# Distinguishing Destructive/Toxic from Incompetent Leadership

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**Abstract**

We argue that it is both timely and critical to make a clearer distinction between destructive/toxic and incompetent leadership to advance research and better mitigate the problems with leadership quality. To achieve this, we first review and integrate the fragmented literature on the subject and specify what competent and effective leadership is. We then propose an operational definition of toxic leadership that is useful for practitioners to make a better distinction between toxic and incompetent leadership. We finally provide recommendations to avoid and deal with toxic leadership in organizations and discuss research directions.

*Keywords:* Leadership, Toxic Leadership, Incompetent Leadership, Personality, Coaching

The concept of destructive or toxic leadership received considerable attention in the past 2 decades in research and practice (Akinyele & Chen, 2024; Mitchell et al., 2023; Padilla et al., 2007; Schyns & Schilling, 2013), with several examples of leadership derailment in the political, business, religious, academic, and artistic communities discussed widely in press and social media. The labels "destructive and toxic" immediately attract considerable attention in the public domain, especially when leaders with high visibility are accused of malfunctioning, often culminating in an instant trial by media. Under the flag of destructiveness and toxicity, various malpractices are described, ranging from a broad set of incompetent leadership behaviors to inhumane and ethically inappropriate behaviors. We consider the terms destructive and toxic leadership as interchangeable because these refer to highly similar leadership behaviors. In this paper we will use both terms interchangeably, respecting various authors' differential use of the terms.

Although destructive and incompetent leadership may have both dramatic effects on employees and organizations (Hogan et al., 2021; Mackey et al., 2021; Schyns & Schilling, 2013), there is a risk in overusing the term destructive leadership, especially when describing various forms of incompetent leadership. We argue that there is more incompetent than toxic leadership and that both need to be better distinguished to achieve a correct framing of the toxic leadership problem, identify its prevalence, examine how it affects people and organizations, and especially how we can work toward potential solutions.

Given the prominence of this theme in current human resources' professional practice and mass media, we discuss toxic leadership from an academic–practitioner angle, reflecting our different professional backgrounds as authors. Although considerable research progress has been made on the topic the past 2 decades, the use of various labels (Tepper, 2007) and the fragmented literature made it difficult for practitioners to make a clear distinction between toxic and incompetent leadership. A single and up-to-date resource grouping available knowledge is lacking today. In addition, practitioners need an operational definition of toxic leadership that is useful in the workplace so toxic and incompetent leadership can be better distinguished.

We therefore first review and integrate the broad, though fragmented, industrial and organizational psychology literature on the topic, building on previous (Schyns & Schilling, 2013) and the most recent work (Akinyele & Chen, 2024; Mackey et al., 2021). In a second step, we extend this research and literature by differentiating toxic from the

broader group of incompetent leadership behaviors. Relying on Padilla et al.'s (2007) toxic triangle model describing how toxic leadership develops within organizations and building on Hogan and Kaiser's work on leadership effectiveness (2005), we provide a definition of toxic leadership that practitioners (and academics) can use to better differentiate toxic from incompetent leadership. We subsequently discuss what practitioners and organizations can do when dealing with leadership issues, which should help them developing a culture of competent and effective leadership, and finish the paper discussing ideas for future research.

## The Leadership Challenge

The leadership literature and training industry today are massive with a plethora of models and theories on "how to lead." Usually, leadership-training programs promote one leadership style, such as transformational, charismatic, autonomous-motivational, participative, supportive, servant, or coaching leadership, as "the new paradigm that will boost the business and let teams thrive." The hyperbolic language and the vague promises of effectiveness alone should inspire caution. This investment in these single-model leadership approaches sharply contrasts with recent studies showing poor employee engagement, with 17% of employees actively disengaged, 62% not engaged, and only 21% engaged (Gallup, 2025), and alarming reports on work-related mental health in both industrialized and developing countries. The global prevalence of burnout is difficult to establish but estimates go as high as 10% to 17% (Demerouti et al., 2021).

This evolution is due to many factors and is not solely the responsibility of leaders. However, leaders do impact organizational policies on the right to disconnect from work, job quality, limiting overtime, work flexibility, or remote work (Eurofound, 2024). Moreover, 40% of people in the EU are not comfortable discussing mental health issues with their supervisor (Leclerc et al., 2022). This is an indication of the quality of the relationship between leaders and their followers that leaders can influence. Finally, Hogan et al. (Hogan & Hogan, 2001; Kaiser et al., 2008) argued that one in two employees are dissatisfied with their immediate boss.

These alarming numbers show that many of the previous training efforts, advocating one or another "adjective" leadership model or theory, fail and lack their intended impact (Haslam et al., 2024), and many people in leadership positions are struggling with how to be a better or more effective leader. As a consequence, leaders' team members are exposed to various forms of incompetent leadership behaviors. Overall, these leadership deficiencies often refer to a "lack of" a desired leadership skill

set, usually reflected in 360-degree feedback ratings, asking to see more of a particular skill in the leader's behavior. In a smaller number of instances, however, followers report more destructive leadership behaviors, with leaders misusing the position and harming people and/or the organization. Given the detrimental impact of such behaviors, these are not tolerable.

## Recent Toxic Leadership Research

### The Concept of Toxic Leadership

Whicker (1996) was among the first to use the term toxicity to describe this kind of leadership behavior and made a distinction between "toxic" and "transitional" categories to better delineate toxic from other forms of incompetent leadership. Reed (2004) discussed the toxic leader syndrome in the military as characterized by (a) a lack of concern for the well-being of followers, (b) a personality or interpersonal style that negatively influences the organizational climate, and (c) followers' perception that the leader is primarily motivated by self-interest.

A broad amalgam of alternative terms has been used since then to denote toxic behaviors, including the dark side of leadership (Mackey et al., 2021), destructive leadership (Schyns & Schilling, 2013), power and leadership, Machiavellian leadership (Marbut et al., 2025), psychopathy (Babiak & Hare, 2007), leader corruption, unethical leadership, dysfunctional leadership, abusive supervision (Breevaart & Schyns, 2025), dark triad traits (Paulhus & Williams, 2002), or leadership derailment (for an excellent overview of [more] labels: see Mackey et al., 2021, Table 1, p. 707-708).

The first critical attempt to operationalize and assess various aspects of toxic leadership has been conducted by Schmidt (2008). Schmidt (2008, cited in Akinyele & Chen, 2024, p. 4) described toxic leaders as "leaders who show intense emotions in an unpredictable manner, lack emotional intelligence, are insensitive and self-interested, using negative managerial tactics to influence followers." Reviewing the literature at that time, he concluded: "Little differentiation was made between destructive leaders that were toxic, bad leaders that were not toxic but lacked managerial skills, good leaders that were evil people, and leaders with mental health problems" (2008, p. 3), portraying the complexity to define toxic leadership. Schmidt started a careful analysis of the literature and organized focus groups to collect critical incidents categorized as toxic leadership behaviors and built a measure of toxic leadership including five scales, that is Abusive Supervision (sample item = "ridicules subordinates"), Authoritarian Leadership ("controls how subordinates complete their tasks"), Narcissism ("has a sense of personal

entitlement"), Self-Promotion ("drastically changes his/her demeanor when his/her supervisor is present"), and Unpredictability ("has explosive outbursts").

**Toxic Leadership Contextualized**

Padilla et al. (2007) made a significant step forward by better defining destructive leadership and introducing a systems perspective on destructive leadership, proposing the toxic triangle, that makes destructive leadership possible. Destructive leadership is (a) "seldom absolutely or entirely destructive" (Padilla et al., p. 179). Most of the time, leadership results in good and bad results, and sometimes bad behavior by the leader is (temporarily) ignored because good results are delivered. In terms of interpersonal behavior, they describe destructive leadership as about (b) "dominance, coercion and manipulation rather than influence, persuasion and commitment." A third feature is that destructive leadership (c) has a selfish orientation. It focuses on goals of the leader instead of those of the organization or followers. Destructive leadership outcomes further (d) detract from and harm the organizations' objectives but also negatively impact the well-being and psychological safety of followers. Finally, destructive leadership and its outcomes must be understood (e) in the broader context of the organization and its vulnerable followers.

The toxic triangle, distinguishing among destructive leaders, followers, and the organization, contextualizes destructive leadership and helps to understand how toxic leadership becomes possible but also continues to occur. The first element is the destructive leader, characterized as charismatic, narcissistic, and unethically using power for personal gain and promotion. Padilla et al. (2007) describe hate and hateful themes as central elements in the ideology of destructive leaders, legitimizing the use of various forms of aggression and threats against others. Second, also followers have a critical role in the leadership process. At first, it may sound strange that not all followers resist toxic leadership, with some even benefiting from destructive leadership behaviors and hence supporting or even copying them. Finally, the third element in the toxic triangle is the context in which leaders and followers interact. Padilla et al. (2007) distinguish four critical aspects of environments in which destructive leadership may breed. First, environments characterized by instability provide the destructive leader opportunities for radical and forceful interventions. Instable environments trigger anxiety in followers, enabling excessively forceful leadership. Second, when people perceive threat, they are more willing to accept to follow the leader. Therefore, destructive leaders often identify internal or external (perceived) threats that have to be fought. The third element is

culture. In high power distance cultures and organizations (Hofstede, 2001), followers experience a larger psychological distance with their leaders, making them more accepting of toxic behaviors. Fourth and finally, organizations differ in terms of their performance evaluation and feedback systems. If governance systems have no consequences when misbehavior is signaled, destructive leaders have free space.

### Antecedents and Consequences

Schyns and Schilling (2013) meta-analytically summarized the relationships between destructive leadership and various leader, job, organization, and individual follower-related concepts. In line with expectations, destructive leadership was negatively related to a series of positive outcomes, including attitudes toward the leader, job satisfaction, commitment, justice, well-being, and individual performance. It was positively related to undesired concepts such as counterproductive work behavior, stress, turnover, and follower resistance. Mackey et al. (2021) updated and expanded their findings, meta-analytically reviewing all work conducted before January 2020, summarizing 418 individual studies including N = 123,511 participants. They also looked at a broader set of associated concepts, including leader demographics and follower personality traits.

Akinyele and Chen (2024) exclusively reviewed studies using the term “toxic leadership” and proposed a model on its antecedents and consequences, though did not cite or draw on the findings reported by Schyns and Schilling (2013) and Mackey et al. (2021) to design or validate their model. This illustrates how the jingle-jangle fallacy using various labels hampers research progress.

### Dark Triad and Tetrad

There is also a substantive and separate literature describing the dark triad (Jonason et al., 2012; Paulhus & Williams, 2002) and dark tetrad (Paulhus et al., 2021), also investigating these traits in employees. The dark triad is a constellation of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy, related to a range of undesirable outcomes in both followers and leaders (Collins, 2025; O'Boyle et al., 2011). The dark tetrad adds the trait of sadism to this pattern. These traits are related to various forms of unethical, inappropriate and deviant behavior toward the organization, colleagues, and customers. These leadership behaviors not only impact organizational outcomes but may also affect team morale, followers, and everyone who must deal with them (Wille et al., 2023).

## Distinguishing Toxic From Incompetent Leadership

The previous review makes clear that toxic leadership is a complex phenomenon that is best understood within the triangle "leader behavior," "susceptible followers," and the "organizational context" (Padilla et al., 2007; Thoroughgood & Padilla, 2013).

**Elements of Toxic Leadership**

The first core element to define toxic leadership is the *behavior of the leader*. Schyns and Schilling (2013) distinguish between destructive leader behavior and destructive leadership. Leaders may demonstrate a broader set of destructive behaviors (e.g. stealing from the company) that are not necessarily directly targeting their followers. They further discuss the difference between actual behavior demonstrated by the leader and the perception thereof by the follower. Destructive leadership should be experienced as abusive by one or more followers. Another critical distinction is whether the leadership behavior toward the follower is intentional or unintentionally destructive. Both may be harmful for the follower, but it is expected that intentional destructive behavior will be experienced as more impactful.

Building on these distinctions, they define destructive leadership as "a process in which over a longer period of time the activities, experiences and/or relationships of an individual or the members of a group are repeatedly influenced by their supervisor in a way that is perceived as hostile and/or obstructive" (Schyns & Schilling, 2013, p. 141). This definition underscores that destructiveness is defined in the influence relationship with the follower, and that it must have a repetitive character, to distinguish it from a single destructive act or a leader having a bad day.

There are many lists of toxic leadership behaviors (Mackey et al., 2021; Pelletier, 2010). In a recent narrative review covering 13 different author teams, Akinyele and Chen (2024) summarized a broad set of toxic behaviors, although they concluded that a clear conceptual definition of toxic leadership was lacking. They list (a) power quest, psychopathy, corruption; (b) unethical power exploitation; (c) disregarding the feelings of others, lack of emotional intelligence, culturally/interpersonally insensitivity; (d) instilling fear, contempt, ridiculing people, bullying, misplaced sarcasm; (e) egoistic, selfish values, self-interest, exploiting for one's own benefit; (f) influencing others to believe that these behaviors are normal or accepted; (g) deceptiveness; (h) psychologically and legalistically corrupt; (i) extreme emotions in unpredictable patterns; and (j) undermining and discouraging others to reach organizational objectives. These behaviors are often intentionally manifested to frighten, intimidate, and harm others, but may also be shown unintentionally (Schyns & Schilling, 2013). In the latter case, these

behaviors have an egosyntonic character, like personality pathology features (Lamkin et al., 2018; Sharpe et al., 2023), where the individual is not or only partially aware of the behavior and its devastating impact on others.

The second element in the triangle is the *interpersonal context*, that is, all colleagues, peers, followers, and everyone in the organization who interacts with the toxic leader. In Padilla et al.'s (2007) toxic triangle model they are called the susceptible followers. In several cases, there is clear consensus that behavior or actions cannot be tolerated, but recipients may perceive toxicity and experience its impact differently (Lipman-Blumen, 2005). What is tolerable for one individual is perceived as toxic by someone else. Perception and the processing of its affective impact are thus also critical elements to consider. In addition, toxic leaders may act and behave selectively, choosing specific people to intimidate or bully. These two phenomena explain why some followers submit a complaint accusing someone of toxic acts, whereas others may do the opposite and defend the leader.

As a victim of toxic behavior, you can (a) undergo, comply, or tolerate the behavior; (b) leave the organization; or (c) accept, join-in, or even copy the behavior; showing a trickling down effect (Mitchell et al., 2023). Parallel to the bullying literature within school contexts (Callaghan et al., 2019), it is not uncommon that toxic leaders have "hang-arounds" that imitate the toxic behavior. To better understand the positions of followers in the susceptible circle, Thoroughgood et al. (2012) proposed a taxonomy of vulnerable followers associated with destructive leadership. They distinguish three conformer types (lost souls, authoritarians and bystanders) and two colluder types (acolytes and opportunists). Lost souls identify with the destructive leader because they believe that compliance will gain acceptance and approval by the leader. Authoritarian conformers feel obliged to obey because they have authoritarian belief systems. The role legitimacy of the leader triggers obedience of the follower. Bystanders, on the other hand, are passive, and they are primarily driven by fear. They want to be seen as good followers and will not publicly criticize or go against destructive leaders, even when they may have their private negative opinions. A first colluder type are the opportunists, who see compliance in terms of contingent rewards. They basically resemble the dark traits of their destructive leaders though they are in the follower position. The second colluder type, the acolytes, share congruent values and goals with the destructive leaders, so they demonstrate an internalized motivation to follow and assist the destructive leader.

Finally, the third component is the *organizational context* in which the toxic

leadership behavior is manifested. People make the place, to some extent, so toxic leadership may also contaminate the organizational culture, creating a toxic work environment. In such environments, toxic behaviors become "the norm," and are reflected in speech, acts, and habits, such as ridiculing and reprimanding people in meetings or intimidating peers and followers. Gradually and increasingly, these behaviors become part of the culture. In healthy environments toxic leadership is not tolerated, and early signs are consistently acted upon.

Sometimes organizations may, consciously or unconsciously, trigger latent toxic tendencies of people, such as the dark triad traits narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy (O'Boyle et al., 2011; Paulhus & Williams, 2002), expressed in toxic leader behavior. They may even indirectly reward and sustain toxic behavior for some time, because temporary "results are good and objectives met," and there are "no main complaints so far" or "our institutional well-being hotspot did not receive a formal complaint." In the long run, however, toxic behavior almost always leads to losses, in terms of productivity, sick leave, turnover, reputation damage, or a poisoned organizational culture (Akinyele & Chen, 2024; Mackey et al., 2021; Schyns & Schilling, 2007), so initial positive effects are short lived.

Breevaart et al. (2022) described the barriers model of abusive supervision, describing four layers of obstacles that explain why abusive leadership is sustained in organizations and followers stay with such leader. This onion type of model positions the follower at its heart with additional layers of barriers on top. From external to internal, the first layer is formed by the broader social and cultural context in which the organization is embedded, referring to complex and ambiguous laws, for example, but also cultural factors such as increased power distance (Hofstede, 2001). The second layer is the organizational context, where policies regarding transgressions and abusive leadership are absent, not functioning properly, or unclear for employees. Barriers in the third layer are due to characteristics of the abusive leader, who may have the power to isolate, cut resources, or take revenge on whistleblowers or followers making a complaint. Moreover, specific personality traits of the abusive leader may aggravate but also "compensate" the abusive behavior (Breevaart & Schyns, 2025). The fourth and final layer are characteristics at the level of the abused follower, such as implicit personality theories or personality traits (Mackey et al., 2021).

**Competent and Effective Leadership**

To distinguish between toxic and incompetent forms of leadership, it is also

necessary to describe what competent and effective leadership is. To better understand the quality of leadership, Hogan et al. (1994) made a critical distinction between leadership emergence and leadership effectiveness. Most research is on leadership emergence, studying characteristics of those in charge, for example, studying personality traits of leaders (Judge et al., 1999; Wille et al., 2018) or describing pathways and strategies to make it into leadership positions (Vergauwe et al., 2021). They define leadership effectiveness, however, as the capacity to build and manage teams that successfully and efficiently work together toward the attainment of common goals (Hogan et al., 1994; Hogan & Kaiser, 2005).

In the past 2 decades, there was also a strong emphasis on learning and development of employees due to fast technological, socio-economical and geopolitical changes so people remain sustainably employable (De Fruyt et al., 2015). This focus on learning and development brought additional challenges for leadership, where the effective leader is now also considered as a catalyst and coach for the development of collaborators. Effective leadership should thus also be defined at the level of the functioning of the individual followers. As individuals, team members must develop and grow, whereas as a team, they need to perform together to deliver a service or produce goods.

To be effective as a leader and achieve these two goals, contemporary leaders need to bring two critical psychological conditions in the workplace, that is (a) creating a safe psychological environment and (b) develop a climate of trust by being trustworthy themselves. Although both may be related to some extent, they refer to distinct psychological skills and may be perceived and experienced differently by followers. In contemporary human resources language, effective leadership could hence be defined as follows, at a minimum (See core column Table 1):

(a) Steer and support the team, so followers work together and function as a team to reach common objectives.

(b) Steer and support the individual: Addressing people as individuals in their uniqueness and motivating them to achieve a collective objective/result, but also toward personal development.

(c) Create a psychologically safe work environment (<> anxiety, fear, …).

(d) Create a climate of trustworthiness: Develop and maintain a climate of trust.

**Differences Between Toxic and Incompetent Leadership**

From the recipient perspective, there is a critical difference between toxic and

incompetent leadership. The recipient of incompetent leadership can (a) tolerate the incompetence; (b) leave the organization, if they have the opportunity to do so; or (c) try to help and improve the leadership. This last option marks a critical difference with toxic leadership, where the follower fears or is (intentionally) downplayed and discredited by the toxic leader who does not acknowledge and will refuse the need for help. There is no intention to change and learn from feedback. The conformer follower types of destructive leadership described by Thoroughgood et al. (2012) do not help the leader because they struggle with their self-esteem and identify with the leader, have strong-leader belief systems, fear the abusive leader, or feel immature to provide genuine feedback. In short, toxic leaders create a *psychologically unsafe work environment*[1] or a culture of workplace anxiety for their followers, which paradoxically also prevents them from becoming better through feedback from followers.

In case of incompetent leadership, however, followers may provide feedback that helps the leader to develop. Feedback will be taken seriously, instead of invalidated or ridiculed, and leader and followers co-develop supported by human resources staff. Healthy leadership is thus a collaborative exercise between leader(s) and followers, contrary to toxic leadership that devaluates input, paralyzes followers, and prevents improvement.

Another critical distinction can be found in the *trustworthiness* of incompetent versus toxic leaders. Trustworthiness is a perception and encompasses three aspects: competence, benevolence, and integrity (Colquitt et al., 2007). Incompetent leaders score low on the competence part, meaning they lack the competencies to deliver effective leadership to their team or organization. This may be expressed in a range of behaviors like clumsiness, slow reactions, indecisiveness, cold behavior, and a lack of technical skills. These leaders often have the right intentions and are benevolent and show integrity. On the other hand, toxic leaders have a low perceived trustworthiness, not because of lack of competence but because of low benevolence and integrity. They might be incompetent, but often they may be talented, toxic leaders who are communicative, charming, and knowledgeable. The mischievousness of their behavior, including high risk taking and manipulation, results in low trustworthiness. If we ask people who they prefer to work with, the incompetent leader will be favored. Although working for an incompetent leader is not pleasant, the possibility to establish trustworthy relationships may compensate for the lack of competence. Followers might even engage in helping and compensating behaviors saving the leader's neck.

## Operational Definition of Toxic and Incompetent Leadership

Based on these considerations, we propose the following definitions: Toxic leadership is manifested when, on a repetitive basis, intentional or unintentional behaviors of the leader are perceived by one or more recipients (followers, peers, customers, etc.) as threatening, intimidating, discrediting, or unethical, with followers experiencing the work environment as unsafe and the leader as untrustworthy so they cannot support the leader in becoming better. These leader behaviors trespass what is presumed to be good leader behavior that is agreed upon in the organization and that followers can expect from their leader.

In contrast, incompetent leaders may show a broader set of inadequate and clumsy behaviors, but these are not perceived as threatening, intimidating, or discrediting the follower. Incompetent leaders may remain to be perceived as trustworthy and show integrity by followers, who are still willing to help the leader in developing. Toxic leadership is thus about: (a) objective/manifested behaviors; (b) perceived as threatening, intimidating and discrediting, creating an unsafe work environment; and (c) being untrustworthy, reflected in poor integrity and unpredictability. At an operational level, toxic leaders have a problem with elements (c) and (d), whereas incompetent leaders have a problem with (a) or (b) (see Table 2). One could say that toxic leadership behaviors are inappropriate, whereas incompetent leadership behaviors are inadequate.

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[1] A reviewer correctly pointed out that the notion "psychological safety" in the I-O literature usually refers to a workplace culture where team members can express themselves freely without fear of negative consequences (see Edmondson & Bransby, 2023). This work has been highly influential in the context of innovation and experimentation in organizations. In the present paper we use the term psychological unsafety to define a culture of anxiety where people feel threatened and insecure by the presence of a toxic leader.

Table 1

*Defining Characteristics of Competent, Incompetent and Destructive/Toxic Leadership*

| Incompetent leadership | Competent leadership at a minimum | Destructive/toxic leadership |
|---|---|---|
| X | (a) Steer/support team | - |
| X | (b) Steer/support individual | - |
| X | (c) Create safe environment | X |
| X | (d) Create climate of trust | X |

Note: '-' Destructive/toxic leaders may also fail (a) and/or (b), but not necessarily.

## Dealing With Toxic and Incompetent Leadership

Distinguishing toxic leadership from leadership incompetence has important implications for both organizational practice and leadership research. Treating these phenomena as interchangeable obscures their distinct antecedents, dynamics, and consequences and leads to poorly targeted interventions. Clear differentiation is therefore essential to prevent both the normalization of harmful behavior and the unjustified stigmatization of leaders who struggle with competence rather than intent.

**Defining desired and undesired leadership**. Organizations should begin with explicit and shared definitions of effective, incompetent, and toxic leadership. Clearly articulated behavioral standards reduce ambiguity, protect leaders from unfounded accusations, and enable followers to raise concerns in a legitimate and structured manner. In the absence of such standards, dissatisfaction with change, performance pressure, or demanding leadership may be misinterpreted as toxicity, whereas genuinely destructive behavior may remain undetected. This ambiguity risks creating a climate in which leaders become reluctant to lead.

At the same time, organizations should avoid unrealistic expectations of leadership. Accepting that leaders are not infallible is a critical element of the leader–follower relationship. When expectations are excessively high, leaders are almost inevitably perceived as failing. Experience with upward feedback suggests that leaders of leaders tend to receive more lenient evaluations than those leading operational teams, likely because leadership complexity is more readily recognized by those in comparable roles. Leaders who are imperfect but well intentioned and who act with integrity are generally granted more tolerance than those who violate trust. Trustworthiness, rather

than flawlessness, appears to be the critical differentiator.

**What leadership model?** A central practical implication concerns the need to focus on leadership versatility or adaptability rather than single-style prescriptions (Kaiser, 2020; Kaiser & Sherman, 2025; Pavlica et al., 2009). Although many leadership theories emphasize leadership emergence and individual leader characteristics, effective leadership is fundamentally relational and situational. Effective leaders are capable of recognizing and responding to individual differences among followers, balancing similarity where cohesion is required and diversity where complementarity enhances adaptability and resilience. This requires sensitivity to differences in abilities, personalities, motivations, and needs (De Fruyt & Wille, in press).

Single-model leadership approaches are therefore insufficient. Teams are characterized by stable individual differences, which demand a flexible repertoire of leadership behaviors rather than adherence to a single preferred style. Leadership behaviors that are effective for one follower may be excessive or insufficient for another. Similarly, what constitutes a challenge for one individual may be experienced as a threat by another. Effective leadership thus requires strong perspective-taking skills and the ability to anticipate person–situation interactions.

Leadership versatility also entails balancing supportive and directive behaviors. Leaders must be both decisive and participative, and must integrate growth-oriented and execution-focused behaviors (Kaiser, 2020; Kaiser & Sherman, 2025). These behavioral demands are inherently tension laden, and effectiveness depends on applying them with appropriate timing and intensity (Vergauwe et al., 2017, 2018). Overreliance on personal strengths can undermine effectiveness when those strengths are applied indiscriminately (Kaplan & Kaiser, 2009). For example, leaders high in agreeableness may excel in enabling behaviors but avoid necessary confrontation, whereas overly forceful leaders may undermine trust and engagement.

**Leader selection and development**. Leader selection plays a pivotal role in prevention. Leadership requires both motivation and capability. Recent research on vocational interests and skills illustrates that skills and interests only overlap to some extent (Soto et al., 2022). Individuals may possess the skills to lead without a genuine interest in people or, conversely, may have strong interpersonal motivation without sufficient leadership competencies. Research indicates that interest in leadership roles is relatively stable, whereas leadership skills are more malleable through training and experience. Promotion decisions based solely on technical expertise or confidence

therefore risk placing individuals in leadership roles for which they lack either the motivation or the capacity.

Leadership emergence is often driven by traits such as extraversion, self-confidence, and ambition, which may facilitate visibility and influence but do not guarantee effectiveness. Evidence suggests that extreme levels of these traits may undermine leadership effectiveness by increasing psychological distance from followers or by skewing attention toward strategic rather than operational concerns. Moreover, poor perspective taking, often associated with low agreeableness, appears to be a recurring feature of incompetent leadership. Selection processes should therefore explicitly assess interpersonal sensitivity, implicit motives, and potential derailers rather than conflating confidence with competence.

Chamorro-Premuzic (2019) describes how we confuse confidence with competence when assessing leadership potential. Extraverted, dominant people who voice their opinions are seen as competent leaders. Their bold presence overshadows potential deficits. This further means that more introverted, though interpersonally sensitive, people have less chances of getting promoted. We must also consider the role that implicit motives play in people aspiring leadership roles. High need for power and achievement might be helpful in exerting influence over others but may also lead to excessive behaviors.

Organizations should also guard against the risks associated with so-called rock star and absent leadership. Leaders who rely excessively on charisma, popularity, power, or pressure often fail to provide sustainable direction and support (Kaplan & Kaiser, 2009). Similarly, leaders who withdraw from their leadership role and avoid influence create confusion and demotivation (Yahaya et al., 2016). Effective leadership requires calibrating presence and influence to the needs of the team and the situation.

**A leadership quality culture**. Organizations must also invest in leadership quality assurance across the leadership lifecycle. Early signals of incompetent or toxic leadership are often detected too late, when damage has already occurred. Regular follow-up on the impact of new leaders, particularly in high-pressure or crisis contexts, is essential. Leaders with high ambition combined with low interpersonal sensitivity warrant closer monitoring during critical transition periods.

Organizations should further differentiate leadership effectiveness from satisfaction with the leader. Although follower satisfaction may reflect relationship quality, it is neither a necessary nor sufficient indicator of effective leadership. Leaders

who avoid difficult decisions, fail to develop their team members, or distribute work inequitably may be perceived as pleasant and easy to work with despite impairing team and organizational performance. Leadership monitoring systems should therefore integrate multiple indicators, including behavioral evidence, trust-based measures, and team outcomes, rather than relying primarily on satisfaction metrics.

Early detection and proportional intervention are critical in addressing leadership problems. Incompetent leadership, typically characterized by skill deficits, limited perspective taking, or insufficient role preparation, should primarily trigger developmental interventions such as feedback, training, mentoring, and supervision. Many incompetent leaders are well intentioned and capable of improvement when expectations are clear and support is provided. Toxic leadership, by contrast, involves persistent, threatening, or trust-eroding behavior and requires a fundamentally different response. In such cases, developmental coaching alone is unlikely to be effective; protective mechanisms for followers, independent investigation, and clear boundary setting by human resources and senior management are essential.

Leadership should further be understood as a shared and relational process. Whereas formal leaders carry responsibility for direction and coordination, followers play an active role in shaping leadership effectiveness by providing feedback, support, and, where appropriate, complementary influence. Followers deserve a good and competent leader, but also the leader deserves a supporting team that contributes to leadership development and to the leadership itself (Wu et al., 2020). Leadership development should therefore be embedded within broader talent management systems and should acknowledge the diversity of employee needs and capabilities.

**When toxic problems are manifested**. Finally, organizations should establish graduated, psychologically safe pathways for raising concerns. Although direct dialogue should be encouraged, power asymmetries mean that it cannot be the sole mechanism. Clear internal escalation routes and access to impartial or external support reduce the likelihood that issues escalate into formal complaints or public accusations. Formal complaints typically signal a failure of earlier dialogue and support mechanisms, and carry significant relational and reputational costs for all involved. Preventive check-ins, clear guidance, and trained responses to early signals are therefore preferable.

A preventive and proactive approach is essential. Just as there is no one-size-fits-all leadership style, there is no single approach to leadership development or governance. Organizations should define their own leadership frameworks, clarify expectations, and

install systems that emphasize learning, accountability, and early correction rather than blame. The key is fostering a culture where reporting is safe and valued, which ultimately strengthens leadership and organizational health (Smith & Fredricks-Lowman, 2020; von Ungern-Sternberg & Becke-Jakob, 2025). Principles derived from just culture approaches (Boskeljon-Horst, et al., 2023; Reason, 1997), such as clear standards, fair accountability, and learning-oriented responses to failure, may provide a useful foundation for managing leadership risks.

When toxic behavior persists despite proportionate intervention, terminating the leadership role may be necessary. In such cases, organizations should critically reflect on why detection and response took so long. Throughout these processes, an evidence-based and balanced approach is required, one that protects victims, ensures fairness to the accused, and avoids premature judgment. Although both incompetent and toxic leadership require resolution, toxic leadership demands greater urgency due to its destructive impact on individuals and organizations.

## Research Directions

For leadership scholars, these findings underscore the importance of conceptually and empirically disentangling toxic leadership from incompetence. Broad labels that conflate harmful intent with capability deficits hinder theoretical progress and practical relevance. Future research should explicitly test boundary conditions that differentiate destructive leadership from ineffective but nonmalicious behavior.

Researchers should first move beyond leader-centric models by incorporating relational, contextual, and systemic factors. Followers, teams, human resource practices, and organizational culture shape both the enactment and interpretation of leadership behavior. Longitudinal and multilevel designs are particularly needed to examine how incompetent leadership may evolve into toxic patterns and how early interventions alter these trajectories.

Measurement practices in research also require refinement. Although follower perceptions are indispensable, reliance on perceptual data alone increases the risk of misclassification driven by dissatisfaction, unmet expectations, or performance management. Integrating behavioral indicators, temporal patterns, and contextual information will improve construct validity and reduce false positives.

Although some progress has been made studying characteristics and antecedents of toxic leaders, how leaders use and/misuse formal and informal power in organizations remains poorly understood. Additional understudied topics are the long-term impact of

toxic leadership on victims and how the behavior of toxic leaders is affected when they are identified as toxic and dismissed but start in a new leadership position in another organization.

Finally, research should differentiate intervention pathways and outcomes. Developmental interventions that are effective for incompetent leaders should not be assumed to generalize to toxic leadership. Comparative studies examining which interventions work for whom, under what conditions, and at what cost would significantly advance both scientific understanding and practical application.

## Conclusion

Distinguishing toxic from incompetent leadership is not merely a semantic exercise. It has profound implications for leadership selection, development, accountability, and sustainability. When organizations conflate incompetence with toxicity, they risk discouraging leadership altogether; when they tolerate toxicity in the name of results, they normalize harm. A differentiated, evidence-based approach enables organizations to be both demanding and humane and allows leadership research to more effectively inform practice.

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