

Bad Apples, Bad Barrels, and Broken Followers? An Empirical Examination of Contextual Influences on Follower Perceptions and Reactions to Aversive Leadership

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ABSTRACT. Research on destructive leadership has largely focused on leader characteristics thought to be responsible for harmful organizational outcomes. Recent findings, however, demonstrate the need to examine important contextual factors underlying such processes. Thus, the present study sought to determine the effects of an organization's climate and financial performance, as well as the leader's gender, on subordinate perceptions of and reactions (i.e., whistle-blowing intentions) to aversive leadership, a form of destructive leadership based on coercive power. 302 undergraduate participants read through a series of vignettes describing a fictional organization, its employees, and an aversive leader in charge of the company's sales department. They were then asked to envision themselves as subordinates of the leader and respond to several quantitative measures and open-ended questions. Consistent with Padilla and colleagues' (2007) toxic triangle theory, results suggest that both perceptions and reactions to aversive leadership depend on the three aforementioned factors. Specifically, aversive leaders were perceived more aversively and elicited greater whistle-blowing intentions in financially unstable organizations possessing climates intolerant of negative leader behavior. Moreover, female aversive leaders were perceived more aversively than their male counterparts under such conditions. Theoretical and practical implications as well as future research directions are also discussed.

KEY WORDS: aversive leadership, destructive leadership, gender and leadership, leadership, organizational climate, Romance of Leadership

Introduction

With the exception of a few (Conger, 1998; Hogan and Hogan, 2001; Mumford et al., 1993; O'Connor

et al., 1995; Tepper, 2000), most leadership studies have focused on the positive outcomes of leader actions (Meindl et al., 1985; Yukl, 1999). In the "typical leadership study" (Hunter et al., 2007), the leader is viewed as someone of unique, almost superhuman qualities. In fact, research on the "Romance of Leadership" suggests observers often erroneously assume that leaders possess a herculean ability to control the fates of their respective organizations (Meindl and Ehrlich, 1987; Meindl et al., 1985). As such, we have tended to place leaders on pedestals in our society, admiring and extolling them for their uncanny capacity to spur positive organizational change. This "heroic conceptualization" of leaders, however, fails to consider those cases in which leaders exert deleterious effects on subordinates and organizations (Hunter et al., 2007).

Underscoring this "dark" side of leadership, there is a general consensus among scholars that leaders sometimes make decisions that harm followers and long-term organizational performance (Bedell-Avers et al., in press; Mumford et al., 1993). Indeed, research suggests leaders are sometimes motivated by their own idiosyncratic interests rather than affecting change for the good of the organization and its members (O'Connor et al., 1995). In explanation, House and Howell (1992) proposed the existence of a personalized charismatic leadership orientation based on personal dominance, authoritarian behavior, self aggrandizement, exploitation of others, and self-interested motivations. Since House and Howell's (1992) seminal work, a number of researchers have begun to investigate various dysfunctional

traits, nefarious behavior, and harmful outcomes associated with destructive leadership styles. Although still in its infancy, a wide array of labels have been used to describe various forms of negative leader behavior, including “leader bullying” (Ferris et al., 2007) “abusive supervision” (Tepper, 2000), “petty tyranny” (Ashforth, 1994), “toxic leadership” (Frost, 2004; Goldman, 2006; Lipman-Blumen, 2008), and “narcissistic leadership” (Rosenthal and Pittinsky, 2006). An examination of such behaviors, moreover, reveals links to a wide range of negative subordinate affective and behavioral outcomes (Baron, 1988, Duffy et al. 2002; Matthiesen and Einarsen, 2007; Tepper, 2000).

Despite an increased recognition among scholars to take a more holistic perspective on leadership, the literature remains saturated with studies focusing on the leader as the driving force behind negative outcomes. Questions still remain, however, regarding the important role of contextual factors in shaping destructive leadership processes (Hunter et al., 2007; Yukl, 2006) and how such factors interact with characteristics of destructive leaders and their subordinates to produce harmful outcomes. In the hopes of expanding our perspective, the present study examined the role of an organization’s climate and financial performance, as well as the leader’s gender in shaping destructive leadership processes.

Destructive leadership and contextual factors

Promising new work by Padilla et al. (2007) offers an integrative approach to destructive leadership, arguing that its emergence depends on three components, termed “the toxic triangle.” According to the authors, destructive leadership results not simply from dysfunctional leaders but from a confluence of destructive leaders interacting with susceptible followers and conducive environments. Indeed, empirical evidence suggests that contextual factors play an important role in creating such environments. For example, Mumford et al. (2007) found in a historiometric analysis of 80 historically prominent leaders that institutional sanctioning of violence, group insularity, and environmental corruption all differentiated violent from non-violent leaders. They concluded that contextual factors play a lead role in

the emergence of violent leaders and create the potential for expression of their violent tendencies.

Research also suggests that certain organizational conditions may act as a catalyst for leader bullying. Among other factors, role conflict and interpersonal conflicts (Hauge et al., 2007), heavy workload, poor team atmosphere, and low job autonomy (Brotheridge and Lee, 2006), low perceived perpetrator costs, high intraorganizational competition, reward systems for bullying behavior, and a highly politicized organizational climate (Salin, 2003), and widespread organizational change such as downsizing and restructuring (McCarthy, 1996; Sheehan, 1996) are associated with bullying in the workplace. Ferris et al. (2007) further reasoned that individuals’ perceptions of organizational politics create an environment of uncertainty whereby leaders may seek to reestablish control by engaging in political influence tactics such as bullying. Additionally, they suggested that large organizations employing workers with relatively low levels of autonomy and independence tend to promote bullying.

Taken together, the current literature suggests a need to examine the many forms of destructive leadership, and leadership in general, from a more holistic perspective (Hunter et al., 2007). To focus exclusively on the leader as the driving force behind negative outcomes may be to miss the complete picture of what is actually going on. However, it remains largely unclear to what degree an organization’s climate and economic health, specifically, shape subordinate perceptions and reactions to destructive leader behavior.

As such, the present study sought to determine whether an organization’s climate and overall financial performance have the potential to influence follower perceptions of and whistle-blowing intentions toward aversive leadership, a specific form of destructive leadership. Pearce and Sims (2002) defined aversive leadership as a brand of management relying on coercive power through the specific use of intimidation tactics and reprimands. Additionally, consistent with Padilla et al. (2007) “toxic triangle” theory, the current study sought to elaborate on whether levels of perceived aversiveness and whistle-blowing intentions change depending on characteristics of the leader and, specifically, the leader’s gender. In so doing, we hope the present effort contributes to our understanding of destructive

leadership as a complex process, consisting of interactions between leaders, followers, and the work environment.

Organizational climate and aversive leadership

Perceptions of aversive leadership

In its broadest sense, organizational climate can be thought of as the “distinct perceptions and beliefs about an organization’s physical and social environment” (Dickson et al., 2006, p. 351). As such, organizational climates provide members with cues regarding how to make sense of the broader organizational context (Schneider, 1975; Schneider and Reichers, 1983) – that is, the practices, procedures, and kinds of behaviors that are rewarded, supported, and expected by the organization (Schneider and Reichers, 1983). In so doing, organizational climates foster institutionalized normative systems that guide member behavior (Schneider, 1983).

Applied to the concept of aversive leadership, it remains unclear whether aversive leaders are perceived more or less aversively depending on whether an organization’s climate is tolerant or intolerant of such behavior. In other words, it may be that highly competitive, hierarchical organizations maintain “get the job done at all costs” value systems (Ferris et al., 2007) that send implicit messages to their employees that aversive leader behavior is permissible and/or necessary for achieving organizationally desirable ends. Indeed, research suggests that such normative influences can create widely accepted systems of dysfunctional behavior, shape employee perceptions of normality, and promote a variety of negative organizational and employee outcomes (Balthazard et al., 2006; Van Fleet and Griffin, 2006). In fact, several authors have suggested that organizational climates can serve as social control systems based on shared norms (de Rivera et al., 2007; O’Reilly and Chatman, 1996).

For example, Ferris et al. (2007) argued that leader bullying may be promulgated by organizations who adopt a “get the job done at all costs” system of normative behavior, which accepts bullying as a means to desired organizational outcomes. Moreover, Ashforth (1994) noted that tyrannical behavior

in organizations may be legitimated by organizational norms that stress compliance through the abusive use of authority. Thus, when negative leader behavior becomes an accepted pattern of behavior in an organization, victims may perceive them as an unpleasant yet normal part of the organization’s climate that they must cope with through fear and resignation (Jennifer et al., 2003). Additionally, several studies have shown that individuals are more willing to accept antisocial behavior as normal within workgroups that espouse dysfunctional behavior (Glomb and Liao, 2003; Robinson and O’Leary-Kelly, 1998).

Overall, these findings suggest that an organization’s climate has the capacity to shape perceptions and behavior by influencing how people interpret various aspects of their work environment. Consistent with the social information processing approach (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978), individuals look to the values, norms, behaviors, and expectations they collect from a particular situation in order to guide their behavior. In so doing, the individual learns what behaviors are acceptable within a given organizational context (Van Fleet and Griffin, 2006). As such, it is hypothesized that aversive leader behaviors may too become normative social phenomena whereby subordinates perceive such behavior as accepted within a tolerant organizational climate and inherently less aversive.

Hypothesis 1: Aversive leaders will be perceived as less aversive in the context of tolerant organizational climates than in the context of intolerant climates.

Whistle-blowing intentions

Additionally, organizational climates may play a significant role in determining whether employees will report aversive leaders to higher authorities. In fact, research suggests that certain normative practices permit climates where fraud, waste, and abuse have the opportunity to flourish (Rothwell and Baldwin, 2006). For example, perceptions of retaliation or a lack of company-wide protections for employees who report abuse may preclude employees from reporting such behavior to organizational watchdogs (Keenan, 2002; Miceli et al., 1999). Thus, employees may perceive greater risks in speaking out, especially if the organization adopts a

culture in which operational issues overshadow ethical concerns in relation to practice (Clinard, 1983).

Moreover, the degree to which the organization supports whistle-blowing behavior has been shown to significantly affect individuals' willingness to report nefarious behavior in the workplace (Keenan, 2002). Further, Rothwell and Baldwin (2007) recently found among a sample of 300 Georgia police officers that a friendship or team climate significantly predicted individuals' willingness to report misconduct on the job.

In sum, organizational climates have the potential to strongly influence how employees think about their organization, their jobs within the organization, and the behaviors they choose to engage in on a daily basis.

As such, it can be argued that employees who work in organizations where aversive leaders are tolerated most likely do not believe that their organization supports the reporting of such behavior. Employees may come to think of whistle-blowing as nothing more than "tattle-tailing" and incongruent with organizational policies and objectives. Moreover, they may be frightened to report aversive leaders for fear of retaliation by the organization in the form of demotion or termination. They may as a result opt to forgo "blowing the whistle," choosing instead to remain silent. Thus, we hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 2: Individuals will report lower whistle-blowing intentions toward aversive leaders in the context of tolerant organizational climates than in the context of intolerant climates.

Organizational performance and aversive leadership

Perceptions of aversive leadership

Further investigating the role of context, research suggests the degree to which organizational performance outcomes are either positive or negative may influence leadership perceptions (Meindl et al., 1985). Meindl et al. (1985) argued that leadership is a firmly ingrained aspect of observers' socially constructed organizational realities. Stemming from complex thought systems, such realities provide an understanding and interpretation of organizational activities and directly implicate leadership as a fundamental

driving force behind such activities and events (Meindl, 1995; Meindl et al., 1985). Consequently, leaders have been elevated to a heroic status in our society, amounting to a general trust in the leadership abilities of those in the uppermost positions of organizational authority. Such grandiose views of leadership, however, may engender a perceptual bias whereby observers believe leaders do or should have the ability to control and influence various facets of organizational life and the ultimate fate of their respective organizations (Meindl et al., 1985).

As a result, organizational members tend to attribute responsibility for both positive *and* negative organizational outcomes to leaders (Meindl, 1995; Meindl et al., 1985). This social phenomenon, known as the "Romance of Leadership," stems from a "biased preference to understand important but causally indeterminate and ambiguous organizational events and occurrences in terms of leadership," neglecting the countless number of known, unknown, and indeterminate causal forces interacting with one another to produce and sustain such organizational activity (Meindl and Ehrlich, 1987; Meindl et al., 1985). This romanticized conception of leadership, thus, translates the inherent complexities underlying organizational life into straightforward and simple terms that are easy to understand, live with, and communicate to others (Meindl and Ehrlich, 1987).

Despite these insights, the current literature fails to address how the "Romance of Leadership" applies to destructive leadership. In one of the first known studies to integrate the two, Bligh et al. (2007) asked high school teachers (followers) to assess their principals' (leaders) leadership behaviors and self rate their levels of job satisfaction, self-efficacy, and resistance. Principals were also asked to assess their followers' citizenship behaviors, complaining behaviors, and job performance. Results suggested that perceptions of aversive leadership were positively related to follower resistance and negatively related to followers' job satisfaction. Additionally, follower-rated variables were significantly related to perceptions of aversive leadership over and above leader-rated variables. These results suggest that the association between aversive leadership and negative outcomes seems to be more socially constructed than real.

Building on the efforts of Bligh et al. (2007), it appears that organizational performance may play a

significant role in determining the degree of aversiveness with which people perceive aversive leaders. Specifically, when organizational performance is *positive*, aversive leaders may be perceived as *less* aversive than equally aversive leaders in both negative and average performance conditions. Such a finding would suggest that potential discrepancies in how aversive leaders are punished are not based on the leader's behavior but are rather due to organizational forces that shape people's perceptions.

Hypothesis 3: Aversive leaders who experience positive organizational performance will be perceived as less aversive than equally aversive leaders who experience negative or average performance.

Whistle-blowing intentions

Positive organizational performance may also serve as a buffer to whistle-blowing behavior directed at aversive leaders. That is, during times of organizational prosperity, aversive leaders may be, on average, forgiven more for their aversive behavior due to their seemingly causal role in spurring positive organizational performance. Organizational members, in turn, may perceive a general lack of support from the organization to report aversive leaders. As a result, individuals may be less likely to report aversive leader behavior for fear of being perceived as disloyal to the organization. Thus, we predict that:

Hypothesis 4: Individuals will report lower whistle-blowing intentions toward aversive leaders in the context of positive organizational performance than in the context of negative performance.

Interaction hypotheses

Organizational climate and performance

Further, it is plausible to suggest that aversive leaders who find themselves in organizational climates intolerant of their behavior and whom are attributed negative performance on the part of the organization might experience even more negative reactions from social observers. That is, they may be punished

doubly – once for behaving aversively in an organizational context scornful of their behavior and twice for the poor performance outcomes attributed to them. As such, it is hypothesized that such leaders may be viewed more aversively and elicit greater whistle-blowing intentions in such environments.

Hypothesis 5a and b: The organization's climate and performance will interact such that aversive leaders who experience negative organizational performance in the context of intolerant climates will be (a) perceived more aversively and (b) elicit greater whistle-blowing intentions than aversive leaders who experience positive or negative performance in the context of tolerant climates.

Gender and leadership – a brief overview of existing research

Padilla et al. (2007) also emphasized the role of leader characteristics in their “toxic triangle” theory of destructive leadership. One leader characteristic that has received considerable attention in the constructive leadership literature but remains unstudied in terms of “dark” side leadership is gender. Drawing from research on women and leadership, it is widely accepted that female leaders are perceived differently from male leaders (Boldry et al., 2001; Burke et al., 2007; Eagly and Karau, 2002; Ridgeway, 2001). Traditionally, leadership has been viewed as a predominantly male privilege in corporate, political, military, and other societal sectors (Eagly and Karau, 2002). As such, although women occupy an increasing number of leadership roles in supervisory and middle management capacities, they remain rarities at the top of most large organizations (Eagly, 2003; Eagly and Carli, 2003; Eagly et al., 2003; Heilman, 2001; Heilman et al. 1989; Koch, 2005; Ridgeway, 2001).

A considerable body of research evidence, moreover, suggests that competent and successful women who do obtain high-status leadership roles often experience a resistive “backlash” from coworkers (Ridgeway, 2001; Ridgeway and Bourg, 2004). Drawing on expectation states theory, Ridgeway and Bourg (2004) argued that societal status beliefs, which regard women as unfitting for high-status, masculine positions, are at the heart of such negative reactions. According to the authors, when female

leaders behave assertively, their agentic behavior “violates the essential hierarchical nature of the status belief, and the competence assumptions that legitimate it” (Ridgeway and Bourg, 2004, p. 231). That is, individuals perceive a clash between the female leader’s behavior and the underlying status belief. Consequently, such seemingly conflicting and contradictory behavior is likely to elicit anger, criticism, and other negative reactions toward the assertive female leader (Bernardez, 1983; Ridgeway, 2001; Ridgeway and Bourg, 2004).

According to Heilman (2001), the disapproval aroused by violations of normative prescriptions prompts personal derogation toward women who deviate from how they are supposed to behave by proving themselves competent at traditionally masculine work. For instance, Heilman et al. (1989) found among a sample of 268 male managers that participants perceived successful female managers as highly competent yet also portrayed them as bitter, quarrelsome, selfish, and interpersonally wanting. Similarly, Heilman et al. (1995) found successful women were perceived as significantly more interpersonally hostile than their male counterparts. Interestingly, these results did not hold when the stimulus person was described simply as a female manager without any indication of success. Clearly, these results suggest that women are not supposed to succeed at jobs and tasks traditionally associated with men in our culture (Heilman, 2001). For those who do, however, negative reactions are highly likely to occur.

Further qualifying these findings, Eagly and Karau’s (2002) role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders argues that negative reactions toward female leaders stem from the societal belief that men and women occupy certain gender roles (i.e., consensual beliefs about the attributes of men and women) which are tied to gendered characteristics. According to the theory, gender roles include both descriptive norms (consensual expectations about what group members actually do) and injunctive norms (consensual expectations about what group members *ought* to do) (Cialdini and Trost, 1998; Eagly and Karau, 2002). While descriptive norms can be thought of as stereotypes, injunctive norms add a prescriptive element not usually included within the stereotype construct. Consequently, descriptive norms associate men with agentic qualities (i.e., assertive,

dominant, tough, etc.) and women with more communal characteristics (i.e., nurturing, affectionate, sensitive, sympathetic, etc.) (Eagly, 1987; Heilman, 2001). Injunctive norms then prescribe which behaviors are gender appropriate and thus dictate how men and women ought to behave (Eagly and Karau, 2002). Put in the context of leadership, role congruity theory asserts that prejudicial reactions toward female leaders result from perceived incongruities between societal stereotypes of women as communal and leaders as agentic.

Leader gender and organizational performance

Applying existing research on gender and leadership to the concept of aversive leadership, it is reasonable to assume that aversive leadership behaviors fly in the face of traditional female gender norms, which associate women with communal qualities. As such, aversive female leaders may experience a more powerful “backlash” effect than female leaders in general. That is, aversive female leaders may be punished doubly, once for being a leader and twice for behaving aversively.

Further, aversive leaders who experience positive organizational performance outcomes may be perceived and reacted to with *less* hostility than those leaders who experience negative performance due to the erroneous attributions suggested by the “Romance of Leadership” (Meindl et al., 1985). However, aversive female leaders who experience positive performance outcomes may, in fact, be perceived and reacted to with *more* hostility than aversive female leaders who experience negative performance. Indeed, female leaders often elicit even more severe reactions when their already “deviant” behaviors (as a leader) are deemed effective by perceivers (Heilman, 2001).

Thus, it is plausible that aversive female leaders who experience negative performance outcomes are deemed responsible for such outcomes and consequently seen as fulfilling societal stereotypes of female incompetence (Ridgeway, 2001; Ridgeway and Bourg, 2004). As such, they may be perceived as conforming more to their feminine gender role and reacted to with less negativity than an equally aversive, but seemingly effective female leader.

Hypothesis 6a and b: The organization's performance and leader's gender will interact such that aversive female leaders who experience positive performance outcomes will be perceived as (a) more aversive and (b) elicit greater whistle-blowing intentions than any aversive male leader who experiences positive or negative performance outcomes.

Method

Design and participants

The present study employed a 2 (organizational climate: tolerant vs. intolerant) \times 2 (leader gender: male vs. female) \times 3 (organizational performance: negative, average, positive) between-subjects factorial design. 302 undergraduate students were recruited from a large northeastern university through the psychology department's subject pool. The study's sample consisted of 218 females and 84 males ranging from 18 to 24 years of age and representing a wide array of undergraduate academic majors.

Participants logged on to an online survey platform, which first presented them with a statement of informed consent approved by the university's institutional review board. After agreeing to participate in the study, participants were randomly assigned by the survey platform to one of 12 study conditions. They then completed an initial battery of covariate measures in order to control for any individual differences accounting for error variance in the dependent variables of interest. Next, participants read a series of fictional emails describing an organization, its employees, and an aversive leader in charge of the company's sales department. Prior to reading the emails, participants were presented with a description of the organization (New Horizons, Inc.) and a list of employees working within its sales, human resources, and accounting departments. This introduction was meant to focus participants' attention and familiarize them with the organizational situation and cast of characters depicted in the emails. After reading the emails, participants were asked to respond to a series of quantitative measures and open-ended questions as if they were subordinates of the leader in question.

Email vignette development

Twelve different sets of emails were created – each representing one of the study's conditions – consisting of communications among subordinates of the leader and company-wide announcements from representatives in the human resources and accounting departments. The emails provided general information about the organization and more specific information about its policies and procedures, as well as fictional accounts of interactions between an aversive leader and several subordinates in the company's sales department. Specifically, the emails were constructed so that they differed only in terms of the study's three manipulated independent variables.

Accounts of the leader's behavior were based on those identified in the factor analysis and subsequent aversive leadership scale ($\alpha = 0.72$) developed by Pearce and Sims (2002). These authors found that the overarching construct of aversive leadership can be defined in terms of two specific behaviors – intimidation and reprimand of subordinates. Additionally, it should be noted that traditionally Caucasian sounding names were chosen for individuals depicted in the emails in order to control for any potentially confounding effects of ethnicity. Sample emails from one of the study's conditions depicting a female aversive leader, an intolerant organizational climate, and negative organizational performance are presented in [Appendix A](#).

Experimental manipulations

Organizational climate

In order to potentially influence participants' climate perceptions, the organization was either described as placing a strong emphasis on deterring destructive employee behaviors through its standard practices and procedures or not. For example, one email from the company's HR representative described a company-wide notice of either mandatory or optional training on the company's HR complaint policies. While the intolerant climate condition placed a strong emphasis on using the company's HR process to report inappropriate workplace behavior, the tolerant climate condition described such training as generally unimportant and unsupported by the human resources department.

Organizational performance

Each set of emails also included organizational performance information that clearly indicated positive, average, or negative performance. Similar to Meindl et al. (1985), performance outcomes were defined in terms of a large percentage increase of 25% (positive), a small percentage increase of 5% (average), or a percentage decrease of 25% (negative) in sales performance. This information was provided in a table in an email from the accounting department comparing the organization's financial performance to other competitors. An interpretation of the table was also provided in the email in order to reinforce the financial status of the organization.

Leader gender

Emails also differed in terms of whether the leader was described as male or female. Emails for each condition only varied in terms of the leader's gender; all other descriptors, behavioral, or otherwise were held constant across the study's 12 conditions.

Dependent variables

Aversive leadership

Aversive leadership was measured using six items adapted from Pearce and Sims's (2002) scale ($\alpha = 0.72$), which assesses the level of intimidation and reprimanding behaviors displayed by a leader. Scale responses were measured on a Likert scale, ranging from "1" (*Disagree*) to "5" (*Agree*). Sample items include: "The leader tries to influence subordinates through threat and intimidation"; "I would feel intimidated by the leader's behavior"; and "The leader reprimands subordinates when their performance is not up to par."

Whistle-blowing intentions

Whistle-blowing intentions were measured using a three-item scale ($\alpha = 0.71$) constructed specifically for the purposes of this research and based off of previous whistle-blowing research (e.g., Rothwell and Baldwin, 2006, 2007). Scale responses were measured on a Likert scale, ranging from "1" (*Disagree*) to "5" (*Agree*). The scale was developed to target participants' willingness to report the behavior of a specific leader in question. Sample items include:

"If I were to witness the behavior displayed by this leader, I would do nothing" (R) and "If I were to witness the behavior displayed by this leader, I would talk the incident over with the coworker involved."

Open-ended questions

In addition, a set of open-ended questions was also administered for exploratory purposes. Specifically, participants were asked about (1) their general perceptions of the leader they read about and (2) to provide recommendations to the New Horizons's board of executives on whether to reward or punish the leader. Responses were then reviewed and relevant constructs that could be content coded as exploratory-dependent variables were identified. Based on previous research, two salient constructs – personalized leadership and contingent punishment – emerged. Specifically, personalized leadership was derived from question one above, while contingent punishment was obtained from question two.

Consistent with previous research (e.g., House and Howell, 1992; McClelland, 1975), personalized leadership was defined as a leadership style which (a) is based on personal dominance and authoritarian behavior, (b) serves the self-interest of the leader and is self-aggrandizing, and (c) exploitive of others. Contingent punishment was defined as the degree to which one administers punitive events such as reprimands and disapproval contingent upon poor performance (Podsakoff and Todor, 1985; Podsakoff et al., 1982). Based on these definitions, sample responses reflecting high, average, and low levels of each variable were identified. These benchmark responses were then summarized and used to construct the scale anchors for each exploratory-dependent variable. Tables I and II illustrate the nature of these benchmark rating scales.

Three research assistants then underwent training in which they were familiarized with the nature of the benchmark rating scales. Following training, each was asked to apply these rating scales to a set of sample responses. Sample ratings were subsequently subjected to an inter-rater reliability analysis, which produced intraclass correlation coefficients (ICCs) of 0.79 and 0.96 for personalized leadership and contingent punishment, respectively, demonstrating a satisfactory level of consistency in ratings across the

TABLE I
Scale and benchmarks for personalized leadership

Personalized Leadership: A leadership style which (a) is based on personal dominance and authoritarian behavior, (b) serves the self-interest of the leader and is self-aggrandizing, and (c) exploitive of others

1. Low rating
 - Suggests and/or explicitly states that the leader's behavior is appropriate and/or effective for obtaining high subordinate and organizational performance.
 - Either implies or explicitly states that the leader is just doing his/her job and/or looking out for the best interest of his/her subordinates and/or organization.
Ex: The leader took care of the problems that were presented. She was not overly harsh, but did her best to take care of the issues in the workplace. She was not a pushover.
2. Low to average rating
3. Average rating
 - Suggests and/or explicitly states that the leader is tough, strong, and/or effective, but nonetheless signals that his/her methods and treatment of employees is inappropriate.
Ex: The leader reprimands like she should, but does so in an inappropriate and forceful manner. She should change the way she addresses employees under her.
4. Average to high rating
5. High rating
 - Suggests and/or explicitly states that the leader's behavior is inappropriate, exploitive of others, highly ineffective, and/or decidedly damaging to his/her subordinates and/or organization.
 - Either implies or explicitly states that the leader abuses the power of his/her position at the expense of his/her subordinates and the organization.
Ex: He is a controlling man who works with fear, screaming at employees when they don't work up to his standards. Power-hungry and generally not a nice person.

three raters. The research assistants then provided ratings on each participant response in the dataset, which were then aggregated across the three raters to produce composite measures of both personalized leadership and contingent punishment.

Covariate measures

To control and limit error variance due to individual differences, several covariate measures were administered to participants – including moral identity (Aquino and Reed, 2002), trait cynicism (Johnson and O'Leary-Kelly, 2003), need for leadership (de Vries et al., 1998), locus of control (Spector, 1988), and ambivalent sexism (Glick and Fiske, 1996), as well as various demographic variables including gender, prior leadership experience, and exposure to leadership research. With the exception of basic demographic variables, each of the covariates is discussed in greater detail below.

Moral identity

Aquino and Reed's (2002) internalization subscale was used to measure participant levels of moral identity ($\alpha = 0.70$). This scale taps the degree to which individuals place moral characteristics at the core of their identity and has been shown to predict ethical attitudes and behavior. Participants are asked to read through a series of adjectives (e.g., caring, compassionate, fair, friendly, generous, etc.) and visualize a person who possesses these characteristics. They are then asked to indicate their level of agreement with 10 statements measured on a 1 (*Disagree*)–5 (*Strongly Agree*) Likert scale. Sample items include: "Being someone who has these characteristics is an important part of who I am" and "I would be ashamed to be a person who has these characteristics" (R). Moral identity was included based on the belief that participants possessing a strong internal sense of moral identity would be more likely to rate a leader as more aversive.

TABLE II
Scale and benchmarks for contingent punishment behavior

Contingent Punishment Behavior: the degree to which one administers punitive events such as reprimands and disapproval contingent upon poor performance

1. Low rating
 - Makes a clear decision to not punish the leader and/or may even advocate rewarding the leader.
 - Shows a lack of hesitation, uncertainty, or wavering in their decision to not punish the leader.
 - Uses language that suggests sympathy and/or lack of blame towards the leader.
Ex: I would say to reward the leader. Simply, she is my boss and if I'm not working up to par, I would want her to say that I'm not. Sometimes people need a wake up call in order to get the job done and get good numbers in. If my boss is helping me make the company better than she's doing her job and therefore should be rewarded.
2. Low to average rating
3. Average rating
 - Suggests an intervention or corrective action to fix the leader's behavior without using harsh, highly punitive, and decidedly disciplinary language.
 - Does not explicitly state that the leader ought to be punished.
 - Focuses more on improving the leader's behavior rather than seeking retribution for the leader's past behavior.
Ex: I would recommend talking to the leader about his actions and recommend better ways of dealing with the situation, then make sure to monitor it in the future to make sure that his behavior is improving.
4. Average to high rating
5. High rating
 - Makes clear decision to punish rather than reward the leader.
 - Shows a lack of hesitation, uncertainty, or wavering in their decision to punish.
 - Uses harsh, highly punitive, and/or decidedly disciplinary language.
Ex: I would ask her to be reprimanded as harshly as possible, even go as far as to fine her. Perhaps move her to different department and even lose her position.

Trait cynicism

Trait cynicism was measured using Johnson and O'Leary-Kelly's (2003) five-item scale adapted from Wrightsman's (1974) cynicism subscale ($\alpha = 0.79$). This scale assesses individuals' sense of cynicism about human nature and general belief that individuals will only abstain from lying, cheating, or stealing when it is either easy to do or unlikely they will get caught. Items are measured on a 1 (*Disagree*)–5 (*Agree*) Likert scale and include: "Most people are not really honest for desirable reasons, they are afraid of being caught" and "Most people would tell a lie if they could gain by it." Trait cynicism was used here as a covariate in order to control for individuals who might rate aversive leaders, on average, more harshly because of their cynical worldview.

Need for leadership

A scale developed by de Vries et al. (1998) was used to assess need for leadership ($\alpha = 0.93$). This scale measures the degree to which an individual needs his

or her leader to contribute to a series of specific work goals, indicating an overall need for leadership in one's work life. The scale consists of five items measured on a 1 (*Disagree*)–5 (*Agree*) Likert scale. Sample items include: "A manager would have a marked influence on my performance" and "I cannot see much added value of a manager on my work" (R). Need for leadership was included in order to control for individuals who might have rated aversive leaders, on average, as less aversive because of their natural dependence on leaders for direction and guidance in their work lives.

Locus of control

Locus of control was measured using Spector's (1988) locus of control scale ($\alpha = 0.77$). This scale assesses individuals' generalized control beliefs in work settings and consists of 16 items measured on a 1 (*Disagree*)–5 (*Agree*) Likert scale. Sample items include: "A job is what you make of it" and "Getting a job you want is mostly a matter of luck" (R).

It was believed that an individual's locus of control might play a role in influencing whether one attributes positive or negative outcomes to the leader or to outside contextual factors. As a result, individuals who have an external locus of control might be less likely to attribute organizational outcomes to aversive leaders, which might subsequently influence the level of aversiveness with which they perceive such leaders.

Ambivalent sexism

Measuring perceptions of female leaders inherently lends itself to biased estimates if one does not control for individual proclivities toward viewing women in a sexist fashion. As such, we included Glick and Fiske's (1996) 22-item ambivalent sexism inventory (ASI) ($\alpha = 0.83$), which includes 11 items measuring hostile sexism (HS) (i.e., sexist antipathy) and 11 items measuring benevolent sexism (BS), a more unconscious and subjectively positive (for sexist men) orientation toward women. Items were measured on a 1 (*Disagree*)–5 (*Agree*) Likert scale. Sample items from the HS scale include: "Women are too easily offended," and "Most women fail to appreciate fully all that men do for them." Sample items from the BS scale include: "Many women have a quality of purity that few men possess" and "Women should be cherished and protected by men."

Demographic variables

In addition to the above individual differences, several demographic variables including participant gender, prior leadership experience, and exposure to leadership research were controlled for. A case summary analysis revealed that male participants represented, on average, 23% of participants per condition. As such, there was a substantial amount of skew in the number of female participants compared to male participants in each condition. Thus, participant gender was included as a covariate in the present study. Moreover, prior leadership experience and exposure to leadership research were included in order to partial out any error variance potentially introduced by individuals who may have had a background in leadership and/or leadership studies. It was believed that such individuals might possess a better understanding of the complex factors underlying leadership processes, and thus might be, on average, less likely to respond to the manipulations.

Statistical analyses

To determine the effects of leader gender and organizational climate and performance, a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) procedure was conducted. This procedure allowed for the control of error variance in the dependent variables attributable to any or all of the predetermined covariates. To test the study's specific hypotheses, univariate ANCOVAs for each dependent variable were then examined in order to identify where specific mean differences existed. Covariates were retained in each of these final analyses if they were significant beyond the $p \leq 0.10$ level. Those covariates that did not meet this significance threshold were identified through the process of backwards, stepwise deletion and removed from the final analysis in order to maximize degrees of freedom, and therefore the effectiveness of the ANCOVA. Significant covariates for each of the study's dependent variables can be found in Tables IV, V, VI, and VII.

Manipulation check

To ensure that participants interpreted the study's experimental manipulations in the intended ways, after completing the dependent measures, participants were asked to indicate the gender of the leader, as well as the climate and performance of the organization they read about in the vignettes. Cohen's kappa was used to determine the level of agreement between participant responses regarding the condition they believed they were in and the actual condition they were assigned. Kappa coefficients of 0.70 ($p < 0.01$), 0.66 ($p < 0.01$), and 0.64 ($p < 0.01$) were found for leader gender, organizational climate, and organizational performance, respectively, indicating good to substantial levels of agreement (Landis and Koch, 1977). Overall, these results suggest that the study's experimental manipulations functioned in the way they were designed to work.

Results

Results are presented in four main sections consistent with the study's four dependent variables: (1) aversive leadership, (2) whistle-blowing, (3) personalized leadership, and (4) contingent punishment. The first

two sections present tests of the study’s hypotheses pertaining to aversive leadership and whistle-blowing intentions, in addition to several exploratory findings. Sections three and four present strictly exploratory findings from the content coded variables – **Personalized leadership** and **Contingent punishment**.

In order to differentiate the study’s two primary dependent variables, aversive leadership and whistle-blowing intentions, as distinct constructs, a principal components factor analysis using varimax rotation, and a two-factor extraction method was performed on the two sets of items. The two factors accounted for 58.84% of the total variance. Items from Pearce and Sims’s (2002) aversive leadership scale loaded onto the first factor, demonstrating factor loadings greater than 0.66 and an eigenvalue of 3.55 – which accounted for 39.43% of the total variance. Those items used to measure whistle-blowing intentions loaded onto the second factor, exhibiting factor loadings greater than 0.60 and an eigenvalue of 1.75 – which accounted for 19.42% of the total variance. These results provide psychometric support for the independence of aversive leadership and whistle-blowing intentions as unique psychological constructs in the present study. Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations of study variables are presented in Table III.

Aversive leadership

Table IV presents the results obtained in the univariate analysis of covariance for aversive leadership. Hypothesis 1 predicted that aversive leaders would be perceived as less aversive in the context of organizational climates that tolerate aversive leadership compared to intolerant climates. Results of the analysis of covariance indicated no main effect for organizational climate, $F(1, 272) = 0.85, p > 0.05$. Further examination of the marginal means suggested no significant difference in perceptions of aversive leadership between the tolerant ($M = 4.26, SE = 0.06$) and intolerant ($M = 4.19, SE = 0.06$) climate groups. As such, Hypothesis 1 was not supported.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that aversive leaders who experience positive organizational performance would be perceived as less aversive than those who experience negative performance. Again, results indicated no main effect for organizational performance ($F(2, 272) = 0.27, p > 0.05$). Inspection of the marginal

TABLE III
Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations for study variables

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Aversive leadership	4.22	0.72	1.00										
Whistle-blowing	3.65	0.87	0.20**	1.00									
Personalized leadership	4.04	1.00	0.15**	0.17**	1.00								
Contingent punishment	3.62	0.88	0.03	0.19**	0.33**	1.00							
Trait cynicism	3.43	0.74	-0.04	0.10	-0.03	0.09	1.00						
Locus of control	3.89	0.42	0.20**	0.22**	0.06	-0.08	-0.14*	1.00					
Ambivalent sexism	2.93	0.52	-0.07	-0.11*	-0.08	-0.07	0.33**	-0.19**	1.00				
Prior leadership experience	1.29	0.46	-0.04	-0.14*	0.08	0.06	0.14*	-0.10	0.07	1.00			
Participant gender	1.72	0.45	0.22**	-0.03	0.04	0.04	-0.01	0.04	-0.22**	-0.11	1.00		
Prior leadership research experience	1.98	0.14	0.02	0.02	0.02	-0.04	-0.01	0.11	0.07	0.09	-0.03	1.00	
Need for leadership	3.88	0.61	0.27**	0.06	0.04	0.05	0.03	0.26**	-0.09	-0.15**	0.08	-0.04	1.00

Note: * $p < 0.05$ level (2-tailed), ** $p < 0.01$ level (2-tailed).

TABLE IV
Summary of univariate analysis of covariance for aversive leadership

	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	η^2
Covariates				
Locus of control	2.88	1	0.09	0.01
Need for leadership	17.31	1	0.00	0.06
Participant gender	15.49	1	0.00	0.05
Main effects				
Leader gender	1.85	1	0.18	0.01
Organizational climate	0.85	1	0.36	0.00
Organizational performance	0.27	2	0.76	0.00
Two-way interactions				
Leader gender × Organizational climate	0.29	1	0.59	0.00
Leader gender × Organizational performance	1.07	2	0.35	0.01
Organizational climate × Organizational performance	0.12	2	0.89	0.00
Three-way interactions				
Leader gender × Organizational climate × Organizational performance	3.17	2	0.04	0.02

Note: *F* F-ratio, *df* degrees of freedom, *p* significance level, η^2 partial eta squared effect size.

means suggested no significant differences in perceptions of aversive leadership between the negative ($M = 4.19$, $SE = 0.07$), average ($M = 4.22$, $SE = 0.07$), and positive ($M = 4.26$, $SE = 0.07$) performance groups. Thus, Hypothesis 3 was not supported.

Beyond the study's predicted main effects, Hypothesis 5a predicted there would be an interaction between organizational climate and performance such that aversive leaders in intolerant climates who experience negative performance would be perceived as more aversive than those who experience positive or negative performance in tolerant climates. Results, however, failed to support this hypothesized interaction, $F(2, 272) = 0.12$, $p > 0.05$. Hypothesis 6a predicted that there would be an interaction between leader gender and organizational performance such that aversive female leaders who experience positive performance would be perceived as more aversive than any aversive male leader experiencing positive or negative performance. Again, results indicated no significant interaction, $F(2, 272) = 1.07$, $p > 0.05$. Thus, Hypothesis 6a was not supported.

However, an interesting three-way interaction emerged among the study's three independent variables – leader gender, organizational performance, and organizational climate, $F(2, 272) = 3.17$, $p < 0.05$. To determine the nature of the interaction, the cell means were examined and plotted on a graph.

Mean trends suggested little variability in perceptions of aversiveness across the leader gender and organizational performance conditions when the climate was tolerant of aversive leadership. However, in the context of intolerant climates, while perceptions of male ($M = 4.23$, $SE = 0.13$) and female ($M = 4.22$, $SE = 0.14$) aversive leaders did not vary when performance was positive ($M_{diff} = 0.01$, $SE = 0.21$, $p > 0.05$), female aversive leaders were perceived as significantly more aversive ($M = 4.44$, $SE = 0.14$) than male aversive leaders ($M = 3.83$, $SE = 0.14$) when organizational performance was negative ($M_{diff} = 0.61$, $SE = 0.20$, $p < 0.05$) (see Figure 1).

Whistle-blowing intentions

Table V presents the results obtained in the univariate analysis of covariance for whistle-blowing intentions. Hypothesis 2 predicted that individuals would be more likely to report whistle-blowing intentions in the context of intolerant climates than tolerant climates. Consistent with expectations, results of the analysis of covariance indicated a strong main effect for organizational climate, $F(1, 272) = 24.47$, $p < 0.05$. Further, the marginal means suggested that whistle-blowing intentions were significantly higher in the intolerant climate

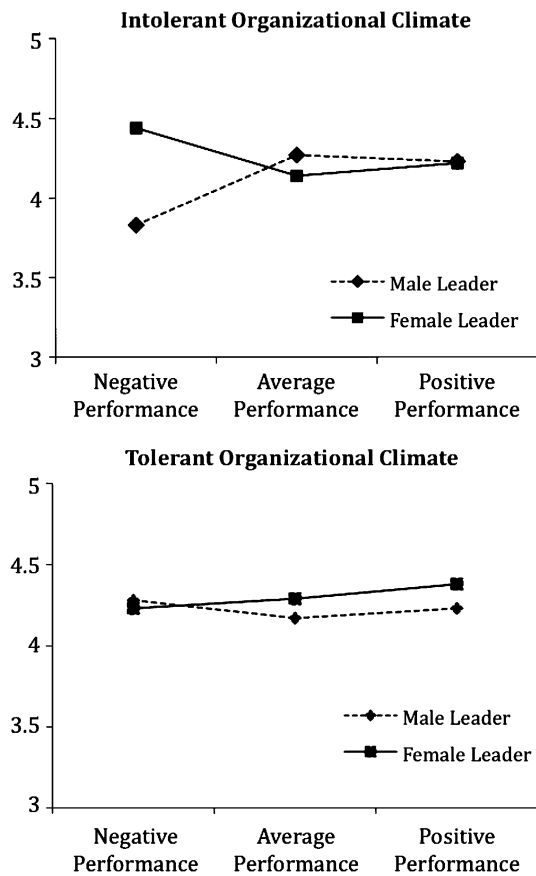


Figure 1. Three-way interaction of leader gender, organizational climate, and organizational performance for aversive leadership.

group ($M = 3.90$, $SE = 0.07$) than in the tolerant climate group ($M = 3.40$, $SE = 0.07$), providing strong support for Hypothesis 2.

Hypothesis 4 predicted that individuals would be more likely to report aversive leaders in the context of negative organizational performance than in the context of average or positive performance. However, results of the analysis of covariance indicated no main effect for performance, $F(2, 272) = 0.09$, $p > 0.05$. The marginal means further suggested no significant difference in whistle-blowing intentions between the negative ($M = 3.63$, $SE = 0.09$), average ($M = 3.68$, $SE = 0.09$), and positive ($M = 3.63$, $SE = 0.08$) performance groups. Thus, Hypothesis 4 was not supported.

Hypothesis 5b predicted there would be a two-way interaction between organizational climate and performance such that aversive leaders in intolerant climates who experience negative performance would elicit greater whistle-blowing intentions than those who

experience positive or negative performance in tolerant climates. Results, however, failed to support this hypothesized interaction, $F(2, 272) = 0.78$, $p > 0.05$.

Finally, Hypothesis 6b predicted that female aversive leaders who experience positive organizational performance would elicit greater whistle-blowing intentions than male leaders who experience positive or negative outcomes. While a significant interaction between leader gender and performance was found, $F(1, 272) = 4.41$, $p < 0.05$, inspection of the cell means and resulting graph indicated only partial support for Hypothesis 6b. Interestingly, when organizational performance was *positive*, participants reported a similar willingness ($M_{diff} = 0.03$, $SE = 0.22$, $p > 0.05$) to report aversive male leaders ($M = 3.65$, $SE = 0.11$) and female leaders ($M = 3.62$, $SE = 0.12$). However, consistent with those findings described above, when financial performance was *negative*, participants reported significantly higher whistle-blowing intentions ($M_{diff} = 0.40$, $SE = 0.21$, $p < 0.05$) toward female aversive leaders ($M = 3.83$, $SE = 0.11$) than male aversive leaders ($M = 3.43$, $SE = 0.13$) (see Figure 2).

Personalized leadership

Table VI presents results of the analysis of covariance for the first of the study's two exploratory-dependent variables – personalized leadership. Univariate results indicated that there was a marginally significant two-way interaction between organizational climate and performance, $F(2, 272) = 2.79$, $p < 0.10$. Examination of the cell means indicated that when performance was negative, perceptions of personalized leadership were slightly higher ($M_{diff} = 0.20$, $SE = 0.25$, $p > 0.05$) in intolerant climates ($M = 4.21$, $SE = 0.14$) versus tolerant climates ($M = 4.01$, $SE = 0.15$). However, when performance was positive, the mean for the tolerant climate condition decreased significantly ($M = 3.88$, $SE = 0.14$), while the mean for the intolerant condition stayed the same ($M = 4.24$, $SE = 0.14$) ($M_{diff} = 0.83$, $SE = 0.27$, $p < 0.05$) (see Figure 3).

Contingent punishment

Results of the analysis of covariance for contingent punishment behavior are presented in Table VII.

TABLE V
Summary of univariate analysis of covariance for whistle-blowing intentions

	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	η^2
Covariates				
Locus of control	16.52	1	0.00	0.06
Trait cynicism	5.87	1	0.02	0.02
Prior leadership experience	7.96	1	0.01	0.03
Ambivalent sexism	4.08	1	0.04	0.02
Participant gender	3.68	1	0.06	0.01
Main effects				
Leader gender	0.12	1	0.73	0.00
Organizational climate	26.47	1	0.00	0.09
Organizational performance	0.09	2	0.92	0.00
Two-way interactions				
Leader gender × Organizational climate	1.42	1	0.24	0.01
Leader gender × Organizational performance	3.90	2	0.02	0.03
Organizational climate × Organizational performance	0.75	2	0.47	0.01
Three-way interactions				
Leader gender × Organizational climate × Organizational performance	2.26	2	0.11	0.02

Note: *F* F-ratio, *df* degrees of freedom, *p* significance level, η^2 partial eta squared effect size.

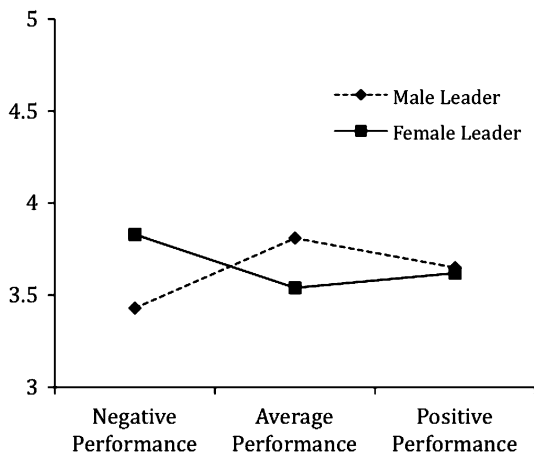


Figure 2. Two-way interaction of leader gender and organizational performance for whistle-blowing intentions.

Univariate results indicated a significant main effect for leader gender, $F(1, 272) = 4.76, p < 0.05$. The marginal means suggested significantly higher contingent punishment recommendations for aversive male leaders ($M = 3.74, SE = 0.08$) compared to aversive female leaders ($M = 3.51, SE = 0.07$). Additionally, consistent with results found for whistle-blowing intentions, a main effect was found for organizational climate on contingent punishment

behavior, $F(1, 272) = 3.29, p < 0.10$. Examination of the marginal means indicated that participants were significantly more likely to recommend punishment for aversive leaders in the context of intolerant climates ($M = 3.72, SE = 0.07$) than tolerant climates ($M = 3.53, SE = 0.07$).

Discussion

The central conclusion that can be drawn from the present study is that destructive leadership appears to be a complex process resulting not simply from destructive leaders but rather from a confluence of leader, follower, and environmental characteristics – consistent with Padilla et al. (2007) toxic triangle theory. Although a general lack of support was observed for the study’s main effect hypotheses, we believe these findings serve to highlight the highly complex nature of destructive leadership. In particular, the present findings suggest that follower perceptions and reactions to aversive leadership vary depending on the leader’s gender as well as the broader climate and financial performance of the organization.

With respect to follower perceptions of aversive leadership, it was interesting to find that such perceptions were not simply a function of the leader’s

TABLE VI
Summary of univariate analysis of covariance for personalized leadership

	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	η^2
Covariates				
Prior leadership experience	3.55	1	0.06	0.01
Main effects				
Leader gender	0.54	1	0.46	0.00
Organizational climate	0.48	1	0.49	0.00
Organizational performance	0.10	2	0.90	0.00
Two-way interactions				
Leader gender \times Organizational climate	0.30	1	0.58	0.00
Leader \times Organizational performance	0.61	2	0.54	0.00
Organizational climate \times Organizational performance	2.79	2	0.06	0.02
Three-way interactions				
Leader gender \times Organizational climate \times Organizational performance	0.05	2	0.96	0.00

Note: *F* F-ratio, *df* degrees of freedom, *p* significance level, η^2 partial eta squared effect size.

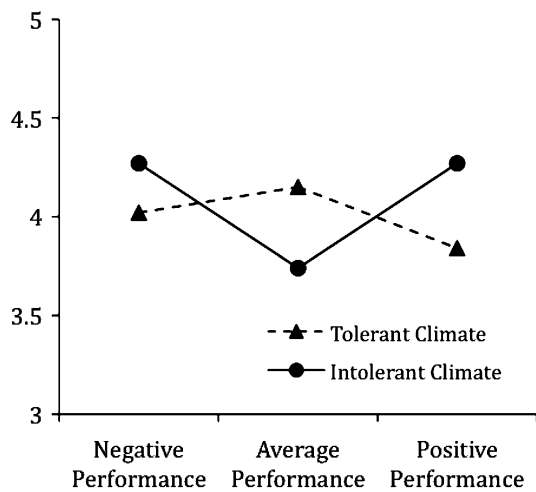


Figure 3. Two-way interaction of organizational climate and organizational performance for personalized leadership.

gender or the organization's climate and performance, independent of one another, but rather were the result of a three-way interaction among these variables. Further, this interaction suggests that in climates intolerant of aversive leadership, female leaders who break the rules with their bad behavior are perceived more aversively than their male counterparts when their rule-breaking is linked to negative organizational performance.

Moreover, it appears that perceptions of leader aversiveness may be relatively difficult to manipulate –

that is, employees seem to know a bad leader when they see one. However, intolerant climates may render social observers particularly sensitive to perceptual changes given other extraneous factors in the organizational environment. Consistent with the Romance of Leadership, when the organization performs poorly in such a context, individuals may make sense of the firm's financial status by blaming destructive leaders and, particularly, female destructive leaders. Although previous research suggests that successful female leaders elicit more negative reactions from observers, with regard to destructive leadership it appears that poor performance attributed to bad behaving female leaders results in more negative perceptions than positive performance. That is, a female aversive leader's role incongruent behavior seems to accentuate negative performance attributions, resulting in increased social backlash. Thus, simultaneously being female, acting aversively, and being attributed responsibility for negative organizational performance results in the highest level of backlash.

In terms of whistle-blowing intentions, it was not surprising to find such a strong main effect for the organization's climate. Prior research suggests climate perceptions can significantly impact whether employees feel comfortable reporting negative work behavior to higher authorities. In particular, Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behavior postulates that intentions to perform a behavior are a function of three specific beliefs, including one's (1) attitude

TABLE VII
Summary of univariate analysis of covariance for contingent punishment

	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	η^2
Covariates				
Trait cynicism	3.35	1	0.07	0.01
Ambivalent sexism	5.59	1	0.02	0.02
Locus of control	3.54	1	0.06	0.01
Main effects				
Leader gender	4.76	1	0.03	0.02
Organizational climate	3.29	1	0.07	0.01
Organizational performance	2.05	2	0.13	0.02
Two-way interactions				
Leader gender × Organizational climate	1.01	1	0.32	0.00
Leader gender × Organizational performance	0.50	2	0.61	0.00
Organizational climate × Organizational performance	0.06	2	0.94	0.00
Three-way interactions				
Leader gender × Organizational climate × Organizational performance	0.46	2	0.63	0.00

Note: *F* F-ratio, *df* degrees of freedom, *p* significance level, η^2 partial eta squared effect size.

toward the behavior, which results from its perceived ramifications, (2) a subjective norm about the behavior, which results from normative beliefs, and (3) perceived behavioral control, which is determined by one’s beliefs about available resources and opportunities to perform the behavior. Specifically, Ajzen (1991) defined a subject norm as “the perceived social pressure to perform or not to perform the behavior” (p. 188). As such, it reflects a person’s thoughts about “the likelihood that important referent individuals or groups approve or disapprove of performing a given behavior” (Ajzen, 1991, p. 195).

Thus, it follows that individuals would be less likely to report aversive leaders in the context of organizational climates that tolerate such behavior – viewing the decision to “blow the whistle” or not as a choice that could carry with it unfavorable social and career consequences from important referents, such as coworkers and immediate supervisors. Moreover, this finding suggests that while perceptions of destructive leaders seem to be relatively rigid in nature, behavioral intentions in response to destructive leadership, such as whistle-blowing, appear to be highly transitory depending on the organization’s climate.

Furthermore, although no main effect was found for organizational performance, its effect was qualified by a two-way interaction with the leader’s gender. That is, participants were more likely to

report intentions to “blow the whistle” on aversive female leaders when the organization performed poorly. It appears that female aversive leaders are not only perceived more aversively in the context of poor organizational performance, but their behavior is also likely to elicit greater whistle-blowing intentions in this context. Thus, during times of financial decline, the aversive and seemingly role incongruent behavior displayed by aversive female leaders may be viewed more negatively than in times of fiscal prosperity. Accordingly, employees may react more negatively to destructive female leaders, blaming them for the firm’s performance and potentially taking active steps to make sure organizational watchdogs are aware of their behavior.

Exploratory findings

Additionally, results from the exploratory-dependent variables seem to further shed light on the complex processes underlying destructive leadership. The marginally significant two-way interaction found between organizational climate and performance on perceptions of personalized leadership lends further support to those found for aversive leadership. When the organization’s performance improved, perceptions of personalized leadership dropped significantly

in the tolerant climate condition, but remained constant in the intolerant scenario. In the latter case, positive organizational performance did not diminish the effects of a climate intolerant of aversive leadership. However, congruent with the Romance of Leadership, in the former case individuals may have attributed part of the organization's success to the leader, forgiving them slightly for their behavior.

In terms of contingent punishment of aversive leaders, the main effect found for leader gender suggests that participants were more likely to recommend punishing male aversive leaders. This finding seems counterintuitive given earlier results suggesting individuals perceive aversive female leaders more negatively and report greater whistle-blowing intentions toward them under certain conditions. However, it may be that when it comes to punishment of destructive leader – a more severe course of action than whistle-blowing – individuals have less compassion for men, whom they believe should be able to handle any disciplinary action taken against them.

However, matching those results found for whistle-blowing intentions, the marginally significant main effect found for organizational climate suggests that employees may feel more comfortable making punitive recommendations to higher authorities regarding aversive leaders when they perceive the organization's climate as intolerant of such behavior. Congruent with Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behavior, intolerant climates may signal to subordinates that negative leader behavior is unacceptable and ought to be punished, thus emboldening employees to pursue disciplinary action in such contexts. However, punishment behavior may be somewhat quelled when individuals perceive potential personal costs associated with whistle-blowing in the context of climates that accept negative leader behavior as normal and a regular part of organizational life.

Limitations

In considering these conclusions, it is important to bear in mind that these findings were based on an experimental design consisting of college students reading vignettes about a fictional organization and its members. The use of "paper people" scenarios has been

questioned by several researchers, who suggest that such methods fail to produce the "experimental realism" necessary to generate the same type of psychological impact on participants that would occur in an actual organization (Landy, 2008; Lengnick-Hall, 1995; Murphy et al., 1986). As such, some caution should be given to generalizing these findings to real-world organizations. However, if "paper people" methods do in fact only produce diluted effects compared to those seen in actual organizations, then it stands to reason that the significant findings and modest effect sizes found in the present study represent at least conservative estimates of the effects one might expect to find in actual organizations plagued by destructive leaders.

In a similar vein, while the present study focused on participants' behavioral intentions in response to aversive leadership (i.e., whistle-blowing and contingent punishment), it is unclear whether such intentions would manifest in the form of actual behavior if participants had been real employees of the target organization. A point of contention in various literatures revolves around the finding that oftentimes such self-reported intentions do not correlate highly with the behaviors they are expected to predict (Carpenter and Fleishman, 1987). Thus, although it has been suggested that intentions are the best predictor of behavior (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1977; Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975), readers should bear in mind the limitations of generalizing these findings to real-world follower behavior.

Finally, the present study represents only a first step in exploring the many complex relationships embedded within Padilla et al. (2007) toxic triangle of destructive leadership. While the current study investigated the effects of the leader's gender and the organization's climate and performance, there are certainly other leader, follower, and environmental variables that must be empirically examined. For example, there is reason to believe that broader societal and cultural values (Luthans et al., 1998) and the absence of organizational checks and balances on power (Gandossy and Sonnenfeldt, 2004; Padilla et al., 2007) are likely to impact the destructive leadership process. Thus, significant work remains on testing both the independent and interactive effects of these variables in order to move past the overemphasis on trait-based approaches to a more comprehensive understanding of destructive leadership.

Theoretical and practical implications

Despite these limitations, this study has several theoretical implications worth mentioning, the first of which is its multifaceted approach to the study of destructive leadership. Specifically, this is one of the first studies to investigate how aspects of the organizational environment affect follower perceptions and reactions to destructive forms of leadership, and specifically aversive leadership. While research suggests that certain leader characteristics (e.g., charisma) can be used to color follower perceptions and harness support for destructive acts (Hogan et al., 1990; Padilla et al., 2007), the overemphasis on destructive leader traits to date has precluded scholars from pursuing a more comprehensive understanding of destructive leadership as a complex social-psychological process. Thus, the present study begins to explore the complex interactions likely to take place between aspects of leaders, followers, and the organizational environment that contribute to this process. In so doing, it represents one of the first steps toward testing Padilla et al. (2007) “toxic triangle” of destructive leadership.

Second, this study integrates both research on the Romance of Leadership and gender and leadership with the “dark” side of leadership. In so doing, it is one of the first to examine how followers socially construct their perceptions and formulate their reactions to destructive leaders based on salient aspects of the organizational environment. In sum, this study is unique in that it attempts to paint part of the complex portrait that is destructive leadership. In this way, it provides support for a more integrative and empirically based model of destructive leadership in the future.

The current study also has several important practical implications. First, it highlights the need for organizations to assess the policies and procedures, corporate beliefs and values, and other organizational features that comprise their corporate climates. These macro-level aspects of an organization may send implicit messages that destructive forms of leadership are tolerated, potentially causing individuals to turn a blind eye to such behavior for fear of retaliation from higher authorities. When magnified across an entire organization, this problem may result in the organization’s failure to remove destructive leaders before too late.

Second, this study has important ramifications for the ways in which bad behaving leaders are dealt with in organizations. That is, whistle-blowing behavior and subsequent disciplinary actions taken against such leaders may be augmented by certain organizational conditions, such as poor financial performance. Moreover, there is the potential that a leader’s gender may interact with these environmental variables such that female destructive leaders are systematically discriminated against more than their male counterparts. As such, organizations should be more conscious of these effects so that they maintain consistency in their actions toward “deviant” leaders. Failure to maintain consistent standards for dealing with all kinds of bad behaving leaders may signal to employees that the organization is not only unfair or inequitable in its policies and practices regarding punishment but in other organizational matters as well.

Summary

In response to the call for research that takes a more comprehensive perspective on destructive leadership, the present study utilized a follower-centric approach in order to investigate the role of context in shaping individuals’ perceptions and reactions to destructive leadership, and specifically aversive leadership. Based on our results, we agree with Padilla et al. (2007) that an overly narrow focus on destructive leadership as an inherently trait-based phenomenon will continue to hinder our understanding of destructive leadership as a highly complex process resulting from the confluence of leader, follower, and environmental characteristics.

The present findings, in fact, suggest that follower perceptions and reactions to aversive leadership cannot, in general, be explained by simple main effects, but rather are a function of complex interactions among the gender of a leader and the broader climate and financial performance of the organization. Hopefully, the present study not only spurs future research on Padilla et al.’s (2007) toxic triangle theory, but also provides an impetus for researchers to move past the overly simplistic trait-based perspectives of destructive leadership that have dominated the theoretical landscape to date.

Appendix A: Sample emails from study vignettes

Rachel Donahue

To: SalesDep_LstSrv
Subject: Welcome to New Horizons sales dept.

Good morning,

Welcome to New Horizons. My name is Rachel Donahue, and I'll be your HR representative. As you may already know, New Horizons is a high volume manufacturing company, established in 1935 and consisting of several large branches throughout the United States and abroad.

In recent years, the company has experienced fluctuating performance levels. However, we look to get back on track and increase our profit margin in the future with the addition of some new and highly talented junior sales representatives, such as yourself.

Your immediate supervisor will be Linda Jackson, who took over as chairman of the sales department this year. You, along with several other sales representatives, were chosen to work directly under Linda.

Welcome aboard. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me.

Rachel

Rachel Donahue
Human Resources Representative
692-234-4321
New Horizons, Inc.

Kara Stephens

To: You (Scott.Phillips@NewHorizons.org)
Subject: Recent interaction with Linda

Hey Scott,

Don't know if you know Phil Mathis, one of the other new sales reps. But I dropped by the copy room yesterday and overheard Linda threatening Phil, saying, "Mathis, I'm sick of your B.S! If your numbers aren't up next quarter, I'll make sure EVERYONE in this building knows how useless a sales rep you are!!!"

Just an FYI, I'll tell you more about it Monday.

Have a nice weekend,

Kara

Kara Stephens
Junior Sales Representative
692-861-2871
New Horizons, Inc.

Perceptions and Reactions to Aversive Leaders

Scott Phillips

To: You (Kara.Stephens@NewHorizons.org)
Subject: RE: Recent Interaction with Linda

Morning Kara,

Hope you had a nice weekend – we went to the beach for a few hours and got the chance to do a little swimming.

Anyways, I got your email and had a similar story to share. I don't know if you overheard, but Linda really laid into one of the senior sales representatives, Andy Harris, for his performance last month. I heard her say, "Why do you even come to work, Harris? Your numbers are awful! You know you make my job a real pain in the ass, Harris! It's amazing we keep such a loser like you around!!"

I'll give you a few more details in our rep meeting at 2:00.

See you then,

Scott

Scott Phillips
Junior Sales Representative
692-520-1034
New Horizons, Inc.

Rachel Donahue

To: SalesDep_LstSrv
Subject: HR complaints

Good afternoon,

For those of you who are new to the company, there will be a mandatory training session regarding HR complaint policies and procedures next Tuesday at 1:30 in the conference room. At New Horizons, we believe such policies and procedures are critical to maintaining an honest and open work environment where employees feel comfortable speaking up if they are ever a witness to or victim of inappropriate workplace behavior.

For those of you who have been with the company for some time now, I want to thank you for taking these policies and procedures so seriously. In the past year we have had several incidents of inappropriate behavior that were dealt with effectively because of your willingness to utilize the HR complaint process. This has made New Horizons a better place to work for everyone.

Best,

Rachel

Rachel Donahue
Human Resources Representative
692-234-4321
New Horizons, Inc.

Christian N. Thoroughgood et al.

Andy Harris

To: You (Scott.Phillips@NewHorizons.org)
Subject: RE: Linda Jackson HR complaint?

Hey Scott,

You bet I did. In fact, there have been quite a few individuals who have filed complaints against Linda. Folks from HR even said that senior executives have ordered a full-scale investigation into Linda's behavior.

I've been here a while now, but it's pretty clear after working here for only a short time that New Horizons doesn't tolerate that kind of stuff. I mean whether you're a senior executive or a maintenance person, you're obligated to speak up when you see or experience something you don't think is right.

I have to say, that's what makes New Horizons such an awesome place to work! Talk to you later.

Andy

Andy Harris
Senior Sales Representative
692-683-3845
New Horizons, Inc.

Scott Phillips

To: You (Andy.Harris@NewHorizons.org)
Subject: Linda Jackson HR complaint?

Hi Andy,

I overheard you getting chewed out by Linda the other day. Did you file a complaint?

Scott

Scott Phillips
Junior Sales Representative
692-520-1034
New Horizons, Inc.

Pam Sampson

To: SalesDep_LstSrv
Subject: Quarterly Sales Performance Report

Good Morning,

The following represents quarterly sales performance numbers and annual overall net gain/loss information for New Horizon and comparative figures for competing companies:

Company	1 st Quarter Jan - Mar	2 nd Quarter Apr - Jun	3 rd Quarter Jul - Sept	4 th Quarter Oct - Dec	Annual Net Gain/Loss
New Horizons, Inc.	- 2%	- 4%	- 9%	- 10%	- 25%
Sharper View, Inc.	+3%	+5%	- 8%	+ 5%	+ 5%
Smith Brothers, Inc.	- 4%	+3%	+5%	+ 5%	+ 9%
Weston & Fox, Inc.	+1%	- 2%	+10%	- 6%	+ 3%

As you can see, quarterly sales have declined substantially with a net loss of -25% in gross sales relative to last year's sales volume. This performance decline represents one of the largest sales losses in the last decade for New Horizons, despite our competitors experiencing annual sales gains in the same market.

For more specific performance figures, please see your direct supervisor.

Pam Sampson
Accounting Department
692-221-4765
New Horizons, Inc.

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