but in the crisis management context, it can have even worse consequences because not only the organisation is at stake but also society and/or its citizens (Boin *et al.*, 2016).

Limitations

The items used in this study to measure destructive leadership behaviours are based on a previous qualitative study (Fors Brandebo, 2018). It would have been preferable, for example, to conduct a dimensional analysis using structural equation modelling but that might have resulted in different factors for usual circumstances and crisis management. Because the aim of this study was to investigate differences between these two different contexts, it would not have been possible. Another option would have been to use already established instruments, however, a comparison between destructive leadership behaviours identified in normal organisations and those identified in crisis management revealed a few differences, and therefore, it seemed more relevant to develop items for this specific context. Additionally, research in this area has been criticised for its lack of theoretical and empirical rigour because many of its conclusions and prescriptions are derived from case studies or anecdotal evidence (Coombs, 2007; Sellnow and Seeger, 2013). In this case, the items are derived from empirical findings.

The performance was measured using self-reported data. It would have been preferable to use more objective measures but to treat the respondents with confidentiality, it would have been too difficult to connect the different respondents to their rated leaders or organisations (for example, to allow for their leaders or co-workers to estimate their performance).

A final limitation is that the data material consists of many leaders. The study does not control for how many leaders are being rated and in a small country such as Sweden, it is also very likely that several of the respondents have rated the same leader. And as pointed out above, connecting respondents and leaders would have been difficult from a confidentiality perspective. However, because the study takes its point of departure in how subordinates perceive and are affected by a destructive leader, it is of less importance for the aim of the study.

Future studies

A suggestion for future studies is the question of under what conditions is destructive leadership developed? Is it personality-related or can contextual conditions “create” destructive leaders? Previous studies have, among other things, suggested that there is a greater probability for destructive leadership to be developed where instability and threats exist, which characterise the crisis management context (Padilla *et al.*, 2007). Uhr (2017) has defined leadership archetypes within crisis management. Leaders within this context are recruited and selected based on ideals which may not coincide with relevant needs and requirements. It has been suggested that these ideals (expectations) may lead to leaders using destructive leadership behaviours (Fors Brandebo, 2018). A final suggestion is related to the relationship between leadership in usual circumstances and during crisis management. What characterises leaders that are good or less good at handling both these contexts?

Conclusions

In the present research, a strong correlation was found between destructive leadership in usual circumstances and crisis management. Generally, the leader’s behaviours in usual circumstances were the best predictors of both subordinate outcomes in usual circumstances as well as in crisis management. In line with attribution theory, this may be related to the crisis management context which is, among other things, characterised by uncertainty and unpredictability. This may, therefore, contribute to subordinates perceiving the leader’s behaviour as more unstable and temporary (a response to the context’s conditions)

compared to in usual circumstances where a likely more long-lasting interaction between the leader and the subordinates may lead to the subordinates being more prone to consider the leader's behaviour as more inherent, stable and volitional (not a response to the context's conditions).

The results highlight the importance of leaders having the ability to create and maintain good relationships with their subordinates in usual, everyday, conditions. It can be assumed that subordinates with high trust in their leader may be more tolerant towards negative leader behaviours when the context is unpredictable and more risky (with the consequence that the leader's behaviour may be less predictable) and, as a consequence of that, relate negative leader behaviour to causes outside rather than to causes inherent in the leader. Task-related, passive forms of destructive leadership behaviours show the strongest associations with the studied outcome variables indicating the importance of a leader being decisive and possessing relevant management skills, such as being able to plan and structure the work as well as being able to transform mental goals to concrete directives.

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Further reading

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Appendix 1

Destructive leadership – factors and items

- Overcontrolling, not involving others
 - Assumes subordinate's duties
 - Doesn't inform subordinates
 - Is overly ambitious (works harder and more than necessary)
 - Makes subordinates feel excluded
 - Doesn't make subordinates feel that they are participating
 - Doesn't honour the structure and roles of the organisation
 - Takes away subordinates' responsibility
 - Doesn't support and foster subordinates
 - Doesn't praise subordinates
 - Is overly controlling
 - Doesn't trust subordinates
 - Is dominant
 - Takes too much space
- Lack of decisiveness, avoiding responsibility
 - Doesn't assume responsibility
 - Tries to foist responsibility on others
 - Doesn't deal with things at hand
 - Becomes incapacitated in stressful situations
 - Is afraid of confrontations
 - Doesn't demonstrate commitment
 - Isn't interested in subordinates

- Isn't interested in the job
 - Doesn't make decisions
 - Doesn't achieve results
 - Doesn't mingle with subordinates
 - Is afraid to confront others
- Ambiguity
 - Is not a good communicator
 - Is not good at giving information
 - Does not comprehend what information subordinates require
 - Does not set up goals and frameworks for the job
 - Is not good at structuring and planning
 - Cannot prioritise when much is going on
 - Does not clearly detail subordinates' mandates
- Becoming stressed, losing control
 - Cannot deal with stress
 - Cannot deal with challenging situations
 - Loses control in stressful situations
 - Magnifies problems when stressed
 - Has mood swings
- Egocentric
 - Is egotistical
 - Is selfish
 - Acts according to what primarily benefits him/herself
 - Prestige is of utmost importance
 - Tries to diminish others/the work of others to further him/herself/his/her own work
 - Denigrates others
 - Doesn't share information
 - Favours certain subordinates
 - Takes credit for subordinates' work
 - Wants to be in the spotlight
- Uses threats and punishments
 - Demonstrates aggressive behaviour
 - Is mean
 - Is unpleasant
 - Is arrogant
 - Punishes subordinates who don't work according to leader's wishes
 - Punishes subordinates who make mistakes
 - Utilises suppression techniques (making invisible, diminishing)
 - Deliberately excludes others
 - Behaves like a bully
- Does not show respect and understanding

- Has difficulties cooperating with others
- Does not wish to cooperate with others
- Does not understand others' needs and requirements
- Does not see the big picture but only him/herself and his/her work
- Marks his/her own territory
- Lacks respect for others (e.g. based on gender, civilian/military status, sexual orientation)

Appendix 2

Dependent variables	Significant independent variables
Affect-based trust	Ambiguity in usual circumstances Threats and punishments in usual circumstances Overcontrolling, not involving others in usual circumstances
Cognition-based trust	Lack of decisiveness in usual circumstances Ambiguity in crisis management
Passivity in usual circumstances	Using threats and punishments in usual circumstances
Passivity in crisis management	Using threats and punishments in usual circumstances Ambiguity in usual circumstances
Overwork in usual circumstances	Lack of decisiveness in usual circumstances Lack of decisiveness in crisis management
Overwork in crisis management	Lack of decisiveness in crisis management

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