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Kathie L. Pelletier
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Leader toxicity: An empirical investigation of toxic behavior and rhetoric

Kathie L. Pelletier
California State University, San Bernardino, USA

Abstract
This paper provides empirical support for the behavioral and rhetorical constructs associated with toxic leadership in organizational contexts. Two exploratory studies were conducted that examined behavior and rhetoric of leaders through the lenses of abusive, bullying, destructive, toxic, and tyrannical leadership theories. In a qualitative study, participants expressed their direct experiences with leader toxicity. Eight behavioral dimensions emerged. Integrating those findings, a 51-item leader behavior assessment was developed to assess agreement of the severity of harmfulness of these dimensions. Based on the results of these studies, a typology of toxic leader behaviors and rhetoric was developed. Organizational implications are discussed.

Keywords
abusive supervision, destructive behavior, leader toxicity, toxic leadership

Introduction and review of the literature
Positive stories of organizational leaders might highlight leaders who motivate employees to achieve their goals and inspire them to do more than they thought was possible. The negative accounts include stories of leaders who ridicule their employees in public, force employees to endure physical hardships, and promote divisiveness between work groups or individuals. These stories depict behaviors of leaders who inflict serious physical and/or psychological harm on their followers. It is quite possible that others working for these leaders view these same authority figures with respect and admiration. To illustrate this point, one prominent college men’s basketball coach earned a reputation for his unorthodox behaviors. During games, when players did not play to their fullest potential, the coach would become physically and mentally abusive. Some players were angered, others felt fear, yet others stated that he was the best coach they had ever had.

Corresponding author:
Kathie L. Pelletier, California State University, USA
Email: kpelleti@csusb.edu
These differences in perceptions and attributions suggest we still have much to learn about how people view leadership, since one person’s toxic leader may be another person’s hero (Lipman-Blumen, 2005). Interestingly, research on leadership has not been balanced with respect to these polar views; the majority of studies have focused on the effective aspects of leadership more so than the destructive ones. Although an understanding of effective leadership is vital for developing managers and supervisors, it is equally important to identify the behaviors and rhetoric of leaders who knowingly or unintentionally inflict enduring harm on their constituents.

The research questions this study seeks to answer are, ‘What are the behaviors and rhetoric of leaders that followers perceive to be harmful to their psychological or organizational well-being?’ Second, based on followers’ social construction of leadership, as illustrated by the basketball coach example, ‘Do followers agree as to what constitutes harmful leader behavior and rhetoric?’ According to social construction theory (Hunt, 1984), followers’ perceptions of leader effectiveness and/or toxicity may differ based on psychological aspects of the observer or relational aspects characterizing the leader–follower dyad.

If followers cannot agree as to what constitutes destructive behavior or rhetoric, they might be unable or unwilling to challenge or confront the leader (Kets de Vries, 1989). Even worse, they might aid or abet a leader who is acting against the interests of his or her followers. By identifying behaviors and rhetoric that followers agree are destructive to their well-being, we can begin to develop and implement leadership interventions aimed at reducing the potential for the emergence of toxicity in existing leaders, or preventing toxic leaders from entering our organizations.

**Theories and characteristics of harmful leadership**

Bass (1985) pointed out that there are as many definitions of leadership as there are people who attempt to define the concept; however, characterizations of destructive or toxic leadership are not as plentiful, although we have seen an increase in studies examining the darker side of leadership. Researchers have proposed descriptions of harmful leadership that fall within the domains of abusive (Tepper, 2000; Tepper et al., 2007), tyrannical (Ashforth, 1994), destructive (Einarsen et al., 2007), bullying (Namie and Namie, 2000), unethical or bad (Kellerman, 2004), and toxic (Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Pelletier, 2009; Reed, 2004). There are behavioral overlaps within these theories, but there are also behaviors that are unique to each conceptual framework (see Table 1). Briefly, I describe the key dimensions of these theories.

**Abusive and tyrannical leadership.** Abusive leadership has been defined by Tepper (2000: 178) as ‘subordinates’ subjective assessments of the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and non-verbal behaviours, excluding physical contact’. Abusive leaders are characterized by their injurious actions that include public ridicule, angry tantrums, inconsiderate actions (i.e., rudeness), favoritism, non-contingent punishment, and coercion. Hornstein (1996) suggests that toxic leaders are primarily concerned with gaining and maintaining control through methods that create fear and intimidation. In addition, tyrannical leaders are distrusting, condescending and patronizing, impersonal, arrogant and boastful, and rigid and inflexible. They take credit for the efforts of others, blame subordinates for mistakes, discourage informal interaction among subordinates, and deter initiative and dissent (Ashforth, 1994).
Destructive leadership. Einarsen et al. (2007) assert that destructive leadership harms not only the subordinate, but the organization as well. These researchers define destructive leadership as ‘the systematic and repeated behaviour by a leader, supervisor, or manager that violates the legitimate interest of the organisation by undermining and/or sabotaging the organisation’s goals, tasks, resources, and effectiveness and/or motivation, well-being or job satisfaction of subordinates’ (208). Destructive leadership can involve acts of physical force (e.g., shoving, throwing things, slamming fist on a desk, sexual harassment that includes inappropriate physical contact), and passive acts such as failing to protect a subordinate’s welfare, or failing to provide a subordinate with important information or feedback.

Bullying. Another aspect of harmful leadership involves the leader using mental or physical strength against someone who is likely to be in a weaker or subordinate position to the person who is engaging in bullying. Bullying often occurs at the hands of top leaders and middle managers (Rayner and Cooper, 1997); therefore, leaders who exhibit this behavior can be considered toxic to the recipients of their bullying tactics. Researchers studying workplace bullying and ‘mobbing’ (i.e., ganging up on a coworker, singling out an employee for harassment) have found that the prevalence of bullying has increased not only in the USA, but in Europe, South Africa, and Australia, as well (Einarsen and Skogstad, 1996; Hoel et al., 2001; Leyman, 1996).
According to the Campaign against Workplace Bullying, one in five U.S. employees reported being bullied with repeated, deliberately harmful verbal abuse (Namie, 2000). Rayner and Cooper (1997) examined bullying behaviors in the United Kingdom and found that in a sample of 1173 employees, 53% reported they had been victims of bullying. Further, 74% of the victims were subordinate to the individual doing the bullying. Of those who had bullied employees, 41% were middle managers and 30% were senior managers, suggesting that the majority of bullying occurs at the top levels of organizations’ leadership hierarchies. According to the International Labour Organization (1996), 77.8% of South Africans say that they had experienced bullying during their careers.

Toxic leadership. Lipman-Blumen’s (2005) concept of toxic leadership draws our attention to the limitations of the paradigm of positive, effective leadership by pointing out that humans are imperfect individuals, and that good (or bad) leadership is influenced by followers. In that vein, a reasonable thesis would include the notion that followers may be blinded to the leader’s shortcomings and actually aid and abet a toxic leader. According to Lipman-Blumen (2005), leaders are considered toxic when they inflict serious and enduring harm on their constituents by using influence tactics that are extremely harsh and/or malicious. In short, toxic leaders exhibit destructive behaviors that work to decay their followers’ morale, motivation, and self-esteem. Although there is considerable overlap in conceptualizations of toxic, tyrannical, unethical, and destructive leadership, Lipman-Blumen notes the multi-dimensional framework of leader toxicity. She suggests that a leader may be toxic in some situations but effective in others, and recognizes that one person’s toxic leader might be another person’s hero. As Walton (2007) suggests, the reason followers might be attracted to toxic leaders is the leader’s high level of intensity and enthusiasm for his or her own objectives. Further, Padilla et al. (2007) contend that when determining toxicity, one must evaluate the consequences, rather than the intermediate effects of the leader’s influence on the follower. The present study examines the behaviors that might lead to these intermediate effects; consequences are not assessed, as the purpose of this exploratory study is to add to existing behavioral typologies of leader destructiveness.

Behaviors and traits of toxic leaders

Lipman-Blumen (2005) presents a range of destructive behaviors from undermining, demeaning, marginalizing, intimidating, demoralizing, and disenfranchising followers, to ‘incapacitating, imprisoning, terrorizing, torturing, or killing others, including members of their entourage’ (19). Kellerman (2004) also presents a listing of toxic traits and suggests that bad leadership behaviors can range from incompetent to unethical. Although many people would consider terrorizing or torturing followers to be at the highest level of the toxic continuum, some followers who have been publicly humiliated or excluded socially by the leaders in their organizations might feel public ridicule or social exclusion are equally harmful.

In an organizational context, examples of Lipman-Blumen’s (2005) aforementioned characterization of toxic leader behaviors are manifested as direct attacks on followers’ character, abilities, and well-being. Examples might include leaders going behind others’ backs to achieve their goals, demeaning employees by criticizing their work or ideas, making subjective assessments about the employees’ attitudes or ability, and/or using constructive discharge tactics to demote or terminate employees without cause. Other examples include
leaders’ intentionally withholding critical information needed to perform adequately, or disenfranchising some organizational members.

Although there are behavioral commonalities described in harmful-leadership theories (Table 1), Lipman-Blumen (2005) makes a unique contribution to the study of harmful leadership by her acknowledgement that toxic leaders contravene basic standards of human rights by consciously reframing toxic agendas as noble endeavors. Toxic leaders also play to the basest fears and needs of their constituents and mislead followers by deliberate lying and distorting facts. Lipman-Blumen discusses these fears and needs by drawing on the work of Ernest Becker (1973). Becker notes that humans tend to repress thoughts of death; consequently, they tend to experience existential angst when confronted with thoughts of their own mortality. Further, as humans, many of us seek to leave behind a legacy. We want to engage in noble ventures so we might transcend death symbolically. Leaders who exclaim that they are the only individuals who can keep people safe seem attractive to followers during or after a crisis. Moreover, leaders who promote fear to keep their followers dependent and compliant are toxic.

People also have a need for affiliation and belonging, to feel that they are among the chosen. In the context of faith, these needs are satisfied when religious leaders convince followers that they have a seat at their respective ‘God’s’ tables. In a work context, a follower might be willing to abet a toxic leader simply to become a member of the leader’s entourage or in-group. A leader who is toxic will recognize, exploit, and capitalize on these vulnerabilities; he or she will convince the followers that the only way they will be saved is to comply with the leader’s demands. These toxic leaders are also skilled at fostering an ‘us/them’ dichotomy for the purpose of enhancing cronyism (‘us’). In promoting this dichotomy, leaders maliciously set constituents against one another by identifying scapegoats and inciting their followers to castigate them.

It is important to note that Lipman-Blumen’s (2005) description of toxicity, like charisma, is based on followers’ perceptions of, and attributions about, the leader, regardless of the leader’s intentions or organizational outcomes. To distinguish bad from toxic leaders, one must consider the leaders’ effects on the followers. If the follower is physically or psychologically harmed by the leader’s actions, and that impairment is long lasting, the leader can be considered toxic. This paper seeks to explore and explicate these perceptions.

Consequences of toxic leader behavior

The consequences of destructive, toxic leadership behaviors at the organizational and subordinate level are plentiful. At the organizational level, researchers have found increases in workplace deviance by subordinates who report working for abusive supervisors (Mitchell and Ambrose, 2007). These counterproductive behaviors tend to be attributed to negative reciprocity, that is, the employee’s effort to ‘balance the scale’ of perceived injustice by inflicting harm back onto the company. Retaliatory behaviors can include sabotaging operations, providing inaccurate or misleading information, and withholding help when a coworker has asked for assistance (Aquino et al., 2001; Bies and Tripp, 1996; Tripp et al., 2002). The publicizing of toxic behaviors can also negatively affect an organization’s bottom line or its ability to attract qualified ethical candidates (Sutton, 2007).

Reed (2004) introduced the negative consequences of toxic leadership in a military context by articulating that these leaders erode unit cohesion and deflate esprit de corps. At the individual level, studies have shown abusive leadership to be related positively to turnover.
intentions and psychological distress, and related negatively to affective and continuance commitment, job and life satisfaction (Rayner and Cooper, 1997; Tepper, 2000). Further, employees subjected to leaders who attack their self-esteem tend to feel low self-worth and a diminished sense of self-efficacy (Kusy and Holloway, 2009) that could lead to deteriorations in performance and morale.

In the studies that follow, I identify behaviors that employees perceive to be toxic. As these studies are exploratory, the findings provide an empirical basis for the development of a typology of leader toxicity and add support for behaviors theorized to be harmful to followers.

A qualitative analysis was first conducted to assess employees’ experiences with leaders they perceived to be toxic or destructive. Based on the findings of this exploratory study, I developed a Leader Behavior Assessment (LBA) that was administered in a quantitative study to another sample.

**Methods**

**Qualitative analysis**

The purpose of the qualitative analysis was to evaluate people’s actual experiences with toxicity and compare those accounts with the behaviors identified in research of abusive, bullying, destructive, toxic, and tyrannical leadership theories. Two questions were posed in an online survey and the responses were content-coded to identify toxic behaviors actually experienced or witnessed by participants. These questions assessed participants’ first-hand experiences with leader toxicity. Participants were asked if they had experienced their leader acting in a harmful manner. They were then asked to describe specifically what that leader did or said to them that they perceived to be harmful (i.e., their direct experiences with leader toxicity). In the second question, respondents were asked to describe an instance when they saw their leader acting in a destructive manner toward one of their coworkers (i.e., vicarious experiences with leader toxicity). As in the first question, respondents were asked to recount what that leader did or said to their coworker that they believed to be harmful.

**Participants**

Convenience, snowball sampling was employed in this study. According to Bernacki and Waldorf (1981), snowball sampling is appropriate in studies where respondents are asked to report potentially disturbing information. Snowball sampling is also likely the best way to gain access to people who are especially knowledgeable about an area that is sensitive, or potentially traumatic (e.g., when asking respondents to recall when a leader harmed them or someone else).

A link to an online survey was posted on a research portal at two southern California university websites. Graduate and undergraduate students were also invited to share the link with working adults they knew. Two hundred and fifteen employees working in a variety of organizations (both public- and private-sector agencies) responded to the open-ended question pertaining to their direct experiences with harmful leadership, and 214 responded to the vicarious question that asked participants to recall an instance where their leader acted in a toxic manner toward a coworker. Of the 215 respondents who answered to the item that asked about direct experiences with toxicity, 189 said they experienced toxicity directly. Twenty-six participants did not provide ‘codeable’ responses (i.e., one individual listed the
name of his supervisor but did not provide an instance of destructive behavior or rhetoric; another respondent stated her boss asked her to switch her work schedule). With regard to vicarious experiences with harmful leader behaviors, 178 participants stated they had witnessed their leader acting in a harmful manner toward one of their coworkers. Only 2% of the sample indicated they had not witnessed a leader acting in a toxic manner.

**Demographics.** There were 49 male (23%) and 151 female (70%) participants. Fifteen individuals did not indicate gender (7%). The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 74 years. Length of employment ranged from less than one month to 47 years. Forty-eight percent of the participants were employed full-time (32 hours or more per week) and 40% indicated they were employed part-time (less than 32 hours per week). Twenty-six respondents (12%) failed to indicate their length of employment. Participants’ present work positions included professional (24%), part-time non-management (19%), full- or part-time student status (18%), full-time non-management (9%), middle management (7%), entry-level manager or supervisor (8%), and top-level executives (3%). Eleven (5%) participants indicated they were not currently employed.

**Data analysis.** A preliminary coding scheme was developed based on the grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Patton, 2002). Behavioral dimensions of bad leadership identified in previous research (Ashforth, 1994; Einarsen et al., 2007; Hornstein, 1996; Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Tepper, 2000) served as the basis for the codes. Following Miles and Huberman (1994), coding of the data took place in two stages. A list of codes was generated in the first stage, a priori, from relevant research studies. The coding scheme consisted of eight key themes associated with destructive, abusive, tyrannical, and toxic leadership (see Table 2 for coding sheet). Coding took place at the sentence level, taking into account the context of the paragraph surrounding each sentence.

To validate the coding scheme and establish inter-rater reliability, two graduate students trained in content analysis evaluated and coded each sentence independently. After modifications to the coding scheme, inter-rater reliability was satisfactory at .96.

**Results of qualitative analysis**

Eight dimensions associated with theories of harmful leadership emerged in the participants’ responses, meaning they had witnessed these toxic behaviors or rhetoric first-hand or observed their leader treating a coworker in a manner that was characterized by these dimensions. The first dimension involved a leader attacking followers’ self-esteem by devaluing and/or marginalizing the employee or his or her work efforts, mocking or ridiculing the individual, or minimizing the employee’s contributions. One respondent included the following statement, ‘My leader said to me, “You make me want to throw up. How could you possibly think your idea could work?”’ Another employee mentioned public humiliation/ridicule as a toxic behavior, stating his boss ‘posted a “boo-boo” board where he tallied the number of mistakes people made’.

The second dimension was the leader’s ideology of divisiveness (Lipman-Blumen, 2005) whereby the leader pitted one or more group members against another or ostracized an individual for the purpose of inciting others to snub the victim. One survey respondent provided evidence for this type of behavior, stating ‘My leader tried to recruit me into a circle of people to spy on coworkers’.
The third dimension, social exclusion, was a function of the leader excluding individuals from activities or meetings that were relevant to the individual’s assignments or position in the company. One respondent gave an example of this dimension, ‘My leader excluded a coworker from meetings on issues that were his specialty’. Another employee noted feelings of exclusion based on her leader ‘greeting everyone in the morning but ignoring me’.

The fourth dimension involved promoting inequity. Leaders exhibited favoritism or based promotion selections on subjective, rather than objective standards, promoted
undeserving members of their entourage, and instilled an ideology of inequity and discrimination in the workplace (Hornstein, 1996). As one employee noted, ‘My boss wanted me to continue to allow others to take credit for my ideas and work and not say anything, which allowed those individuals to get promotions over me’. One respondent noted feeling that she was being discriminated against, ‘My boss put her arm around me stating that I was her little Jew girl. I was the only person whose behaviors were recorded’. Another person explained how she was bypassed for a position due to her sex, ‘I was told that because I was a woman, they did not think I had the ability or was good enough to fill the maintenance position’.

The fifth dimension derives from research on abusive supervision (Tepper, 2000). Behaviors associated with abusive leadership included yelling at subordinates, throwing tantrums, and using physical force to make a point or obtain compliance. Numerous respondents wrote about their experiences that ranged from yelling to throwing objects, ‘An employee was yelled at to the point the person urinated as a result of stress’ and ‘She threw a stapler at my head’.

The sixth dimension was evidenced by the leader using tactics that ultimately threatened followers’ pragmatic needs or psychological and/or physical well-being. Examples of these types of threats to security included coercion, described by one employee as his leader proclaiming, ‘You will do what I want or I will make life hard for you’, threatening to fire an employee without just cause, and forcing people to endure physical or mental hardships. One employee described her fear of her leader as follows, ‘My supervisor threatened to “get rid of me” and I knew he kept guns in his car. I felt it meant he would kill me’. Another respondent described how he was forced to endure physical hardship in the military, ‘I became extremely ill while in the military. My C.O. ignored my 48-hour bed rest notice and assigned me to a 24-hour duty in the cold’.

The seventh dimension was the leader’s lack of integrity and use of deceptive tactics. Behaviors associated with this characteristic (although not exhaustive) were taking credit for someone else’s work, being unwilling to admit mistakes and blaming mistakes on the followers (Namie, 2000), and using deception to further the leader’s agenda. The unethical dimension associated with this construct was bending or breaking rules, or demanding others bend the rules to meet company objectives. One respondent discussed how his leader was using him to further his own agenda, ‘My boss forced me to transfer business to a company that gave him a kickback when I had already committed the business to another source’. Another participant stated, ‘My supervisor asked me to bend rules to increase productivity’.

The last dimension involved a laissez-faire style of leadership whereby the leader, by nature of excessive rigidity, complacency, or incompetence (Lewin et al., 1939; Lipman-Blumen, 2005), ignored feedback, stifled dissent, or failed to bend when flexibility was warranted. Leaders who incorporate laissez-faire styles of leadership are toxic in that they can deflate the motivation of the work group or inhibit employees from voicing concerns or ideas. One employee working in an academic setting described her leader’s unwillingness to support her, ‘I sent a student to the school office because she came to class smelling of marijuana. The principal sent me into a conference with her parents by myself, with no support’.

**Experiences with leader toxicity.** Figure 1 shows the distribution of employees’ direct (toxic to you) and vicarious (toxic to coworker) experiences with leader toxicity.
The most commonly reported toxic behavior was attacks to self-esteem. Almost half of the participants (46%) who reported vicarious experiences with leader toxicity witnessed a leader attacking a coworker’s self-esteem. Thirty-six percent of the participants who presented their direct experiences with toxic leader behaviors cited behaviors that involved being demeaned or ridiculed in public. A greater percentage of respondents (24%) reported direct experiences of their leaders’ lack of integrity than witnessing dishonesty toward one of their coworkers (11%). *Laissez-faire* behaviors and threats to security were experienced more directly than vicariously. A greater percentage of respondents noted leaders engaging in abusive behaviors toward a coworker (20%) than participants experiencing this form of supervision directly (15%). The least common harmful behaviors experienced in both direct and vicarious accountings were social exclusion, divisiveness, and inequality.

**Similarity between direct and vicarious experiences with leader toxicity.** In both direct and vicarious experiences with harmful leadership, attacks to self-esteem included leaders ridiculing employees in public, and demeaning employees personally or criticizing their work performance. Leaders who lacked integrity took credit for other’s work, blamed others for their mistakes, and were dishonest and hypocritical. Threats to security, *laissez-faire* leadership styles, abusive behaviors, promotion of inequality, divisiveness and socially excluding followers comprised the remainder of the toxic factor references. Key themes that emerged in these factors were threatening employees and forcing them to endure hardships (threats to security), ignoring employee concerns (*laissez-faire*), yelling and displaying anger (abusive), exhibiting favoritism or making comments regarding one’s religion (inequality), pitting one employee against another (divisive), and failing to acknowledge the employee or include the employee in organizational activities (social exclusion).

These findings enabled the researcher to develop items that tapped into these constructs for incorporation in the LBA that was administered in the quantitative study. The goals of the LBA were to determine the level of agreement of the harmfulness of each behavioral dimension identified (i.e., toxic intensity) in the qualitative analysis and the percentage of respondents endorsing a particular behavior as destructive or harmful (see Appendix).

![Figure 1. Employees’ direct and vicarious experiences with toxicity by factor](image-url)
Methods

Quantitative analysis

Graduate and undergraduate students with work experience enrolled in psychology and business classes at two southern California universities were recruited to complete the online LBA. The LBA, evaluated an individual’s perceptions of the helpfulness or harmfulness of 51 leader behaviors exhibited in an organizational context. Behavioral examples of each of the eight dimensions of bad leadership listed in Table 2 were considered for inclusion into the LBA. The goal of the LBA was to include at least two behavioral or rhetorical examples of each dimension. Although several dimensions did not have equal representation in the qualitative comments, adequate coverage of each dimension was desired so items were written to provide sufficient representation. The decision to include a specific behavior was based on if that behavior was commonly referenced in the qualitative study (e.g., public ridicule, taking credit for someone else’s ideas). Thus, the breakdown of items per dimension was as follows: attacks to self-esteem (six items), leaders’ lack of integrity (nine items), abusiveness (six items), social exclusion (two items), divisiveness (three items), promoting inequity (four items), threats to security (three item), and laissez-faire (four items).

The Likert-type scale was associated with each of the 51 behaviors and ranged from 1 = ‘extremely helpful’ to 7 = ‘extremely harmful’. A rating of 4 on the scale indicated the participant perceived the behavior to be neutral (i.e., neither helpful nor harmful). The percentage of participants endorsing the behavior as either extremely harmful (indicated by a score of 7) or very harmful (indicated by a score of 6) was also calculated. Of the 51 items, 37 described harmful leader behaviors as suggested in the destructive and toxic leadership literature and as determined by the results of the participants’ experiences with leader toxicity. Eleven items that typified good, helpful leadership were included to discourage careless response patterns (i.e., rating down one end of the scale), and two items that could be perceived as neutral (e.g., inviting a select few to an important meeting, and asking employees to work late to help a coworker complete a major project).

Participants

Demographics. Convenience sampling was used to obtain participants. The sample consisted of 269 valid cases. Of the 269 cases, 162 participants were graduate students attending a private university in southern California and 107 participants were students attending a public university in the same geographic area. There were 63 male (23%) and 188 female (70%) participants. Eighteen individuals did not indicate gender (7%). The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 74 years. Length of employment ranged from less than one month to 47 years. Forty-eight percent of the participants (n = 128) were employed full-time (32 hours or more per week) and 40% (n = 108) indicated they were employed part-time (less than 32 hours per week). Thirty-three respondents (12%) failed to indicate their length of employment. Participants’ present work positions included professional (24%), part-time non-management (19%), full- or part-time student status (18%), full-time non-management (9%), middle management (7%), entry-level manager or supervisor (8%), and top-level executives (3%). Fourteen (5%) participants indicated they were not currently employed but had work experience.
Results of quantitative analysis

Table 3 shows the means and percent endorsement of the leader behaviors that were endorsed as very to extremely harmful. The percentage of endorsement was derived from the valid percent of participants who rated behaviors as very (6) or extremely harmful (7).

Using the typology in Table 2 to categorize the items, toxic characteristics and behaviors rated as most harmful included attacks to self-esteem (i.e., public ridicule and mocking). These destructive behaviors were endorsed by over 96% of the respondents as ‘very’ to ‘extremely’ harmful (mean = 6.81). A leader’s lack of integrity (i.e., blaming others for own mistakes, taking credit for an employee’s work, asking employees to falsify figures) was also endorsed as very harmful (means ranging from 6.60 to 6.69) by at least 94% of the participants. Abusiveness (e.g., throwing tantrums and yelling) was endorsed as very to extremely toxic by 89% of the respondents. Divisiveness and social exclusion also emerged as toxic factors. Behaviors that were perceived to be divisive included pitting employees against each other and telling someone that he or she is not a team player. Social exclusion was identified as behaviors whereby the leader ignores an employee but acknowledges others. Behaviors associated with laissez-faire styles were also indicative of harmful leadership. These behaviors included ignoring employee comments and failing to respond to employees’ concerns.

Discussion

The primary goals of this study were to extend research on harmful leadership by identifying empirically those leader behaviors that followers perceive to be toxic, determining dimensions of leader toxicity and prevalence of followers’ experiences with destructive leaders, and developing a typology of harmful leader behaviors for use in future research. These analyses revealed eight dimensions of leader toxicity that involved the leader breaking down followers’ self-esteem, threatening employee’s occupational and/or personal security, promoting a culture of inequity, intimidating employees physically and mentally, and being dishonest. Leaders were also considered toxic when they fostered a divisive culture or when they failed to listen or act on employee concerns. In short, the behaviors identified in theories of harmful leadership were supported; employees had experienced these behaviors directly, or had witnessed their leaders exhibiting these behaviors toward their coworkers.

Another important contribution of this study to the literature on bad leadership is the finding that observers in these two studies generally agreed about what constituted toxicity. These findings are important because they begin to balance the positive paradigm of leadership by acknowledging the existence of bad leadership and destructive behaviors. Further, employees’ reports of their actual experiences with destructive leaders provide us with an in-depth representation of the prevalence (98% had witnessed leaders exhibiting destructive behaviors) and manifestation of leader toxicity in organizations.

In conclusion, this study provides empirical evidence for several of Lipman-Blumen’s (2005) assertions regarding the multi-dimensional framework of toxic leadership. Although Lipman-Blumen asserts that one person’s toxic leader may be another individual’s hero, there was general agreement in this sample as to what constitutes toxicity based on the results of the Leader Behavior Assessment and participants’ direct and vicarious accountings of toxic leadership.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Percent endorsing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Publicly ridiculing an employee's work</td>
<td>6.81</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td>98.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hanging a 'wall of shame' board to post employee blunders</td>
<td>6.80</td>
<td>.48</td>
<td>96.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lying to employees to get his or her way</td>
<td>6.72</td>
<td>.57</td>
<td>94.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blaming others for the leader's mistakes</td>
<td>6.70</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>96.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking credit for an employee's work</td>
<td>6.69</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>94.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asking employee to falsify productivity figures to meet a goal</td>
<td>6.67</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>93.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mocking employees as a display of humor</td>
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<td>.69</td>
<td>90.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Throwing a tantrum when goals are not met</td>
<td>6.56</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>89.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promising you a promotion if you do something that involves bending a company policy</td>
<td>6.55</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>88.2</td>
</tr>
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<td>Demoting an employee without giving good reason for the decision</td>
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<td>.73</td>
<td>88.0</td>
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<td>Failing to respond to concerns of employees</td>
<td>6.52</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>90.3</td>
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<td>89.1</td>
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<td>Lying about the organization's performance</td>
<td>6.51</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td>88.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Telling an employee that he or she is not a team player</td>
<td>6.36</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td>83.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Creating contests between two employees where winning involves downplaying the work of others</td>
<td>6.36</td>
<td>.89</td>
<td>82.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ignoring employees' comments</td>
<td>6.32</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>82.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Greeting all of your coworkers but ignoring you</td>
<td>6.25</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td>79.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Threatening to terminate a coworker, even if the statement is made in a joking manner</td>
<td>6.16</td>
<td>1.00</td>
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<td>Making false statements about competitors</td>
<td>6.12</td>
<td>.89</td>
<td>75.5</td>
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<td>Yelling when a deadline is missed</td>
<td>6.11</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>75.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Making an employee feel as though his or her job is in jeopardy</td>
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<td>Raising voice when his/her point does not appear to be accepted by employees</td>
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<td>1.04</td>
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<td>Asking one of your coworkers, 'Is this the best you can do?'</td>
<td>5.86</td>
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<td>Threatening to deny an employee's vacation request if a deadline is missed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Saying to an employee, 'You just don't understand the problem'</td>
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<td>1.08</td>
<td>59.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coercing employees to accept his or her ideas</td>
<td>5.65</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bending the rules to meet productivity goals</td>
<td>5.62</td>
<td>1.28</td>
<td>58.0</td>
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<td>Inviting specific employees to social events and excluding others</td>
<td>5.54</td>
<td>1.34</td>
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<tr>
<td>Acknowledging others’ contributions to a project but not yours</td>
<td>5.53</td>
<td>1.52</td>
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<tr>
<td>Failing to disclose the reasons behind organizational decisions</td>
<td>5.43</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>45.0</td>
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<td>Slamming a fist on the table to emphasize a point</td>
<td>5.31</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>45.0</td>
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<td>Making employees work until the job is done, even if it means they must work all night</td>
<td>5.14</td>
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<td>Not sticking to the plan of action</td>
<td>5.11</td>
<td>1.07</td>
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<td>Encouraging good performers to put pressure on poor performers</td>
<td>5.09</td>
<td>1.72</td>
<td>47.9</td>
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<td>Giving resources to the departments whose functions make the leader look good</td>
<td>4.93</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>38.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Continuing to do things the old way</td>
<td>4.85</td>
<td>.98</td>
<td>26.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reprimanding employees when they make mistakes</td>
<td>4.23</td>
<td>1.56</td>
<td>24.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inviting a select few to an important meeting</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>19.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Items are listed in descending order of means.
Strengths, limitations, and areas for future research

An important strength of this study is its contribution to our understanding of toxic leadership. Extending the behavioral and rhetorical descriptors of toxic leadership through employees’ actual experiences with leader toxicity enables further research in the areas of the manifestation of toxic leader behavior and levels of toxic intensity. Further, by identifying common behaviors associated with destructive leadership through the eyes of the victims and witnesses, researchers can determine antecedents and consequences of these destructive characteristics and behaviors at the individual level.

Future research should also identify and evaluate empirically the organizational conditions (e.g., the toxic triangle) that may enable the emergence of leader toxicity (Padilla et al., 2007) and the consequences of these destructive behaviors at the individual and organizational levels. Additionally, asking respondents to describe the effects (socio-emotional, psychological, and physical) of these toxic behaviors would add an important piece to the toxic leadership ‘puzzle’.

The development of a typology of toxic behavior and rhetoric will enable researchers to develop additional measures of leader destructiveness; there are only a few toxic behavior measures to date (Ashforth, 1994; Pelletier, 2009; Tepper, 2000). Consequently, the behavioral constructs identified in these studies provide a good starting point for scale development.

This study, however, is not without limitations. One limitation was that the samples were not randomly selected. Although the samples were diverse in terms of participants’ age, gender, race/ethnicity, work and supervisory experience, and job position, the results of this study may or may not generalize well to any specific organization. It is difficult to evaluate the culture of the respondents’ organizations or the nature of their industries based on the survey methods utilized.

Implications

This study has implications not only for organizations and their leaders, but the followers as well. The most obvious implication is that because harmful leadership is related to decreased employee performance, commitment, and job satisfaction (Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Mitchell and Ambrose, 2007; Tepper, 2000), strong efforts should be made to reduce the likelihood of the occurrence of these destructive behaviors. Organizational resources should be dedicated to adequately train and monitor the performance of leaders to ensure that managers and supervisors engage in appropriate, healthy management behaviors. Executive coaches who work with leaders should evaluate the leader’s interactions with subordinates (including leader rhetoric) to ensure procedural and distributive justice applies in all decision-making, and that employees are treated with respect. These coaches might also benefit by educating the leader about the nature of harmful behaviors and training leaders to identify when they exhibit these potentially toxic behaviors so they might be aware of when they are approaching the toxic cliff.

At the follower level, organizations should ensure safe outlets exist for ‘outing’ leaders who engage in destructive behaviors and rhetoric. A second strategy might include establishing an ethics ombudsperson who, in addition to investigating organizational corruption, could also investigate allegations of leader toxicity.

In conclusion, identifying and explicating behaviors that employees feel are detrimental to their personal and occupational well-being provide important behavioral dimensions for
further research in the areas of toxic organizational cultures and destructive leadership. It is the author’s hope that the findings of this exploratory study will be useful for researchers who are interested in developing toxic leadership written narratives, creating video vignettes for use in a lab setting, or supplementing existing behavioral typologies of harmful leader behaviors. Further, through an understanding of the types of leader behaviors constituents perceive are harmful to their occupational well-being, practitioners can begin devising strategies to prevent toxicity from emerging in the workplace.

References


Kathie L. Pelletier is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Management at California State University, San Bernardino. She graduated from Claremont Graduate University with a PhD in Psychology, with a concentration in organizational behavior. She has held leadership positions in public and private sectors for over 28 years. Her research interests include organizational corruption, business ethics, and ethical and toxic leadership. Her articles on ethics program effectiveness and organizational corruption have been published in the *Journal of Business Ethics* and the *Journal of Leadership, Accountability and Ethics*. She has also written several book chapters on ethical leadership and government corruption.

**Appendix**

**Leader behavior assessment scale items**

1. Inviting a select few to an important meeting.
2. Publicly ridiculing an employee’s work.
3. Listening actively to concerns.
4. Mocking employees as a display of humor.
5. Yelling when a deadline is missed.
6. Asking employees to work late to help a coworker complete a major project.
7. Posting an employee’s project in recognition of a job well done.
8. Threatening to terminate a coworker, even if the statement is made in a joking manner.
9. Asking one of your coworkers, “Is this the best you can do?”
10. Asking employees for ideas on how to resolve an organizational problem.
11. Taking credit for an employee’s work.
12. Inviting specific employees to social events (e.g., golfing, company parties) and excluding others.
13. Blaming others for the leader’s mistakes.
Ignoring employees’ comments.
(15) Having an open-door policy.
(16) Slamming a fist on the table to emphasize a point.
(17) Making an employee feel as though his or her job is in jeopardy.
(18) Using inspirational appeals to get employees to comply with a new policy.
(19) Lying about the organization’s performance at a company meeting.
(20) Bending the rules to achieve productivity goals.
(21) Highlighting a work group’s achievements in the company newsletter.
(22) Lying to employees to get his or her way.
(23) Continuing to do things the old way.
(24) Making false statements about the competitor.
(25) Asking an employee how he or she can help to resolve an issue.
(26) Making employees work until the job is done, even if it means they must work all night.
(27) Greeting all of your coworkers in the morning but ignoring you.
(28) Reprimanding employees when they make a mistake.
(29) Asking an employee to falsify productivity figures to meet a goal.
(30) Promising you a promotion if you do something that involves bending a company policy.
(31) Throwing a tantrum when goals are not met.
(32) Providing resources to ensure a workgroup has all the tools it needs to finish an assignment.
(33) Coercing employees to accept his or her ideas.
(34) Failing to disclose the reasons behind organizational decisions.
(35) Telling an employee in public that he or she is not a team player.
(36) Working quickly to correct problems.
(37) Acknowledging other coworkers’ contributions to a project but not yours.
(38) Raising voice when his/her point does not appear to be accepted by employees.
(39) Approving training requests for employees who need to improve their skills.
(40) Threatening to deny an employee’s vacation request if a deadline is missed.
(41) Failing to respond to concerns of employees.
(42) Not sticking to the plan of action.
(43) Treating every employee the same.
(44) Demoting an employee without giving a good reason for the decision.
(45) Saying to an employee ‘you just don’t understand the problem’.
(46) Seeking the advice of a select few to brainstorm ideas for a new project.
(47) Giving resources to departments whose functions make the leader look good.
(48) Creating contests between two employees where winning involves marginalizing the work of the other.
(49) Encouraging good performers to put pressure on poor performers.
(50) Hanging a ‘wall of shame’ bulletin board to post employee blunders as a display of humor.
(51) Telling employees to work and not think.