**Learning to Love Your Inner Bad Guy**- How to Use Dark Personality Traits in Early Leadership Education

**Abstract**

This session will discuss leadership inside the framework of the Dark Triad (Machiavellianism, Narcissism, and Psychopathy) as a tool for understanding how these traits impact leadership styles in contemporary management. The application of this session focuses on teaching undergraduate students in management who are unexposed to traditional leadership theory and application. After presenting a theoretical framework, we will assess the group’s dark traits. Using the most prevalent dark trait as a group selection criterion, we will break into groups to solve a managerial problem via a case study. After discussing the impact of trait-driven decision-making, we will discuss teaching implications.

**Keywords**

Leadership, Management, Dark Triad

**Introduction**

The loss of 4.4 million workers in the Great Resignation of 2021 paints a dark picture in the post-pandemic world (Richter, 2021). Moreover, the lack of new human capital leaves existing employees burned-out and often resentful of management and former co-workers (Kapoor et al., 2021; Mejia et al., 2021; Slaughter et al., 2021). Beyond resentment, many employees appear fearful for their vocational future. Some scholarship supports that this fear invokes dark personality traits in response to the perceived stimuli (Coney, 2016; Harper et al., 2020). With the current workforce appearing less agreeable, lacking compassion, displaying low empathy, having low life satisfaction, and experiencing difficulty seeing the good in themselves and others (Kaufman et al., 2019) and a growing literature suggesting dark personality traits may encourage positive workplace outcomes (Grijalva et al., 2015; Higgs, 2009; Paunonen et al., 2006; Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006), managers may be able to harness employee negativity towards organizational benefit.

Arguably, technology companies like Amazon, Apple, and Tesla owe the success to their visionary leaders because they have been primarily driven by their leader's ability to push the envelope of possibilities. However, the driving force often comes from dark personality traits (Ashcroft, 2016; Fetscherin, 2015; Ingerson et al., 2020; Kellner, 2018; Sharma & Grant, 2011; Williams et al., 2018). Leaders must weigh their most sympathetic attributes with their darker impulses to succeed.

This presentation explores what drives leaders to be (un)successful by using active conversations surrounding leaders’ dark traits. Through employing critical discussions on leadership theory related to the Dark Triad's influence on management in tandem with a focused group activity, we challenge the conventional exclusion of using dark traits to teach undergraduate students.

**Theoretical Foundations**

***Psychopathy.*** Contemporary culture paints the image of psychopathy as a dominant/defining personality trait where one interacts with the world in an emotionless/self-serving way, often typified by serial killers (Hannibal Lecter: DeLisi et al., 2010; Dexter Morgan: DePaulo, 2010). However, mental health practitioners do not have a clinical diagnosis matching popular views (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Instead, the psychology literature characterizes psychopathy into two overall constructs (primary and secondary) based on associated traits and behaviors (Ali et al., 2009; Newman et al., 2005). In primary psychopathy, individuals often exhibit callousness, lower emotional responses to stimuli, are manipulative and use their superficial charm to circumvent social situations (Newman et al., 2005). Additionally, people who demonstrate primary psychopathy often use defensive dysfunction by having less fear, exhibiting cunning, and lacking empathy or remorse without being overtly harmful to

themselves, others, or their organizations (Ali et al., 2009; Newman et al., 2005). However, the literature contends that there are multiple adverse effects on the organization, self, and others for these individuals despite their negligent actions (Carre et al., 2018; Neo et al., 2018; Reio & Sanders-Reio, 2006). Overall, primary psychopathy is a part of one's overall personality where people display some degree of antisocial behavior, impulsivity, callousness, and lack of empathy (Frick & White, 2008). Conversely, secondary psychopathy links with impulsivity, highly neurotic/hostile behavior, and direct nefarious acts (Benning et al., 2005). When exploring the general topic of psychopathy, scholars often do not distinguish between primary and secondary (Newman et al., 2005). The vast majority of business literature uses primary psychopathy in evaluating the overall trait in the workplace (Ali et al., 2009; Benning et al., 2005; Newman et al., 2005).

In contemporary leadership, exemplars such as Elizabeth Holmes (Dundes et al., 2019; Mallery, 2017) and Steve Jobs (Isaacson, 2012; Mallery, 2017; Sharma & Grant, 2011) provide insight on how people with psychopathy as a dominant trait lead. In the case of Jobs, scholars depict how he was antisocial and highly neurotic and used cunning in delivering product ideas while lacking empathy (Isaacson, 2012; Sharma & Grant, 2011). While leading Theranos, Elizabeth Holmes indicated she closely followed Jobs's personality-driven leadership style (Mallery, 2017), and thus she was also callus, calculated, and highly goal-focused. Even though the legacy of Jobs resulted in the technology giant Apple, Holmes's reign resulted in fraud and corporate misconduct. Arguably, Holmes intentionally intended harm by her fraudulent actions. We may be observing secondary psychopathy traits in her leadership compared to Jobs's leadership.

***Machiavellianism.*** For this trait, the image of a puppeteer deviously manipulating human puppets from the shadows comes to mind because Machiavellianism consists of manipulating and exploiting others via an amoral/emotionless, callous approach to social interactions ultimately towards serving oneself (Jakobwitz & Egan, 2006). Machiavellians possess superior intelligence at high levels because they adeptly display interpersonal manipulation via high emotional intelligence and influence over other people in social situations (Kowalski et al., 2018). Moreover, Machiavellianism highly correlates with Big Five's agreeableness scale. (Jakobwitz & Egan, 2006) allowing for easy manipulation because people high in agreeableness tend to be more liked and prone to leadership (Kichuk & Wiesner, 1997). In the workplace, the literature supports Machiavellianism associates with counterproductive workplace behaviors such as deceit, coercion, workplace cheating, and abusive supervision (Mitchell et al., 2018; Shu et al., 2011).

Contemporary Machiavellian leadership exemplars include Jeff Bezos (Fetscherin, 2015; Ingerson et al., 2020) and Elon Musk (Landesz, 2018; Maasberg et al., 2020). These iconic leaders are known for their manipulative business practices using charisma to drive personal and organizational goals. Interestingly, these leaders also share some traits (callousness and lack of empathy) found in psychopathy.

Psychopathy and Machiavellianism closely correlate when examined empirically (Carter et al., 2015; Glenn & Sellbom, 2015; Miller et al., 2017; Vize et al., 2018). Both traits carry similar affective qualities (i.e., emotional detachment and non-remorsefulness) and similar behavioral characteristics (i.e., exploitation/manipulation, an inclination towards malicious and antisocial behaviors). Nevertheless, each trait differentiates at specific levels on how/why individuals each manipulate to achieve goals (Hare & Neumann, 2008; Levenson et al., 1995; Rauthmann, 2012; Rauthmann & Will, 2011). Both Machiavellianism and psychopathy carry similar cognitive characteristics via being self-centered and having a negative view of self and others; their desires via self-serving nature and agenetic orientations also commonly align (Hare & Neumann, 2008; Levenson et al., 1995; Neal & Sellbom, 2012; Patrick et al., 2009; Rauthmann, 2012; Rauthmann & Will, 2011). However, they ultimately differ in their abilities to control impulses (Glenn & Sellbom, 2015; Jones & Paulhus, 2011; Rogoza & Cieciuch, 2020).

***Narcissism*** appears in popular culture via fictional exemplars like Miranda Priestly in *The Devil Wears Prada* (Thawait, 2021) and the teenagers known as the 'Plastics' in *Mean Girls* (Karlyn, 2021). Narcissism has a clinical diagnosis associated with its extreme exhibition requiring medication/psychiatric intervention (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Clinical Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) is described as having an augmented sense of self-importance while exhibiting entitlement, exaggerating talents/accomplishments, preoccupation with cognitive perceptions of self-involving acquisition of power, feelings of superiority, monopolization of conversations, extreme arrogance, unwillingness to consider others emotions, and pathological show-up-manship (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Ronningstam, 2011). However, the clinical presentation of NPD is relatively rare (Stinson et al., 2008). In the business literature, narcissism presents much differently than clinical because most of the literature explores non-clinical presentations (Jakobwitz & Egan, 2006; Kaufman et al., 2019; Miller et al., 2017, 2021; O'Boyle et al., 2012; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). The trait of narcissism encompasses self-absorption, entitlement, dominance, grandiosity, and a feeling of overall superiority (Corry et al., 2008). Additionally, narcissism relates to extraversion, openness to experience, and a lack of agreeableness (Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Vernon, 2008).

Given narcissistic leaders often drive organizational change and early adopters of technology often carry the trait of narcissism (Gerstner et al., 2013), narcissism is not always perceived as a negative trait in leadership. Individuals high in narcissism likely carry the characteristics of assertiveness, self-promotion, striving for social attention, and desire for admiration (Hater et al., 2021) and are likely to use these traits to push through perceived obstacles but also self-publicize as being able to do so when their peers struggled.

Many scholars argue Donald Trump stands as the quintessential narcissistic leader of modern times because he exemplifies extroversion, openness to experience, grandiosity, self-promotion, and being unagreeable in his interactions with others (e.g., Ashcroft, 2016; Kellner, 2018; Williams et al., 2018).

**Teaching Implications**

We suggest teaching dark personality traits (e.g., narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy) can enhance students' assimilation of concepts in leadership in multiple ways. Initially, students will learn about aspects of their own personality to inform their own managerial decisions helping them navigate future problems in the workforce. Second, using exemplars associated with each dark personality type, students will identify management styles via personality-driven management models for deeper study. Beyond identification and self-awareness, students will be able to discuss the pros and cons of how dark personality traits affect the organization and its human capital. Furthermore, we argue that if students can identify their managers' personality traits, they will be able to better respond to potential difficulties in actual practice.

We recognize that exploring darker elements of one's personality may appear controversial in the classroom because these traits tend to have negative connotations. However, ignoring or obfuscating their existence limits the tools available for students to adapt to challenges as either managers or being managed in the existing workforce. Therefore, we suggest presenting the dark personality traits (via the Dark Triad) as a novel way to initiate awareness and discussions in leadership.

**Learning Objectives**

At the end of the session, participants will be able to:

* + Describe how the personality traits of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy (Dark Triad) relate to leadership styles in contemporary management.
  + Describe how dark personality traits can be used to inform leadership decisions.
  + Develop possible solutions for challenges associated with contemporary management problems using dark personality types as a framework.
  + Discuss teaching implications related to leadership styles based on dark personality types.

**Session Description (for the MOBTS Presentation and Classroom Exercise)**

**Material, Space, and Other Requirements**

* Classroom space for meeting or virtual (zoom.)
* Presentation software and hardware
* Readings (if the instructor chooses to give before classroom experience)
  + *Who Empathizes with Machiavellian or Narcissistic Leaders?* (Page et al., 2017)
  + *Why bad guys win at work* (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2015).
  + *Know The "Dark Triad" To Prevent Workplace Chao* (Sarkis, 2019)
* Time Requirements
  + 1 hour class period
  + 15 minutes lecture
  + 30-45 minutes workshop with classmates for an in-class activity

**Lecture and Experience**

Initially, we will present a few slides covering the overall problem as outlined in this submission’s introduction to present the topics of dark personality traits (Narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy) in conjunction with exemplars of each personality trait and how those traits impact their management style as though it was being presented to students in a truncated form. After having participants fill out the dirty dozen questionnaire (Appendix A: Jonason & Webster, 2010), we will discuss the group’s overall breakdown and presentation of dark personality traits. Using existing data from a prior class of undergraduate students who also filled out this questionnaire (Appendix B), we will discuss how students tend to identify with these personality traits because of their age and emotional development (Trzesniewski & Donnellan, 2010; Twenge et al., 2008). Considering that the audience for this presentation likely already knows these topics, we will only highlight points vital to teaching the subject or helpful in the discussion after the exercise. The time expectations for this should take no longer than 15 minutes.

We will be accommodating both virtual and in-person; the participants will break into groups for discussion. Each participant will be given a written-out case study with a managerial problem to be resolved from the framework of one of the Dark Triad traits (Appendix C). We expect this to take approximately 30 minutes. We will facilitate a more extensive discussion to report how each group navigated the conflict at the end of the discussions. After allowing for 10 minutes of overall discussion, we will discuss what values/problems arise from using this method to teach management styles to a group of undergraduate students. We will allow for a small amount of time for questions for improvement or other ways the exercise could impact students.

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**Appendix A**

**Dirty Dozen Questionnaire**

1 = Strongly Disagree; 7= Strongly Agree

1. I tend to lack remorse.

2. I tend to be callous or insensitive.

3. I tend to manipulate others to get my way.

4. I tend to want others to admire me.

5. I tend to want others to pay attention to me.

6. 1 tend to seek prestige or status.

7. I tend to expect special favors from others.

9. I have used deceit or lied to get my way.

8. I tend to exploit others towards my own end.

10. I have used flattery to get my way.

11. I tend to be unconcerned with the morality of my actions.

12. I tend to be cynical.

Machiavellianism (3, 9, 8, and 10)

Psychopathy (1, 2, 11, and 12)

Narcissism (4, 5, 6, and 7)

Narcissism (a = .83)‚ Machiavellianism (a = .78)‚ and Psychopathy (a =.80) (Jonson et al‚ 2013)

**Appendix B**

Chart, line chart

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**Appendix C**

During the past six months, you have served as manager for a team of three people in charge of recruiting and onboarding new talent into the organization. During your short tenure, you have gathered useful information for motivating the team to accomplish new goals. Upper management has given you the task to increase recruitment efforts by 20% in the next quarter. Owing to your “fast-track” status in the organization and direct connections to upper management, you have been told that if you meet this goal, you will receive a promotion and be able to name your successor as the manager of this team from one of your subordinates.

Using one of the dark personality traits (Machiavellianism, Psychopathy, or Narcissism) assigned by the group leader as your basis for understanding how to motivate your employees, what is the best way for you to use Duane, Kylie, and John to accomplish the goal given to you by upper management to secure a promotion?

After coming up with a solution, please answer the following questions:

1. What are the potential damages for pushing any individual in the team for the organization?
2. Who would you choose as your successor if goals were met?
3. What are the potential issues/benefits that may arise from your promotion choice?

Your team consists of three people: Kylie, John, and Duane. The below information you have about them comes from their personnel file and is supplemented from your knowledge from working with them for the past six months.

**Kylie**

Demographics:

* 32 years old.
* Female.
* Mixed race (Caucasian/Latina).
* Salary approximately $40-50K (when meeting job goals)
* Married (6 years)
* Husband earns substantially more money in an outside firm.
* One five-year-old child (overall healthy and with no behavioral complications) will start kindergarten in a few months.
* One cat and one dog (both rescues) as pets.

Psychographics

* Liberal political views
* Prefers to work in groups (believes others add a lot to the process)
* People pleaser
* Tends to always see the good in people
* Prone to feelings of being a failure when she does not accomplish other’s goals for her
* Highly loyal to the company and those she is aquatinted with
* She appears to be motivated by more time with her child/family
* Cares deeply about helping other mothers find jobs and achieving job security.
* You have observed she easily gets offended when people do not consider a woman’s difficulty in finding work
* She enjoys the organization’s culture and connecting with other employees.

Education

* Associates degree in Business Administration.
* Taken some additional classes for a bachelor’s degree (at least a full year focused study required to complete at local university)
* Her next promotion would require a bachelor’s degree per company policy.

Job Experience:

* Three years with this company.
* Six years total in recruiting experience
* Before recruiting, she job hopped every 6-9 months since she entered the workforce.

Career Motivation

* She does not currently want to move up in the company does not see the pathway or value in promotion
* She has expressed wanting to take more time off to manage changes in childcare demands

Job duties

* 100% of the time: Recruit new talent/skilled labor for the company
* No direct supervisory responsibilities.

Additional information

* She works well with others and often likes to co-recruit with John.
* She is really good at recruiting women, especially single mothers. However, her potential recruits require significant efforts to onboard into the organization.
* She is reasonable for finding the majority of recruits for the team but often shares the commission and credit with others on the team
* Looks up to Duane for his experience and often will run all ideas through him before implementing them.

**John**

Demographics:

* 41 years old.
* Male
* Caucasian
* Salary approximately $55-65K (consistently exceeds goals)
* Unmarried (just left long term relationships a year ago because she wanted kids, and he did not)
* No Children
* One dog (A purebred poodle) as a pet

Psychographics

* Somewhat conservative political views, but he does not openly discuss his ideologies.
* He prefers to work on projects alone (he does not think others get things done as well as he does)
* Career driven
* Practicality and logic are essential to him
* He cares deeply if he is liked
* He appears to be motivated by making more money
* Annoyed by recruiting based on family status or family values
* He enjoys the organization’s culture and connecting with other employees.

Education

* Bachelor’s degree in Philosophy.
* He is interested in MBA because he feels it will accelerate his career. (However, he has not applied for a program despite talking about it for the entire time you have managed him)

Job Experience:

* Two years with this company.
* Ten years total in recruiting experience
* He has worked for competitor recruiting firms in the past for multiple years. (Often refers to how the other firms did things better than the current company).

Career Motivation

* Outwardly expresses the desire to move up in the company
* Privately expressed that if he is not given a promotion in the next six months, he will likely start looking for another job that will “see his potential.”

Job duties

* 50% of the time recruiting talent/skilled labor
* 50% applicant screening, testing, and background/references checking
* No direct supervisory responsibilities.

Additional information

* He has had some success working with Kylie in the past.
* He gets irritated with Kylie’s approach of targeting single mothers or women in general for prospective hires because he claims “it causes him to have to work harder in assessing their skills and talents because many of the women do not directly have job experience” in the company’s field.
* Well-liked by his peers.
* Upper Management has not observed his desire to move up.
* He thinks Duane is a wealth of knowledge but has not used his clout in the company to move up in the company ranking effectively

**Duane**

Demographics:

* 60 years old.
* Male
* Caucasian
* Salary Approximately $70K (rarely exceeds goals and tends to just meet expectations and coast after expectations are met)
* Married (15 years), history of one divorce
* Two Children (33-year-old male and 25-year-old female)
* He has an aging dog but does not talk about its breed.

Psychographics

* Somewhat conservative political views and frequently will interject them into conversations.
* He prefers to work in a group (because the others in the group can do most of the “hard work”)
* Not particularly Career driven
* Feels showing up for the job is enough for receiving his wage
* Cares about others seeing him as an expert in the field
* He appears to be motivated by meeting the requirements for retirement in a few years.
* Motivation has never been Duane’s biggest strength.
* Duane enjoys being the senior-most recruiter in the organization.

Education

* Bachelor’s degree in human resource management.

Job Experience :

* Twenty years with this company.
* Twenty years total in recruiting experience (same company)

Career Motivation

* Has not outwardly expressed interest in promotion prospects.
* He appears to be happy with his current job and staying in his current role until retirement.

Job duties

* 100% of the time, placement of prospective hires
* No direct supervisory responsibilities. However, the other two on the team see him as their unofficial supervisor.

Additional information

* Duane carries a chip on his shoulder from unrealistic expectations by management in prior recruiting efforts that make him suspicious of any new work initiatives from management.
* He constantly comes up with excuses for why new things and attempts to meet company goals are futile to the team.