The Impact of the Dark Side of Leadership on Project Followers

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Destructive Leadership View project

Title:

The Impact of the Dark Side of Leadership on Project Followers

Summary:

The historical approach of researching leadership without considering its negative aspects could mean the concept of leadership itself is not fully understood. This multi-method qualitative study explores challenging behaviour in project leaders, and how followers cope. It identifies what followers perceive to be challenging leader behaviour, explores how this impacts on followers and how they cope.

The study identifies challenging project leader behaviours relating to teams, performance, relationships and change. Impacts of the behaviour on the follower are categorised as psychological, work and personal impacts. Coping strategies used by followers include approach/avoidance and problem-focused/emotion-focused categories.

This research could support organisations in identifying leaders who display challenging behaviours, enabling them to design interventions to mitigate the impact on followers. It recommends that organisations take responsibility for providing easy access to support mechanisms, and also suggests future studies measuring the effectiveness of coping strategies.

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Introduction

Leadership in general has been studied for decades, with more recent studies considering the impact of project leadership on project success. The definition of leadership from the Association for Project Management (APM) (2012, p. 68) is "the ability to establish vision and direction, to influence and align others towards a common purpose, and to empower and inspire people to achieve success". This optimistic definition implies leadership has a positive impact, and it is true that leadership research historically focused on methods for effective and improving leadership (Tepper, 2007). This is also true in the context of project leadership research, which tends to focus on leader efficiency rather than "behavioural or interpersonal factors" (Müller and Turner, 2007, p. 21). The importance of leadership to project success (or failure) is obvious, as "when leadership is effective, everyone benefits" (Gaddis and Foster, 2015, p. 25). Previous research into the dark side of leadership suggests that up to 75% of leaders fail to exhibit successful leadership characteristics (Hogan and Hogan, 2001). In addition, Inyang (2013) suggests that studying leadership without considering negative aspects prevents the concept of leadership being fully understood.

With a rise in corporate scandals and destructive leaders (Aasland *et al.*, 2010; Cote, 2018), there is a requirement for more research to be undertaken into the darker side of leadership. A literature review carried out by Schyns and Schilling in 2013 showed that destructive leadership behaviours (such as those which are voluntarily harmful and deviant) were prevalent in organisations, with severe consequences for employees' mental health and wellbeing (Schyns and Schilling, 2013). Research also suggests that bad leadership results in long-lasting and serious consequences for organisations, teams and followers (Hogan and Hogan, 2001). One estimate of the cost to US-based organisations was almost $24 billion per year due to lowered productivity, staff absences and healthcare-related costs (Mathieu and Babiak, 2016). The impact on followers can be debilitating, with many victims suffering social, psychological and physical consequences (Shaw, Erickson and Harvey, 2011). Few studies have investigated how followers cope with negative leader behaviour (Yagil, Ben-Zur and Tamir, 2011), particularly within project environments. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring challenging behaviour in project leaders, and how followers cope. There are three objectives to the study: to identify what followers perceive to be challenging behaviour of project leaders; to explore how challenging leader behaviour impacts on followers; to identify methods which followers use to cope with challenging leader behaviour.

The research aims to support organisations in identifying if and when interventions are required to mitigate the impact of negative leadership. It also explores strategies used by followers to cope with challenging leader behaviour, which could provide followers with coping mechanisms should the organisation fail to intervene.

Review of Project Leadership Literature

Despite the amount of time that people have studied leadership, there is still no single definition (Gill, 2011). As early as 1985, Bennis and Nannus (p. 4) stated that "no clear unequivocal understanding exists as to what distinguishes leaders from non-leaders" and this is still true.

Leadership research has historically been categorised into traits, competencies and behaviours; this research focuses on leader behaviours. Although several theories of positive and effective leader behaviours have been identified, there is much less research into negative behaviours and leadership weaknesses. Research by Zhang, Leslie and Hannum (2013), identified five weaknesses, summarised by Cote (2018) as problems with performance; problems with relationships; problems with change; problems with building and leading teams; and problems with experience (see Table 1 below). Alongside theories of effective leadership, theories have also been suggested for negative leadership, which can be categorised as 'bad', 'sad' and 'mad' (Furnham, 2010, cited in Inyang, 2013). 'Bad' leadership implies deliberate immoral or unethical behaviour, 'sad' leadership implies incompetence or lack of skills, and 'mad' leadership implies mental or psychological impairments.

Table 1 – Five Key Weaknesses of Leaders, as summarised by Cote (2018)

Problem Area	Description
Performance	Includes being unable to meet the objectives of the business, often due to excessive self-promotion, a lack of focus and attention to the priorities of the business and playing office politics.
Relationships	A lack of soft skills when dealing with stakeholders and colleagues, including being insensitive, critical, manipulative and dominating, the consequences of which are decreased trust and a demotivated team.
Change	Unable to learn from feedback or criticism, unable to handle everyday pressures, not willing to adapt leadership style to meet the needs of the organisation or the team members.
Building/Leading Teams	An inability to both lead and manage a team successfully, not recruiting the right people for the team, ineffective leadership of the team.
Experience	Doesn't have a 'big picture' perspective, can't develop and communicate a vision, poor communication, unable to function in different positions to lead the company.

Several 'bad' leadership theories have been developed, including abusive (Tepper, 2000; Tepper, 2007), tyrannical (Ashforth, 1994), destructive (Einarsen, Aasland and Skogstad, 2007), and toxic (Lipman-Blumen, 2005). The similarities and differences between some of these are represented in Table 2 below. Many of these studies used questionnaires completed by the leader or their subordinates, for example the Destructive Leadership Questionnaire (DLQ), used by subordinates to identify specific leader behaviours (Erickson *et al.*, 2015). However, by only considering a single viewpoint, either that of the leader or the follower (not both), researchers miss other perspectives. Thoroughgood *et al.* (2018, p. 627) argue that leadership is "a dynamic, cocreational process between leaders, followers and environments". This suggests perceptions of leader behaviour could differ depending on the follower (Pelletier, 2010), and this is supported by Lipman-Blumen (2005) who says one person's hero is another person's toxic leader.

Table 2 – Harmful behaviours and associated leadership theories

Behaviour	Abusive	Tyrannical	Destructive	Bullying	Toxic
Demeaning/marginalising, or degrading	X	X	X	X	X
Ridiculing/mocking	X	X	X	X	X
Social exclusion	X			X	X
Ostracising/disenfranchising employee					X
Inciting employee to chastise another				X	X
Exhibiting favouritism	X	X	X		X
Harassment (including sexual)	X		X	X	
Emotional volatility	X		X	X	
Coercion	X				X
Using physical acts of aggression		X	X	X	X
Threatening employees' job security				X	X
Forcing people to endure hardships				X	X
Being deceptive/lying	X	X	X		X
Blaming others for the leader's mistakes	X	X	X	X	X
Taking credit for others' work		X		X	
Pitting in-group members against out-group members					X
Ignoring comments/ideas					X
Acting disengaged			X		
Stifling dissent		X			X
Being rigid		X			X
Presenting toxic agendas as noble visions					X

Source: Adapted from Pelletier (2010, p. 375)

Within project management specifically, research has focused on the competencies project managers need to ensure projects are successful, as defined by the traditional criteria of time, cost, and quality (Lloyd-Walker and Walker, 2011). If we define effective leadership and project success in this one-dimensional way, we fail to address the impact that project leadership potentially has on stakeholders; in particular, the project team.

Perhaps because the concept of leadership is subjective (Schyns and Schilling, 2013), project management leadership research has focused on the performance of tasks, rather than the performance of people (Lloyd-Walker and Walker, 2011). This is despite research which found the greatest impact on project management practices are interpersonal skills (El-Sabaa, 2001), while Müller and Turner (2007) found that leadership style has an influence on project success.

While identifying positive behaviours to improve leader effectiveness, it is also important to identify negative behaviours, especially those that may harm followers (Pelletier, 2010). Einarsen, Aasland and Skogstad (2007) suggest that researching negative aspects of leadership may be *more* important than researching positive aspects. This could be due to research suggesting some 'bad' leadership traits are actually beneficial to project success, as suggested by Kaiser, LeBreton and Hogan (2015). They proposed that leadership performance was positively related to some dark-side traits such as narcissism and psychopathy, and suggested that some of these traits are tolerated, even desired in leaders, as they can be used to gain benefits for the organisation. If organisations are willing to tolerate bad leaders, followers may need to acquire coping strategies to deal with the consequences of their behaviour. This is one reason bad leadership needs further research.

A definition of Challenging Leader Behaviour

While it is clear the various 'bad' leadership theories have common behaviours, there is no single model encapsulating the many behaviours that followers could perceive as challenging. Therefore, the term 'Challenging Leader Behaviour' is suggested. This enables participants to determine for themselves what bad leadership means to them and their projects. Challenging leader behaviour is defined in this study as ***"any behaviour displayed by the project leader, that has a negative impact on the project or the follower, from the follower's perspective"***. This brings the focus onto the follower and the consequences of the behaviour, regardless of whether the behaviour is deemed 'good' or 'bad' according to theories from literature. If leadership is socially constructed, as argued by Erickson *et al.* (2015, p. 40), then there is "a valid argument for focusing specifically on followers' perceptions".

Impact of challenging leader behaviour

Research has demonstrated that bad leadership can have significant consequences for organisations, teams and followers (Erickson *et al.*, 2015). Research carried out by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD, 2015) suggests organisations often perceive employee absence and turnover to be the biggest impacts. Just as important is the wellbeing of individuals, due to the impact on motivation and productivity. However, there is some research suggesting bad leadership may have a *positive* impact on the organisation, such as the study by Judge, Piccolo and Kosalka (2009) which proposes that narcissistic leaders may be more likely to take risks that improve organisational performance. Few studies focus on the impact of challenging leader behaviour on projects, although much research has been done on the impact of positive leader behaviour. For example, the study by Aga, Noorderhaven and Vallejo (2016) found that a positive leadership style (e.g. transformational) had a positive effect on project success. It could be argued, therefore, that a negative leadership style could have a negative effect.

Clarifying the effects of bad leadership on individuals is much more difficult, possibly because individuals can interpret the same behaviour differently. Impacts identified in literature fall into three main categories: Impact on mental and physical health, impact on family life, and impact on job

satisfaction (Krasikova, Green and LeBreton, 2013). Much research exists on work-related impacts such as job satisfaction, performance and productivity (e.g. Mehta and Maheshwari, 2013; Mathieu and Babiak, 2016). However, the impact on the physical and mental health of followers is often neglected, possibly because "it almost seems a matter of course that destructive leadership is … negatively related to wellbeing" (Schyns & Schilling, 2013, p. 143). Some studies focus on wellbeing (e.g. Erickson, Shaw and Agabe, 2007; Yagil, Ben-Zur and Tamir, 2011), and consider emotional impact, psychological distress, family wellbeing and work performance. This study aims to add to this research from a project perspective, both to identify challenging behaviour in project leaders, and to identify tools and coping strategies for followers.

Coping with challenging leader behaviour

Identifying how followers can cope with challenging leader behaviour within projects is the ultimate aim of this research, but there is a responsibility on organisations to recognise and deal with challenging behaviour before it becomes a problem. Interventions could take place at recruitment, during appraisals or through provision of mechanisms for employees to raise concerns (Erickson *et al.,* 2015). Cote (2018) identified interventions such as therapy, social skills training, or coaching which the organisation could provide, while Yagil, Ben-Zur and Tamir (2011) suggest interventions to raise the leader's awareness of their abusive behaviour. However, the study by Webster, Brough and Daly (2014, p. 353) states that these interventions are "often inadequate to deal effectively with this specific problem". So, what happens when intervention is unsuccessful, or if the organisation fails to intervene?

There is little research regarding how followers cope with challenging leader behaviour. According to general coping literature (Skinner *et al.*, 2003

Looking at specific coping strategies, the studies by Webster, Brough and Daly (2014) and Yagil, Ben-Zur and Tamir (2011) found that followers often 'disengaged' from bad leaders and were more likely to avoid than to challenge them. Support-seeking strategies were also adopted by followers. These were either problem-focused (speaking to HR or colleagues to solve the problem) or emotion-focused (speaking to friends and family to deal with emotional consequences). Additionally, research carried out by May *et al.* (2014) suggests the way followers cope with destructive leadership could predict the leader's future behaviour towards the follower, improving it or destroying it further. They go on to suggest that a 'vicious cycle' could occur, where the follower's method of coping with the challenging behaviour causes further (and increased) challenging behaviour from the leader.

Methodology

This study is designed to identify what individuals perceive as challenging leader behaviour, and the coping strategies they adopt to cope with the such behaviour.

Research design

A multi-method qualitative study was employed to make sense of the meanings constructed by followers (Creswell, 2014). The study used an online survey to measure how common challenging behaviour was in project leaders, and to then select participants for the second stage of the study, consisting of semi-structured interviews. The survey statements were used as prompts during the interview, with some participants' responses discussed in more detail during the interview. The survey is discussed first.

Survey design and pilot

To check validity and ease of use, a pilot survey was designed and distributed to a small number of people. This led to modifications such as reducing the number of statements in both parts of the survey, from 88 statements overall to 60. The final survey consisted of two sections. The first aimed to establish what individuals perceived to be challenging leader behaviour. Pairs of statements developed from the Leadership Versatility Index (Kaiser Leadership Solutions, 2018), were used by participants to indicate their preferences. The second section listed 29 statements, paired as positives e.g. "*treated everyone in the team fairly*" and negatives e.g. "*had favourites within the team*" (14 pairs plus an extra negative). Participants indicated how often they experienced each behaviour using a five-point scale from "Always" to "Never". Statements were based on the 22 destructive leader behaviours identified in Erickson *et al.* (2015). Combining responses from both sections and scoring them, enabled participants to be identified who had experienced challenging leader behaviour, who were then invited for an interview.

Interview design

The second stage of the study aimed to 'dig deeper' into the survey responses to determine how participants coped with challenging leader behaviour. Data was gathered using semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions based on the three research objectives. Participants were asked to consider what they perceived to be challenging behaviour, how it impacted on them, and how they coped. Participants were also asked to expand on specific responses from their survey, particularly for unethical, bullying or abusive behaviour. This allowed these behaviours to be explored in more depth.

Sample selection

The online survey link was distributed as widely as possible via professional networks. Personalised emails aimed to increase response rates, alongside 'snowballing' where recipients were asked to forward the link to others. The Association for Project Management's student research page, the University alumni association and social media channels were also used to ensure wide distribution. This resulted in 67 individual survey responses. Participants were mostly female (58.2%), with males making up 38.8% of respondents. Ages ranged from under 30 (25.4%) to over 60 (8.9%), the majority being between 30 and 59 (59.7%). Some participants did not disclose age or gender. To protect anonymity, no data was collected on job title or sector. Participants were asked to submit their contact details only if they were happy to take part in the second (interview) stage of the study.

Following survey completion, participants were scored based on their responses to determine potential interviewees. A response of 'always' or 'often' to a *negative* statement scored 1, as did a response of 'never' or 'rarely' to a *positive* statement. All other responses scored zero. These scores were used to rank participants according to their responses. Eight participants were selected for interview, evenly split between male and female with two participants aged under 30, three between 31 and 50, and two over 50. One did not disclose their age.

Analysis design

An inductive thematic analysis approach was used to analyse data from the interview transcripts, using spreadsheets and paper; for later work, the use of a qualitative data analysis tool would be considered. An approach similar to that used by Erickson, Shaw and Agabe (2007) was adopted by looking at individual blocks of text, breaking them down into meaningful units and then identifying single-idea statements which became the key themes. The statements were then assigned to one of three categories: Leader behaviours, impacts of leader behaviour, and coping strategies. Once statements were assigned to categories, further analysis identified themes and sub-themes in each category, related to the research objectives.

While an inductive approach was used, once themes had been identified, they were refined with reference to literature. This was to determine if any themes from literature were present in the analysed data, and to determine if new themes, not present in literature, had emerged from the data. Once key themes had been identified and analysed, sub-themes were identified. Given the large number of key themes, further analysis took place and key themes were categorised into 'super themes', using the five leader weaknesses identified by Zhang, Leslie and Hannum (2013). These are problems with relationships, problems with building and leading teams, problems with experience, problems with performance, and problems with change. Table 1 provides descriptions for these five weaknesses. Super themes, key themes and sub-themes are presented in Table 7, along with example participant responses.

Two methods of content analysis were used to identify which key themes were most relevant to this study. The first measured the number of times each theme was mentioned. These results are presented in Table 5 and shows some participants were more expansive in their descriptions than others. Using this data alone would lead to those individuals disproportionately impacting analysis (Erickson, Shaw and Agabe, 2007). For example, there were 25 responses in total for the 'ethical' theme, however the majority of these were from one individual. To create a more balanced analysis, a dichotomous scoring system was adopted. If a participant mentioned a key theme during their interview they scored 1, regardless of how many times they mentioned it. If it was not mentioned, they scored 0. This meant all respondents were weighted equally.

For the first objective, key themes from the analysis were compared with and refined using relevant literature, mainly the destructive leader behaviours used in the Erickson *et al.* (2015) study. This approach was adopted due to the "bewildering proliferation of taxonomies on leadership behaviour" (Yukl, Gordon and Taber, 2002, p. 15), which created difficulties in finalising distinct themes. As themes for this objective emerged, it became clear that a measurement was required of how relevant each theme was to the study. This was achieved by counting the number of times each theme was identified, and the number of participants mentioning each theme, and is discussed in detail in the analysis section. Following this, five super themes were adopted, based on five leader weaknesses identified by Zhang, Leslie and Hannum (2013). Table 1 describes these five weaknesses in more detail, and Table 3 lists all super themes, key themes and sub-themes used in analysis of this objective. Results are discussed in the analysis section later.

Table 3: Super Themes, Key Themes and Sub-Themes of Challenging Leader Behaviour

Super Theme	Key Theme	Sub-Themes
Experience	Planning	Poor planning, unable to delegate, lacks knowledge
Performance	Clarifying	Lack of clarity re: project goals and tasks, lack of transparency
Building teams	Monitoring	Controlling, micromanaging, dictatorship, interfering
Relationships	Supporting	Not taking responsibility, not visible, detached, lacks motivation
Building teams	Recognition	No appreciation, lack of respect, takes credit for others' work
Change	Consulting	Won't be challenged, won't accept feedback, doesn't consult team
Change	Change	Resistant to change, lacks innovation
Performance	Political	Has favourites, pits people against each other
Relationships	Personal	Inappropriate personal behaviour, takes things personally
Relationships	Interpersonal	Insensitive to situations, creates conflict, poor body language
Relationships	Unethical	Immoral, takes advantage, fraud, lying, covering up mistakes
Relationships	Bullying/Abusive	Confrontational, threatening, violent, excludes/ignores people
Experience	Skill deficit	Lacks PM skills, lacks technical skills, doesn't follow processes
Experience	Communicating	Can't negotiate, inappropriate communication, poor stakeholder communication
N/A	MISC/OTHER	Lacks trust, lacks empathy, inauthentic, narcissistic

To address the second objective, research carried out by Krasikova, Green and LeBreton (2013) and Erickson, Shaw and Agabe (2007) was used to refine the themes for data analysis. The research by Erickson, Shaw and Agabe (2007) asked followers three questions: how the bad leader made them

feel, how it affected them personally, and how it impacted their work performance. The research by Krasikova, Green and LeBreton (2013) asked how the leader's behaviour impacted on their psychological/physical health, family life and job/life satisfaction.

The third objective was addressed using research carried out by May *et al.* (2014) and Yagil, Ben-Zur and Tamir (2011), to clarify categorisations of coping strategies for data analysis. Yagil, Ben-Zur and Tamir (2011) identified two common methods of categorising coping strategies used in this study, approach coping and avoidance coping. The research by May *et al.* (2014) was added problem-focused and emotion-focused to these, resulting in four categories in total. These four categories of coping, with related strategies, are presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4: *Examples of Follower Coping Strategies in Response to Destructive Leadership*

	Approach coping	**Avoidance coping**
Problem-focused coping	*General coping strategies:* Problem solving Seeking instrumental support *Upward influence tactics:* Ingratiating/appeasement Rational Persuasion Exchange/negotiating Exerting pressure Upward appeals to subordinate authorities Coalition	*General coping strategies:* Avoiding contact with the leader Absenteeism
Emotion-focused coping	*General coping strategies:* Acceptance Cognitive restructuring Seeking emotional support *Supervisor-directed deviance:* Verbally attacking the supervisor Embarrassing/ridiculing the supervisor	*General coping strategies:* Denial Wishful thinking Substance abuse *Coworker- or organisation-directed deviance:* Verbally attacking coworkers Embarrassing/ridiculing coworkers Defrauding/stealing from the organisation Shirking

Source: *May et al. (2014, p. 206)*

Survey Findings

While the survey's primary aim was to identify participants to be interviewed, there were some interesting findings from survey responses. For example, one question asked participants if they had experienced a project leader acting in a "bullying or abusive manner towards people", and 58.2% indicated they had experienced this. This aligns with the findings of Aasland *et al.* (2010) who suggested that up to 61% of leaders act destructively. A second finding was that when considering the gender of respondents, more females scored at the higher end of the scale. This could indicate that compared to males, women either experience more challenging leader behaviour, or that they perceive more behaviours to be challenging. This could be a potential area for future research.

Results and Findings from Interviews

Considering analysis of the interview data, participants were asked what they perceived to be challenging behaviour from a project leader, how it impacted them, and how they coped with it. The results are presented below and are summarised in the conclusion (NB: Codes are used in this section to identify individual participants, these are F01, F02, F03, F04, M01, M02, M03, M04).

What followers perceive to be challenging behaviour in project leaders

Participants were asked what they considered as challenging behaviour from a project leader. These results are presented in Table 6.

Table 5 – Number of occasions each theme was mentioned (how important)

	Key Themes														
	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T6	T7	T8	T9	T10	T11	T12	T13	T14	T15
F01	3	3	2	6	3	2	0	3	3	2	0	6	0	0	3
F02	4	5	0	2	1	1	0	1	0	1	6	0	0	3	0
F03	4	1	2	4	5	3	0	0	0	5	0	5	1	6	4
F04	1	0	5	2	4	0	0	1	1	0	5	1	1	0	1
M01	5	0	4	10	2	1	0	0	1	0	5	0	3	0	4
M02	5	1	1	4	0	1	2	0	2	1	0	0	3	2	0
M03	0	0	3	4	0	0	0	0	6	8	8	13	0	0	0
M04	0	0	7	2	0	0	2	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	4
Totals	22	10	24	34	15	8	4	5	14	18	24	25	9	11	16

Table 6 – Number of participants mentioning each theme (how common)

	Key Themes														
	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T6	T7	T8	T9	T10	T11	T12	T13	T14	T15
F01	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	1	0	0	1
F02	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	0
F03	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	1	1
F04	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	1
M01	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1
M02	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	1	0
M03	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0
M04	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	1
Totals	6	4	7	8	5	5	2	3	6	6	4	4	5	3	5

Combining both analyses identified how **important** and how **common** each key theme was. For example, it could be important to one person but not common across all interviews, or it could be common due to being mentioned by everyone, but not important if only mentioned once per person. The following section discusses the results.

Table 7 – Followers' perceptions of challenging behaviour in project leaders

Code	Super Theme	Key Theme	Example responses
T1	Experience	Planning	*"they forget that they have a project team around them to give away some of the work"* (F04) *"if you feel somebody's not organised and coordinated that's very challenging … they either haven't taken on board what's been said, or haven't read enough"* (F03)
T2	Performance	Clarifying	*"it becomes clear that you're not meant to ask questions … about why certain things are happening"* (F03) *"if you don't have a clear goal, or … it completely changes, that can be quite frustrating"* (F01)
T3	Building teams	Monitoring	*"they want to know exactly what they're doing, where they are, why is it taking so long"* (F04) *"They're sort of drunk on power, and must establish that they are better than you, that they have control over you"* (M03)
T4	Relationships	Supporting	*"I don't understand how you can have a cohesive team … when you can't see what the leader is up to"* (M01) *"the leader [doesn't] take responsibility for … being part of that project"* (F01) *"The pressure gets ramped up, because you start getting behind on the project"* (F04)
T5	Building teams	Recognition	*"it doesn't make me feel valued"* (F02)

			"I haven't seen ... genuine appreciation for the work that people have done" (F01)
T6	Change	Consulting	*"they're unlikely to listen, unlikely to be receptive to change, to criticism, to anything that challenges their ... leadership"* (M01) *"It's not discussed, they just go off and do it anyway"* (M02)
T7	Change	Change	*"they find it hard to adapt to [change]"* (M02)
T8	Performance	Political	*"there's a lot of pitting people against each other"* (F01)
T9	Relationships	Personal	*"there's a lot of very petty situations ... that to me is very unprofessional, quite childish" (F01)* *"I could see how that person had got into a personal situation with this client that ... damaged the project"* (F03) *"because it hadn't worked for them that one time, they've immediately ruled it out and said it's not worth doing ... they just gave up"* (M02)
T10	Relationships	Interpersonal	*"it's not professional, it's not appropriate for this situation, you need to ... treat this with the respect that it deserves"* (F03) *"There was real conflict ... we had some real clashes of opinion"* (M03)
T11	Relationships	Ethical	*"they're the type of people that are willing to bury a lot of people on the way up"* (M01) *"he liked to take advantage of vulnerable people"* (M03)
T12	Relationships	Bullying/Abusive	*"I thought the guy was going to kill me ... he was screaming at me"* (M03) *"people who are not willing to change or not changing fast enough are very often ... pressured or intentionally irritated to ... motivate them to leave" (F01)*
T13	Experience	Skills	*"Corners were being cut in terms of data protection"* (F02)
T14	Experience	Communicating	*"they're going into this meeting, you think 'you're not prepared for this' ... the lack of preparation"* (F03) *"it was the severe lack of communication ... made the project really difficult"* (M02)
T15	N/A	Other (misc)	

When identifying problems with relationships, the **Supporting** theme was mentioned most frequently (n=34) and was mentioned by all participants. Several participants described leaders who lacked interest or were not visible (literally or figuratively). Participants also found it challenging when leaders failed to take responsibility for projects, blaming the team if things went wrong. Leaders using negative reinforcement to pressure the team were also found to be challenging. The **Personal** and **Interpersonal** themes ranked highly in terms of importance and were both mentioned by 75% of participants. Personal behaviours included childish behaviour, taking things personally and giving up easily. Interpersonal behaviours participants found challenging included leaders being insensitive to situations (e.g. redundancy meetings). Several participants described leaders who clashed and created conflict within the team. The themes of **Ethical** and **Bullying/Abusive** were among the most frequently mentioned behaviours, despite only being identified by half the participants. This could be because these are emotive subjects people feel strongly about, potentially prompting more intense and deeper discussion. These themes include leaders taking advantage of people, covering up mistakes, and more serious behaviours such as lying and fraud. Also included are leaders excluding team members, talking behind people's backs, being confrontational, and extreme behaviours such as physical threats and violence. A sub-theme emerged around leaders creating negative environments which caused people to resign, discussed further below.

When identifying problems with building and leading teams, the **Monitoring** theme was mentioned by nearly all participants (87.5%) and included leaders displaying micromanaging and controlling behaviour, and constantly monitoring followers. Interestingly, one participant (F02) indicated a preference for leaders being more hands-on, providing *"very clear instructions"* so they understood their role. All other participants preferred to be left to manage their own work. The theme of **Recognition** was mentioned by 62.5% of participants and ranked highly for importance. Participants

described a lack of appreciation and not feeling valued by the leader. This theme also included leaders who took credit for other people's work.

When discussing problems with experience, the **Planning** theme was identified by 75% of participants, with particular reference to leader disorganisation. 'Little or no delegation' was another behaviour participants found challenging, as well as poor resource use, cutting corners in the project, and lacking a 'big picture' perspective. The **Skills** theme mainly focused on leaders lacking technical or project management skills, and leaders not following processes or procedures, such as data protection legislation. The **Communication** theme included leaders with poor communication skills or using inappropriate communication channels. This included poor stakeholder communication and leaders negotiating ineffectively.

Participants rarely identified problems related to the themes of **Clarifying, Politics, Consulting** and **Change** which constitute the super themes of problems with performance and problems with change. Example responses can be found in Table 7 and related sub-themes can be found in Table 3.

In summary, these results suggest that challenging behaviours involving relationships are most important to followers. This is in line with Erickson, Shaw and Agabe (2007, p.35), who found "an inability to deal with subordinates" was the highest response category in their study. Challenging behaviour around team building was also important to followers. This aligns with the study by Kendra and Taplin (2004), whose research stresses the importance of the project leader's team building skills. While it was important to participants that leaders were in control, they found controlling behaviour challenging. This matches the findings of Webster, Brough and Daly (2014). The frequent mentions for the themes of ethical and bullying/abusive aligns with Erickson, Shaw and Agabe (2007), and could be explained by research suggesting negative behaviours impact more than positive ones (Amabile *et al.*, 2004). While these findings provide an understanding of what constitutes challenging leader behaviour, it is important to identify consequences of these behaviours for followers.

The impact of challenging leader behaviour on followers

The previous section identified several leader behaviours participants found challenging. This section considers the impact of these behaviours on participants. A variety of outcomes were reported, and from thematic analysis of these outcomes, themes emerged related to health, personal life and work life. These themes align with those identified by Erickson, Shaw and Agabe (2007) and Krasikova, Green and LeBreton (2013), which led to the development of the three themes used in this study. These are presented in Table 8, with example outcomes and related responses from participants. Each theme is discussed in detail below.

Table 8 – Outcomes for followers of challenging leader behaviour

Key themes	Example outcomes	Example responses
Psychological impacts	Emotional reactions e.g. feeling stressed, anxious, frustrated, worried, angry, confused.	*"it can cause quite a bit of anxiety ... it can be quite distressing"* (F01)
	Not feeling valued	*"it makes you feel that what you do is not valued, or that your contribution is not valued"* (F03).
	Feeling threatened – physically Feeling threatened – verbally	*"I thought the guy was going to kill me"* (M03) *"it's a form of bullying ... you feel intimidated"* (F03)
	Feeling ashamed	*"I felt slightly shameful about it"* (F04)
	Feeling defensive	*"the more you get into that command and control mode, you're driving people to be much more defensive"* (M04)
	Feelings of failure	*"you feel like a failure, or that you've been weak in some way"* (F03)

Personal impacts	Work-life balance – unable to switch off	*"I take it home and I can't switch off from it. I sit and worry about it outside of work"* (F02)
	Relationships (outside work)	*"it affects your personal life … The person I was going out with at the time, our relationship dramatically improved when I left my job"* (M03)
	Health – physical	*"I got absolutely sick … so I quit"* (M03)
	Health – mental	*"if a lot of this stuff builds up … it can be detrimental to my mental health"* (F02)
Work impacts	Motivation/team morale	*"[the behaviour] was totally demoralising for me and the team"* (F03)
	Performance	*"I didn't function well"* (F02)
	Want to leave – temporarily avoid leader	*"you get to the end of the day and you leave … you just clock out and go"* (F04)
	Want to leave – organisation	*"It makes you question what you are doing … Could I be working in a different team? Do I even want this as a career?"* (M01)

Psychological impacts

The most common consequences of challenging leader behaviour on followers were psychological impacts. Participants identified a range of emotional reactions such as feeling stressed, anxious, frustrated, worried, angry and confused. Participants discussed the impact on their relationship with the leader, including a lack of value or support. 37.5% of participants said they felt threatened by the leader, either physically or verbally. Participants also identified feelings of shame and failure (25%). One participant commented that as they approached the end of their contract, they felt *"disposable"* (F04) and could be blamed for unethical practices during the project.

Personal impacts

The second theme includes impacts on relationships, health and home life. Several participants described how challenging behaviour had negative impacts on their home life. Participants found they were unable to 'switch off', taking problems home. The importance of a good work-life balance also arose when discussing coping strategies and is discussed further in the analysis of the third objective below. The impact on participants' home life extended to their personal relationships. One participant described how the behaviour they experienced had a profound negative effect and how they were *"full of anger, all the time"* (M03), severely affecting the relationship with their partner. Participants also described how the behaviour they experienced had negative health impacts. Participants reported feeling physically sick and having problems sleeping. Impact on mental health was also mentioned; one participant said a build-up of challenging behaviours caused their mental health to deteriorate, and for another participant, on-going challenging behaviour pushed them to breaking point: *"Everybody has a breaking point, there's only so much you can take … before it starts to affect you negatively"* (F01).

Work impacts

Participants identified several work-related impacts of challenging behaviour. These included feeling demotivated or demoralised, with half the participants indicating they felt less motivated at work due to leader behaviour. Participants also described impacts on their performance, how they felt *"unable to reach their full potential"* (M04), possibly causing negative repercussions for the project team. As one participant indicated, controlling behaviour impairing an individual's realisation of their potential, could limit the ability of the team to *"reach its potential for collaborative working"* (M04). This lack of collaboration and synergy within the team could then impact on the achievement of project objectives. Half the participants identified that behaviour they experienced made them *"not want to be there"* (F04). This ranged from wanting to leave as early as possible every day, to considering a change of career. Some participants even left the organisation because of challenging behaviour, discussed further in the analysis of the third objective.

In summary, these results suggest the biggest impacts of challenging leader behaviour on followers are psychological, such as anxiety and stress, which is also the case in the study by Webster, Brough and Daly (2014). Negative impacts on relationships were identified, not just the leader-follower relationship, but extending to personal relationships and home life, where work-life balance was also affected. The study by Erickson, Shaw and Agabe (2007) also demonstrates this. Challenging leader behaviour impacted participant performance at work, including decreased motivation, again supporting the study by Erickson, Shaw and Agabe (2007). A lack of collaboration within the project team could also negatively impact the achievement of project objectives. This analysis suggests that the effects on relationships and teams have the most impact on followers, which was also the case for challenging leader behaviours in the previous section. It is therefore important to understand what can be done by followers (and the organisation) to cope with the impacts of challenging leader behaviour.

How followers cope with challenging leader behaviour

Having identified challenging leader behaviours and the impact they had, participants were then asked how they coped with these behaviours. Followers may need to develop coping strategies to deal with challenging leader behaviour if there has been little or no intervention from the organisation to address or remove the behaviour (Webster, Brough and Daly, 2014). One participant summed this up by saying: *"you can't change other people's behaviour, you can only change the way you react to it"* (F01).

An interesting point made by some participants was that organisations should include tests or measures in the recruitment process for project leaders to identify potential 'bad' leaders, thus excluding them from appointment into the organisation altogether. This was also mentioned by Cote (2018), who said organisations need to take a proactive approach, using tools to screen leaders. This could benefit organisations, as they would then not need to provide interventions to change behaviour, and could reduce potential impacts of absenteeism, turnover and low productivity.

Coping strategies identified by followers were analysed and sorted into two themes: strategies where people tried to change the situation, and those where people tried to avoid the situation. When literature on coping strategies was consulted (e.g. Yagil, Ben-Zur and Tamir, 2011), it became clear these were common ways of categorising coping strategies, referred to as approach coping and avoidance coping respectively. The research by May *et al.* (2014) suggested the addition of problem-focused and emotion-focused coping, enabling a deeper analysis to take place. The combination of these two categorisations resulted in four key themes, used to categorise the coping strategies as displayed in Table 6. This approach is often adopted when analysing data in coping research and is well established in the general coping literature (Skinner *et al.,* 2003), and is presented in Table 4).

Table 1 – Follower coping strategies

Key themes	Specific strategies	Example responses
Problem-focused approach coping	Problem-solving: Confronting the leader	*"I have talked to leaders about their behaviour … unfortunately it's been shut down"* (F01)
	Problem solving: Seeking practical support	*"I've had HR and occupational health involved to … provide me with some extra support"* (F01)
	Appeasement	*"you understand … what your manager is happy with … you learn stuff like that just to appease them"* (F04)
	Instrumental action: Wellbeing activities	*"I'll go for a run or a walk every day on my lunch break … so I'm getting some positive exercise in"* (F01)
	Manage upwards	*"Managing up, where subordinates manage their managers … you learn to manage their stress levels"* (F04)

	Take on leadership role	*"if you don't feel like something is being done effectively, you take on the role yourself and make sure it happens"* (F03)
Emotion-focused approach coping	Seeking emotional support	*"I did feel it was very important to talk to somebody about it. You can't just keep that locked up inside"* (F03)
	Acceptance	*"you have to accept that you aren't going to change that person"* (M04)
	Cognitive restructuring	*"focussing on the positive outcomes"* (F03)
Problem-focused avoidance coping	Avoiding contact – temporarily	*"Just getting out and getting away from my computer … that definitely helps"* (F02)
	Avoiding contact – permanently	*"I left in the end, I quit on a moral basis"* (M03)
Emotion-focused avoidance coping	Denial	*"putting it to one side"* (F03)
	Wishful thinking	*"sit and worry"* (F02)

Problem-focussed approach coping

Coping methods adopted most frequently were 'problem-focused approach' strategies, with 87.5% of participants implementing these approaches. 75% of participants confronted or challenged the leader directly, although one person admitted this was not always effective. Another common strategy involved seeking practical support, such as from HR, occupational health, or trade unions, however one participant described problems accessing these. For example, externally-provided therapies required many steps to access; for someone suffering stress or anxiety, this seemed too much work. Participants described attempting to appease the leader by doing exactly what was asked of them. Two participants used wellbeing activities such as running, walking and meditation to mitigate the impact of the leader's behaviour. Other strategies mentioned were managing upwards and taking on the leadership role if the project leader failed to.

Emotion-focussed approach coping

50% of participants used 'emotion-focussed approach' strategies, the most common of which was seeking emotional support from family and friends. Acceptance of the situation was identified by two participants as a way of coping with the situation. Cognitive restructuring, whereby the follower re-frames the situation (May *et al.*, 2014), was used by one participant who re-focused on positive outcomes of the project for stakeholders, rather than the challenging behaviour.

Problem-focussed avoidance coping

62.5% of participants discussed using problem-focussed avoidance strategies. These all involved avoidance of the leader, usually just temporarily, by leaving the office at lunchtime, or as early as possible at the end of the day. A significant number of participants (25%), said they left the organisation as a direct result of the challenging behaviour displayed by the project leader.

Emotion-focussed avoidance coping

Participants who used emotion-focussed avoidance strategies (37.5%) mostly coped by ignoring or denying the leader's challenging behaviour, in different ways. Some participants talked about 'letting it go', or 'getting on with it', whereas others were more likely to 'sit and worry' about the situation. Another participant admitted that 'absorbing' the behaviour was an ineffective coping strategy: *"I coped badly … you would probably describe it as total avoidance coping … I avoided all of it"* (M03). Other participants ensured their work and home life was separated as much as possible and another's approach was to *"plan things on the weekend that are relaxing"* (F01) to avoid thinking about the emotional consequences of the leader's behaviour.

In summary, it is clear that the most commonly adopted coping strategies focus on the problem; in this case the leader-follower relationship. The majority of participants challenged or confronted the leader about their behaviour, aiming to improve the leader-follower relationship (approach coping). Participants also attempted to improve the leader-follower relationship by seeking out instrumental support to change the leader's behaviour, although this required easy access to be effective. Avoiding the leader completely (avoidance coping) was slightly less common. This analysis is broadly in line with the study by Webster, Brough and Daly (2014), which looked at coping strategies for toxic leadership. However, not all coping strategies identified in Webster's study were mentioned by participants in this study, possibly due to the small sample size. It is perhaps worth noting at this point that follower reactions to challenging leader behaviour could potentially lead to further (and increased) challenging behaviour (May *et al.*, 2014). This highlights the importance of the organisation's role in supporting the preferred coping strategies of followers.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore challenging behaviour in project leaders and identify coping strategies of followers. The results outlined above suggest the most significant challenging behaviours relate to the relationship between the leader and followers. This can be seen in the various behaviours identified by followers as challenging, such as leaders who were unsupportive, used bullying behaviour, had poor interpersonal skills, behaved unethically and struggled with building and leading teams. Consequentially, these challenging behaviours resulted in negative impacts on the leader-follower relationship. This could potentially create a "perpetuating vicious cycle" (May *et al.*, 2014, p. 205), whereby the follower's reaction to the challenging behaviour causes the leader to display more challenging behaviour. While the most common impact of challenging behaviour related to emotional reactions such as feeling stressed, anxious or worried, most other impacts related to relationships. The behaviour impacted on relationships within the workplace and at home. Workplace relationship impacts included the leader-follower relationship, as well as a lack of cohesiveness within the project team, both of which could potentially have an impact on project success. However, it also included negative impacts on relationships outside of work, which affected the personal lives of participants. Finally, the coping strategies adopted by followers mainly focused on ways to improve the leader-follower relationship, and were notably not specific to projects. This was achieved through confronting the leader directly or seeking instrumental support from the organisation. However, this support needs to be accessible in order to be effective, suggesting that organisations have a responsibility to provide access to relevant support, enabling followers to adopt their preferred coping strategies in response to challenging leader behaviours.

Implications for practice

The role of the organisation in enabling followers to cope with challenging leader behaviour should not be underestimated. In order to cope with challenging leadership behaviours, followers adopt specific coping strategies, in particular, practical support-seeking strategies. The organisation needs to ensure that the relevant support is available and easy as possible for employees to access (May *et al.*, 2014). If the support is not readily available to those seeking it, employees may leave the organisation (Webster, Brough and Daly, 2014). Likewise, if employees remain in the organisation, the poor relationship between leader and follower is likely to lead to further communication problems, which is a well-known critical success factor in projects.

As previously discussed, organisations could carry out screening during the recruitment process in order to identify and filter out potential 'bad' leaders who may display challenging behaviour. This was also mentioned by several participants during the study. In addition, organisations could put into

place interventions for leaders already employed, with the aim of reducing or removing the challenging behaviour (Erickson *et al.*, 2015). As leader behaviour is potentially a contributing factor to project success (Müller and Turner, 2007), an improvement in leader behaviour could result in a positive impact on project outcomes.

Limitations and future research

In this study, participants were not asked about *how effective* their chosen coping strategies were. While some participants volunteered this information, it was not a specific objective for this study. Including it in future similar studies may provide useful information about which strategies are most effective in dealing with challenging leader behaviour. For example, nearly all participants in the study challenged the project leader on their behaviour. It would have been interesting to see if this approach was effective, and how it influenced the leader-follower relationship. This could be a useful subject for future research.

A further limitation of this study was the small sample size and the fact that the majority of interview participants were current or former higher education employees. It could be argued that this is not a representative sample of the project management profession. Therefore, the data cannot be generalised for all project management professionals, but could be used for wider applications. Future research could benefit from larger samples taken from several 'traditional' project management sectors (e.g. construction or engineering) to replicate this study for wider practice within project management.

As discussed earlier, analysis of the survey data found that more females than males scored at the high end of the scale that measured the number of negative behaviours experienced. This could be interpreted in two ways. Either females experience more challenging leader behaviour compared to males, or they perceive more behaviours to be challenging. It could also be the case that a larger sample in different organisations would produce different results, and so this could be a potential area for future research.

Finally, the findings are based on an individual follower perspective of the project leader's behaviour. Different followers in the same team may have perceived the leader's behaviour differently and may not regard it as challenging. While Hogan and Hogan (2001) believe that the best way to measure a leader's performance is via subordinate ratings, this approach could result in bias, with organisational politics and personal vendettas influencing the data. In future studies, capturing the leader's view of themselves, as well as the perspectives of subordinates, peers and supervisors, could provide a 360-degree view of leader behaviour, helping to avoid potential bias (Gaddis and Foster, 2015).

In conclusion, the various challenging behaviours displayed by project leaders can have a significant impact on the relationship with the follower and the wider project team, with potential consequences for project success. Followers can adopt proactive coping strategies with the aim of changing the leader behaviour. However, these will only be successful if the organisation ensures ease of access to the coping strategies and support interventions required by followers. Many of the coping strategies identified in the study are not project-specific and can therefore be applied in a variety of situations, not just project environments.

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