With the bad comes what change?

The interplay between destructive leadership and organizational change

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Introduction

Although the study of the 'dark side' of leadership has grown exponentially in the past decade, destructive leadership has received significantly less attention than its counterpart, where the focus is on positive traits and behaviors of leaders. As discussed in a recent chapter on the 'forgotten' destructive leaders, the emphasis has been put on "who organizations want to hire, develop, and promote rather than who organizations should avoid" (Schyns, Neves, Wisse & Knoll, forthcoming, p. 1). Nonetheless, a growing number of studies on the 'dark side' of leadership have included themes such as abusive supervision, bossing, destructive, toxic and/or negative leadership, among others (Schyns & Schilling, 2013).

Although context is a central element in the enactment of destructive behaviors (Padilla, Hogan & Kaiser, 2007), we still know fairly little about the relationship between these behaviors and contextual influences, particularly the context of organizational change (Krasikova, Green & LeBreton, 2013). We argue here that organizational change is a context that is very relevant to the understanding of destructive leadership. Examining destructive leadership in the context of change is interesting both from a leadership and a followership

perspective. This is the case because organizational change might relate not only with actual destructive leader behaviors but also with followers' perception of destructive leadership.

In terms of leader behavior, change seems to create a context that is particularly conducive to destructive leader behavior due to a lack of checks and balances and ambiguity that often characterizes change (Neves & Schyns, forthcoming). Cohen (2016) argues that these types of organizational characteristics facilitate negative behavior of leaders high in dark triad personality. Thus, change is likely to bring about destructive leader behavior. At the same time, followers might not be able to fully understand the background of leader behavior during change (Neves & Schyns, forthcoming). That makes it more likely that they attribute destructive leadership where leaders might behave in certain ways out of situational necessity. For example, changes in followers' tasks might come across as arbitrary without a full understanding of the new needs of the organization.

We argue here that in an environment where change is more frequent, unpredictable and inevitable (Shin, Taylor & Seo, 2012) and where success rates of change are low (Choi, 2011; Shin et al., 2012), investigating the role of destructive leadership is an important and worthwhile endeavor. This is because it appears that one of the main tasks for managers today is the leadership of organizational change (By, 2005). Yet we know little about how the change context itself can contribute to manager derailment or follower perceptions of destructive leadership.

The scarce evidence relating to change and destructive leader behavior so far suggests that the context of organizational change, due to its complexity, uncertainty and future orientation is particularly sensitive to destructive behaviors from leaders. For example, a recent study showed that submissive employees, characterized by low core self-evaluations and lack of social support from peers, perceived more abuse from their leaders particularly in recently downsized firms, where their vulnerability is enhanced (Neves, 2014).

Given the conditions that usually surround change processes (i.e., increased uncertainty, heightened stress, high likelihood of failure) and their potential to enact destructive behaviors, it seems imperative that researchers address the 'black box' concerning the role of destructive leadership in the context organizational change. In order to take a closer look into this phenomenon, we organized this special issue on the interplay between destructive leadership and organizational change.

Contributions to the Special Issue

The four studies presented in this special issue contribute to this discussion and address several important issues related to the interplay between destructive leadership and change. The authors use rather diverse lenses to examine destructive leadership such as abusive supervision, aversive leadership, unethical leadership, and leader's inability to engage in paradoxical sensegiving. At the same time, they focus on how leaders' behaviors influence different employee reactions during change, namely, strain, job insecurity, error learning, resistance to change as well as paradoxical sensemaking.

In the first paper, using a time-lagged design with a sample of German employees from the finance sector, Otto, Thomson and Rigotti examine the draining effects of abusive supervision on important resources during a highly stressful change event, that is, organizational restructuring. Using Conservation of Resources theory (COR: Hobfoll, 1989), the authors show how abusive supervision exacerbates the effect of restructuring experiences on employee work-related irritation and job insecurity, thus signaling the importance of preventing abuse in change contexts in order to prevent resource loss spirals.

In the second paper, Bligh, Kohles and Yan provide a cross-cultural test of the leadership determinants of error learning, a critical aspect of change management (Stace & Dunphy, 1994). They compared individuals with work experience from Europe, China and the US, showing that both passive (laissez-faire) and negative (aversive) leadership behaviors

obstruct learning from errors. They found some interesting variations across cultures, therefore indicating that an effective management of organizational change should take into account not only the immediate organizational context, but also the broader national/regional environment in which the organization operates.

In the third paper, Motousi and May provide a theoretical reflection on how unethical leadership contributes to follower resistance to change. They build on Ford and Ford's (2010) argument that resistance to change should not be solely considered problematic but rather seen as a potentially valuable resource. In doing so, the authors make the case for resistance as a positive and constructive reaction to unethical leader behaviors pertaining to the change event. Moreover, they argue that followers interpret such actions in light of their own moral standards and expectations regarding their leader's behavior, which should influence the strength and expression of their resistance.

Finally, in the fourth and closing article, Sparr develops a model of leader sensegiving as a tool to deal with change-related paradoxical tensions. The model is built on the argument that organizational change is paradoxical in its nature (Nasim & Sushil, 2011) and that it is the poor management of those paradoxes that often explains followers' defensive stance and reactions such as anxiety or threat perceptions. The leaders' inability to engage in paradoxical sensegiving can impair followers' own ability to make sense of the paradoxes involved in change processes, and in turn their reactions to the change itself.

Taken together, the papers in this special issue broaden our view by providing important theoretical considerations and evidence to move forward the field of destructive leadership in the context of change with a combination of theory development and empirical evidence. They also help us to think about the future of research into destructive leadership and change. We will outline a few ideas for future research in the following section.

The 'Dark Side' of Future Research

First, we need more evidence on the relationship between destructive leadership and resistance to change. If we assume that resistance can represent a proactive positive attitude (as a strategy to deal with unethical requests or to signal that more transparency and information is needed) as well as a negative attitude (as the expression of stable negative dispositions or as a strategy to deal with loss of power, prestige and status), more work is needed to understand the nuances of such processes. Does destructive leadership influence both positive and negative forms of resistance? What are the individual and organizational dimensions that affect these processes?

Second, given the practical applicability of approaches such as the readiness for change model (Armenakis, Harris & Mossholder, 1993), a deeper understanding of how destructive leadership influences the ability to craft a message of readiness is desirable. The message should include five dimensions (Armenakis & Harris, 2002): discrepancy (is the change really necessary?), appropriateness (is the specific change appropriate?), efficacy (can I/we successfully implement it?), principal support (is top management committed?) and personal valence (what is in it for me?). This raises questions regarding destructive leadership: Does destructive leadership impair the organization's and leader's ability to craft a strong change message? Do destructive behaviors have a similar impact on each component of readiness to change and are the boundary conditions similar? For example, self-efficacy beliefs, that is, the extent to which one believes in one's capabilities to execute and cope with a given course of action (Bandura, 1986) might help overcome the impact of destructive leadership on the efficacy dimension of readiness to change. However, it might do fairly little to overcome the influence of destructive leadership on the principal support dimension, as it involves different cognitions and referents.

Third, more research is needed to understand the cultural variations of perceptions of and reactions to organizational change, as well as of prescribed leadership behaviors, which

might explain why certain leader behaviors are deemed destructive in certain cultures, but not others. Danişman (2010), building on Schein's (1992) idea that organizational cultures are embedded in societal cultures, argued that one should expect significant differences in resistance to change (and leadership behaviors) between cultures. Certain cultural values (e.g., power distance), both at the national/regional and organizational levels, may explain why leaders engage in specific sensemaking processes (I say and you do) and enact certain behaviors (abuse as a tactic to get compliance and improve performance), and therefore influence their effectiveness and how employees react to change efforts. How do cultural values influence how leaders behave during change? What about the way in which employees interpret behavioral cues from destructive leaders and interact with destructive leader behaviors, and how does that shape employees' interpretation of the change message?

These reflections do not aim to be an exhaustive list of potential research streams related to these topics. Rather, we would like to fuel an important discussion that contributes to a better understanding of how and why destructive leaders behave as they do, and what the impact of this behavior is in the context of change.

Conclusion

While organizations work in order to have dedicated and positive leaders that help them in their efforts to adapt, change, and become sustainable, they should beware that destructive leaders and destructive leadership often appear during change. We, consequently, need to better understand how they and their leadership influence change and followers. At the same time, measures need to be taken for followers to better understand the behaviors of their leaders in the context of change. These steps are warranted in order to guarantee that bad apples do not contaminate the barrel and undermine the future of changing organizations.

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Acknowledgements

The editors would also like to acknowledge the important contribution of the scholars that reviewed the manuscripts for this special issue, as their expertise and time was invaluable.