Dysfunctional Leadership

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Abstract

Most employees have the expectation of being treated fairly and justly in the workplace. For the most part, research shows this is the case in most organizations. However, there are instances where organizations or departments within organizations experience poor leadership that can lead to dysfunction in a work environment. Researchers have discovered a leader’s self-esteem can be directly related to their leadership ability. A leader’s moral compass and ability to adhere to a code of ethics can also play into the perception of whether or not they are good leaders or managers. In some cases, managers and leaders may have plenty of confidence, self-esteem and moral fortitude but simply lack the knowledge of the job of which they are tasked. Charisma is another strong characteristic of an effective leader. Occasionally, charisma can be confused with narcissism or the distorted view of self. While businesses and other organizations can be prone to bad, or toxic leadership, those leaders who manifest destructive leadership styles can be problematic for armed forces.

Dysfunctional Leadership

Most employees have the expectation of being treated fairly and justly in the workplace. For the most part, research shows this is the case in most organizations. However, there are instances where organizations or departments within organizations experience poor leadership that can lead to dysfunction in a work environment. Researchers have shown various patterns and rationales for this “toxic” leadership in the workplace. Whether it is because of incompetence, egotism or an autocratic sense of leadership, poor leadership can root its ugly head in a wide range of organizations from business to the military. In most instances, those cases of bad leadership can manifest into situations with serious consequences.

The biggest question researchers ask is: What makes a bad leader? This paper will attempt to briefly find some answers to those questions by looking at self-esteem, ethics and situations where bad leadership can be found.

Self-esteem

Researchers have discovered a leader’s self-esteem can be directly related to their leadership ability. Studies indicate those with high self-esteem have a more positive view of themselves to the point where their belief it they are superior to those under them (Schoel, Bluemke, Mueller, & Stahlberg, 2011, p. 523). Conversely, those who hold low self-esteem are more prone to have less self-confidence, especially after the failure of themselves of group they oversee (Schoel et al., 2011, p. 523). With regards to leadership, those with lower self-esteem are prone to place decision-making on the shoulders of others, rather then themselves, making them a submissive leader (Schoel et al., 2011, p. 523). It is shown that leaders have to not only possess expertise in their field but have to be perceived as a reliable source of information and advice (Yukl, 1989, p. 22). Good leaders with high self-esteem can be strong enough to evoke employee’s compliance without question (Yukl, 1989, p. 22). Those leaders with perceived or actual low self-esteem can struggle with coping with demands or overcoming constraints, which dealing with both can show the effectiveness of an individual as a leader (Yukl, 1989, p. 10).

Ethics and Morals

A leader’s moral compass and ability to adhere to a code of ethics can also play into the perception of whether or not they are good leaders or managers. The effectiveness of a leader can often be derived from the contribution to the quality of processes (Yukl, 1989, p. 6). Research shows those who manipulate others for their own benefit or leaders who fail to see the inherent connection between their actions and outcomes have a tendency to make unethical decisions in the workplace (Kish-Gephart, Harrison, & Klebe Trevino, 2010, p. 18).

The ethics and morals of leaders can have a direct correlation to the behavior of employees. For example, employee behavior should be influenced by guidance provided by their workplace. The ethical culture of a work environment includes organizational elements such as executive leadership (Kish-Gephart et al., 2010, p. 7). If leadership keeps its focus strictly on the bottom line of the organization, with little to no attention paid to ethical concerns, the pattern of unethical behavior and conduct is more likely (Kish-Gephart et al., 2010, p. 7). Leaders have a responsibility to communicate the difference between right and wrong within their organization and hold employees accountable when wrong decisions are made. Weak or non-leadership can lead to employees making decisions based more on self-interest and less on organizational ethics (Kish-Gephart et al., 2010, p. 6). Leaders who fail to utilize analysis when making decisions and rely more on emotion can project the self-serving interest that leads to unethical decision-making (Yukl, 1989, p. 59).

Incompetence

In some cases, managers and leaders may have plenty of confidence, self-esteem and moral fortitude but simply lack the knowledge of the job of which they are tasked. This perceived incompetence will lead to poor employee engagement, job satisfaction and the moral of the team (Leary et al., 2013, p. 113). Expertise can prove to be a strong source of power within an organization. While a leader can fake expertise, over a period of time that experience will be put to the test and employees’ perception of the leader’s expertise will become more accurate (Yukl, 1989, p. 22). Those leaders competent in their profession will have the ability to make good decisions, solve problems and complete challenging tasks (Yukl, 1989, p. 23). However, those leaders who lack the necessary skills to lead a team will be unable to perform those tasks and that inability can lead to counterproductive behavior such as yelling, acts of workplace violence and frequently missed due dates (Leary et al., 2013, p. 114).

The combination of dysfunction due to incompetence and counterproductive behavior can lead to degradation of job performance or hold back the ability of the team as a whole, thus leading to a lack of job satisfaction or a reduction of employee engagement (Leary et al., 2013, p. 116).

Lack of Charisma – Dark Leadership

Charisma is another strong characteristic of an effective leader. Employees are more likely to follow a charismatic leader as well as have an emotional attraction to a leader than one who lacks magnetism and enthusiasm (Yukl, 1989, p. 25). Occasionally, charisma can be confused with narcissism or the distorted view of self. This narcissism, while having the possibility of drawing individuals to leadership roles, can lead to disastrous results (Takala, 2010, p. 60). This characteristic can cause the leader to lack a tolerance for criticism, the ability to compromise and can fall victim of their tendencies that are reinforced by their positions (Takala, 2010, p. 60). While a charismatic leader is trusted to lead their respective team to success and have the ability to create a vision that motivates staff (Yukl, 1989, p. 25), the leader who portrays more narcissism is more rigid, callous, corrupt and insular. The narcissist can also be evil — or one who does psychological harm to others (Takala, 2010, p. 60). It is this narcissistic form of leadership which causes fatal damage to trust and commitment within organizations and leaders who betray the trust of their followers may never be able to recover that important factor of effective leadership (Takala, 2010, p. 62).

Toxic Leadership

While businesses and other organizations can be prone to bad leadership, those leaders who manifest destructive leadership styles can be problematic for the military (Reed & Olsen, 2010, p. 58). Toxic leadership has been defined as “an apparent lack of concern for the well-being of subordinates, a personality or interpersonal technique that negatively affects organizational climate, and a conviction by subordinates that the leader is motivated primarily by self-interest” (Reed & Olsen, 2010, p. 58). This toxic leadership can be problematic in business but, for the military it can be even more so in the sense that toxic leaders are unconcerned with how their actions impact direct reports, thus putting lives in danger (Reed & Olsen, 2010, p. 64).

Conclusion

Bad leadership can, sometimes, be masked by the qualities of good leaders. Leaders can mask incompetence, a lack of ethics, low self-esteem or toxicity with other traits. However, those negative qualities, more often than not, rear their heads over the course of time. The key is for organizations to foster good leaders through education and development. These bad leaders can prove dangerous to organizations, including the military, and it is incumbent upon those organizations to root out bad leaders or bad leadership qualities shown by individuals otherwise productivity and morale of those following bad leadership will falter.

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