

The Dark Side of Leadership:  
A Cross-Cultural  
Compendium  
With Lessons for Leaders

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## Chapter 22

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# Navigating the Dark Side of Leadership: Insights from Nigeria's Public Sector

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### Introduction

Leadership is one of the prime determinants of organisational culture, productivity, and success. It is classically represented by inspirational vision, strategic insight, and motivational prowess, with claims that it can transform and lead any organisation toward its goals (Amah & Ogah, 2023). However, beneath this very conventional view lies a darker reality threatening organisational harmony and efficiency. Dark leadership is an under-recognised but not rare occurrence in organisational lives and comprises traits such as narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism (Cesinger et al., 2023). Specifically, it refers to traits typically signified by self-serving motives, manipulative behaviours, and declining levels of trust, morale, and operational effectiveness observed in organisations (Wilhau & Karau, 2021).

The dimensions of dark leadership in the Nigerian public sector take unique directions, as shaped by cultural norms, historical legacies, and institutional frameworks (Aniche, 2021). Nigeria's public sector landscape provides fertile ground for dark leadership behaviours, especially against the backdrop of bureaucratic complexities and governance challenges (Inuwa & Ononiwu, 2020). Consequently, it impairs decision-making processes and

perpetuates a culture of impunity and inefficiency (Pensky, 2008). Empirical evidence from recent studies refers to the pervasiveness and dark, destructive consequences of leadership in the public agencies of Nigeria (Akanle & Shittu, 2022; Àkànle & Nkpe, 2021). It shows that leaders in such contexts gain increasing influence to the detriment of organisational integrity and employee well-being. Similarly, such behaviours erode trust, suppress innovation, and retard organisational adaptation to dynamic sociopolitical environments.

Therefore, the chapter interrogates the concept of dark leadership within Nigeria's public sector, specifically discussing its prevalence, manifestations, and consequences on organisational dynamics. Drawing from case studies and empirical data, the chapter elaborates on how dark leadership practices materialise in decision-making processes, organisational cultures, and employee engagement levels. The intricate relationship between dark leadership, cultural norms, and institutional contexts is also discussed, given its implications for organisational resilience and sustainable development. This chapter furthers ongoing conversations on the subject and details practical ways to mitigate the negative consequences of dark leadership. Ethical leadership practices, transparency, and accountability will help generate organisational environments characterised by trust, integrity, and operational excellence. These insights are instrumental to policymakers, practitioners, and scholars who attempt to understand the cultural contexts underpinning leadership in Africa and strive for effective governance and sustainable organisational outcomes.

## **Understanding Dark Leadership**

Leadership plays a pivotal role in organisational success by fostering employee coordination, goal alignment, and enhanced performance. With effective leadership, organisations can avoid chaos and inefficiency. The concept of "dark leadership" has sparked debates in literature, with researchers highlighting its toxic, destructive, and abusive manifestations (Padilla et al., 2007). Behaviours associated with dark leadership include victimising employees, lying to them, blaming the wrong person for mistakes, and discrimination. Research indicates that dark leadership correlates with decreased employee performance, increased psychological distress, and low levels of job satisfaction and commitment.

Additionally, higher levels of abusive leadership are linked with increased work-family conflict. Despite these negative attributions, dark leaders often avoid dealing with the repercussions of their behaviours. This relatively dismissive attitude towards dark leaders can be attributed to prevailing perceptions of leadership. Traditionally, leaders have been idealised as possessing positive traits that contribute to organisational success. However, recent research challenges this notion, suggesting leaders may exhibit unethical behaviours and possess dark characteristics (Herbst, 2014). Various terminologies describe leadership's negative aspects, including toxic, destructive, tyrannical, and dysfunctional (Padilla et al., 2007; Ashforth, 1994).

Leadership decisions significantly impact organisational structures, and leaders may only sometimes act in the organisation's best interests. Negative leader attitudes can lead to adverse consequences for followers, including disappointment, stress, unhappiness, decreased self-confidence, and disengagement from work (Ashforth, 1994). While much research has focused on positive leadership styles and their benefits, there has been a notable neglect of the darker aspects of leadership. Recent developments in leadership research emphasise the need to acknowledge and understand the negative impacts of leadership on employees and organisations.

This shift in perspective has led to increased attention to the dark side of leadership, prompting a surge of studies examining its various dimensions. However, the ambiguity surrounding the concept of dark leadership presents challenges in delineating its scope and constituent leadership styles. The lack of theoretical integration further complicates understanding, highlighting the need for clarity in comprehending dark leadership and its implications. Addressing this issue is crucial for advancing knowledge and effectively addressing the challenges of dark leadership in organisations.

Dark leadership encompasses behaviours and traits that harm both followers and organisations, reflecting the dysfunctional aspects of a leader's personality. Various terms have been introduced in the literature to describe this phenomenon, including petty tyranny (Ashforth, 1994), abusive supervision (Tepper, 2000), dark side leadership (Conger, 1990), evil leadership (Delbecq, 2001), toxic leadership (Lipman-Blumen, 2005), and bad leadership (Kellerman, 2004). For instance, petty tyranny refers to leaders' oppressive, capricious, and vindictive use of power and authority (Ashforth, 1994). This behaviour is characterised by arbitrariness, belittling of subordinates, lack of consideration, protracted or constrained conflict resolution, discouragement of initiative, and non-contingent punishment. Similarly, abusive supervision

involves sustained displays of hostile behaviours towards subordinates, such as hostile verbal and nonverbal actions (Tepper, 2000). Dark leadership, on the other hand, encompasses negative leadership behaviours characterised by traits such as narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. Narcissism, for example, is at the core of dark leadership, with narcissistic leaders exhibiting self-absorption, entitlement, hostility, arrogance, and a superficial view of themselves (Judge et al., 2009).

While some argue for positive aspects of narcissism, such as productivity and inspiration (Maccoby, 2004), others emphasise its negative impacts on followers and organisations (Judge et al., 2009). Similarly, Machiavellianism involves using lies, manipulation, coercion, and force by leaders to motivate followers (Judge et al., 2009). This behaviour may lead to negative organisational outcomes, such as poor follower perceptions and workplace deviance (Tepper et al., 2006). Psychopathy, on the other hand, refers to operating with psychopathic traits below the level required for diagnosis as psychopaths (Boddy, 2011).

Psychopathic leaders may engage in workplace bullying and demonstrate a lack of emotional intelligence (Lishner et al., 2011). The consequences of dark leadership are significant and far-reaching. Research has shown that employees under abusive supervisors experience lower levels of organisational commitment, life and job satisfaction, and perceptions of organisational justice. They also engage in fewer organisational citizenship behaviours and are more likely to experience turnover, conflict between work and family, emotional exhaustion, and psychological distress (Ashforth & Lee, 1997; Tepper, 2000; Duffy et al., 2002; Tepper et al., 2006).

Of particular concern is the impact of dark leaders on employees' organisational commitment and turnover intentions. As conceptualised by Meyer and Allen (1997), organisational commitment consists of three dimensions: affective, continuance, and normative commitment. Affective commitment is highly predictive of employee retention and job performance (Meyer et al., 2002). Dark leaders who diminish their employees' affective commitment risk losing valuable personnel and may experience declines in job performance.

The job embeddedness model (Mitchell & Lee, 2001) and the unfolding model (Lee & Mitchell, 1994) offer theoretical frameworks to understand employee turnover. According to the job embeddedness model, employees are likelier to remain with an organisation if they have strong connections to the organisation and the community. Dark leaders undermining employees' affective commitment may weaken their sense of connection to the

organisation, increasing the likelihood of turnover. Similarly, the unfolding model suggests that employees often leave a job due to a “shock” event. Over time, dark leaders may subject their subordinates to numerous shocks, ultimately motivating them to leave the organisation.

Thus, dark leaders can impact employee turnover through job embeddedness and unfolding models. To comprehend dark leadership, one must explore theoretical frameworks that dive into the intricacies of bad leadership practices and their effects on individuals and institutions. Various theoretical views offer valuable insights into the concept of dark leadership. The Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) is a well-known theoretical framework that suggests individuals acquire knowledge and skills by observing, imitating, and modelling conduct. Within the framework of dark leadership, this idea posits that leaders may acquire abusive or manipulative tendencies by observing other leaders or being exposed to and encouraged in such activities within their organisational environment.

Subordinates, in response, may internalise these habits and continue them inside the organisation. The Trait Theory of leadership is another significant paradigm that proposes that specific personality qualities make persons more likely to become leaders (Peters, 2023). Within the realm of dark leadership, bad leadership practices have been linked to qualities such as narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy (Judge et al., 2009). Leaders with these characteristics may demonstrate a greater propensity to partake in abusive or exploitative actions towards their subordinates.

The Dark Triad paradigm, consisting of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy (Paulhus & Williams, 2002), provides a focused perspective for comprehending dark leadership. Studies have demonstrated that persons with elevated levels of these characteristics are more prone to displaying manipulative, exploitative, and abusive behaviours while in positions of leadership (Jonason & Webster, 2010). Knowing how these characteristics interact with leadership behaviours will help you better understand the mechanics underlying dark leadership. Moreover, the perspective of Role Theory highlights the impact of societal norms and expectations on personal conduct (Biddle, 1979).

Leaders have a specific social position within organisations with associated expectations and obligations. Dark leaders, however, have the potential to act contrary to these standards by taking actions that harm both the organisation and their followers. The elements contributing to the genesis and persistence of bad leadership behaviours can be clarified by investigating the role dynamics under dark leadership circumstances.

## **Impact of Dark Leadership on Employees' Well-being and Organisational Culture**

There has been a noticeable increase in the study of dark leadership and its impact on organisational effectiveness in recent years. This illustrates a growing realisation of the damage and often catastrophic effects of toxic leader behaviours on organisational outcomes. Narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy characterise dark leadership; it adversely impacts the welfare of employees and the culture of organisations. It detrimentally impacts trust, morale, and productivity in the work atmosphere, reducing creativity and efficiency. Emotional and psychological impact on followers, corrosion of trust, and encouragement of unethical behaviour have identified challenges against organisational health and effectiveness (Nicolaidis & Duho, 2019).

Research studies on the damage that can be caused to an organisation's outcomes because of a toxic executive have grown in recent years. A perusal of these dark-side factors provides an understanding of their pernicious effects and the importance of interventions for organisational culture and performance. The following section elaborates on this perspective by depicting how traits of dark leadership, such as narcissism, psychopathy, abusive supervision, and Machiavellianism, all negatively affect organisational effectiveness.

### ***Abusive Supervision and Employee Well-being***

Abusive supervision is among the most studied aspects of dark leadership. Tepper (2000) pioneered the systematic study of the effects of abusive supervision. According to his findings, employees who are victims of abusive monitoring exhibit more stress and poorer job satisfaction. Lower job satisfaction implies decreased commitment to the organisation and productivity. Further research has reiterated and corroborated these findings by proving that staff under abusive supervision have adverse effects such as emotional exhaustion, disengagement, and a reduction in performance (Wu & Hu, 2009; Oyewunmi & Oyewunmi, 2022). This damaging effect is further amplified, and the effectiveness of the business further decreases by the toxic work environment, which is usually characterised by mistrust and terror.

## **Narcissism and Decision-Making**

It has been shown that leaders who are highly egotistic and predisposed to idolisation negatively influence organisational decisions and their strategic orientation. Narcissistic leaders put themselves ahead of the organisation's image to promote their interests and take risks (Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006). This self-serving behaviour may endanger the organisation's long-term sustainability and survival. Additionally, it has been indicated that narcissistic employers can create an atmosphere in the workplace where workers become scared to give their ideas or criticise. This results in a faulty decision-making process, often leading to poor strategic decisions (Judge et al., 2009).

## **Machiavellianism and Manipulative Behaviour**

Machiavellian leaders are manipulative, deceitful, and exploitative; they often use unethical tactics to accomplish predetermined goals. Dahling et al. (2009) explored how Machiavellian leadership obstructs cohesiveness and effective organisational decision-making by fostering an illusory and untrustworthy climate. They will be more likely to engage in unethical behaviour and propagate a manipulative environment throughout the organisation (Ashforth & Anand, 2003). Machiavellianism is associated with an increased level of poor organisational performance, as attested to by low morale, negative employee sentiments, and feelings of exploitation and abandonment.

## **Psychopathy and Organisational Stability**

The impulsiveness, lack of regret or guilt, and superficial appeal of psychopaths can seriously jeopardise the stability of organisations and their capacity to generate revenue. Babiak and Hare (2006) investigated how psychopathic leaders behaved in corporate settings. They concluded that the organisation faces financial hazards due to its careless decisions about the economy and its disregard for morality. Psychotic leaders continue in their use of bullying and other abusive actions in work and organisational environments, creating a hostile work environment that disrupts organisational procedures and only serves to raise employee attrition (Oyewunmi et al., 2018). The leader's incapacity to build sincere connections and trust inside the business contributes to the ensuing organisational instability, creating a turbulent and inefficient operational climate.

## ***Erosion of Ethical Standards***

The ethical climate of an organisation is also heavily influenced by leadership. The presence of a dark figure as a leader in an organisation makes corrupt practices more common in an organisation, and as a result, the ethical norms of working are weakened. The authors of a study by Padilla et al. (2007) discussed the “toxic triangle” model in which “settings conducive to the unleashing of dark side behaviour” are combined with destructive leaders and susceptible followers. The normalisation of corruption by dark leaders affects organisational culture. It has long-term negative consequences on the efficiency of the organisation’s performance, as elaborated in a report by Ashforth and Anand (2003). When ethical standards are not maintained, employees, stakeholders, and consumers lose trust in a corporation.

## ***Impact on Employee Turnover and Organisational Costs***

There is a high correlation between abusive supervision and voluntary employee turnover, according to Tepper et al. (2006). Employees who are victims of dark leadership are more likely to leave the organisation due to the negative implications they experience. High turnover rates disrupt organisational processes, as most turnovers are likely to be accompanied by high costs in training, hiring, and knowledge loss. Turnover has a significant impact not only on the current production of the organisation but also on the long-term strategic capacity of the organisation.

The body of research on the subject clearly illustrates that dark leadership makes organisational effectiveness challenging and increasingly unrealised. This aligns with the view articulated in this chapter that a toxic work environment impairs employee well-being, decision-making, ethical standards, and financial performance due to abusive supervision, narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism. However, these dimensions should be considered to fully appreciate what these practices look like and how they impact the organisation’s results.

## **Dark Leadership in Government Agencies: A Reflection**

Dark leadership, manifested by traits such as narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy, can result in profound implications for the well-being of individuals at work and for the culture in general within an organisation. The effect of dark leadership is often felt more in the public sector; usually,

it causes reduced efficiency, low morale, and a decline in the ethical standards in an organisation. Such case studies involve the failures and other pathologies brought about by dark leadership, which are destructive to several government agencies across contexts. This reflection discusses unethical incidences in selected government agencies in Nigeria. These are isolated cases, and in no way erode the credible contributions of the agencies to the well-being of the public. However, important lessons can be learned for improved institutional outcomes and necessary public policy reforms.

The Federal Inland Revenue Service (FIRS) is responsible for collecting taxes and revenue to fund government operations and public services. Despite its critical role in economic development, the FIRS has been plagued by allegations of corruption and unethical behaviour among senior officials. A landmark case typifying the influence of dark leadership is one whereby a senior staff of the agency was implicated in bribery and tax evasion activities by the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC). The defendants were found guilty of bribery and tax evasion. It was alleged that the company bribed the senior staff to fraudulently reduce its tax liability. The senior staff was said to have solicited and accepted a cash gratification thereby constituting abuse of office (Okereke & Okoli, 2022).

There are some implications from this case as it pertains to organisational culture and effectiveness. The case brought to light the erosion of trust, ethical standards, and operation disruption. This suggests that the cases of bribery and tax evasion erode citizens' confidence in the agency and its ability to administer the tax regime fairly. Also, it provides critical insights into the need for reform to enhance integrity and transparency.

The Federal Road Safety Corps (FRSC) is responsible for ensuring safety on Nigeria's roads through the enforcement of traffic regulations, education, and rescue operations. However, the agency has faced specific challenges casting some degree of aspersion on the character of leadership. The Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission charged two officials of the agency to court over allegations of extortion of motorists. The Commission accused the defendants of forcefully collecting unauthorised "fees" without a traffic offence being charged. The defendants were said to have used their positions for personal gain by accepting gratification from motorists. The counts bordered on offences contrary to specific sections of the Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Act of 2000. The duo pleaded not guilty and were later granted bail (Okereke & Okoli, 2022). These allegations mirror many other issues connected to public trust and institutional integrity within the agency and further dimensions.

The involvement of the officials in corrupt practices diverts attention and resources from performing the key role of the enforcement of traffic laws. The diversionary effects of mitigating corruption incidents erode effectiveness and compromises and relatively limited operational capabilities. The charges against the officials have some legal implications. Conviction may attract very stiff penalties, including imprisonment without the option of a fine, and adverse publicity for the case seriously dents the reputation of the FRSC. This will affect the Commission's ability to recruit and retain competent personnel and negatively impact public support for its programs. The case calls for wholesale reforms within the FRSC to address corruption and enhance transparency and accountability. Among the reforms should be strengthening internal controls, anti-corruption training, and promoting a culture of integrity to restore public trust and ensure that FRSC conducts all its activities based on high ethical standards.

Unethical practices have a negative multiplier impact on the society. Bribes constitute an additional financial cost, and they distort economic activities due to uncertainty and lack of trust. Consequently, this also impedes the general investment climate and prospects of sustainable economic development. Therefore, the effect of reported corruption and extortion by agency officials extends beyond some particular cases; it represents a vote of no confidence on the institution's integrity and the credibility required to deliver on stipulated statutory obligations. Such issues must be dealt with, taking into cognisance aspects of strict enforcement of anti-corruption laws, constant monitoring, and ethical conduct.

## **Lessons for Leaders**

The cases of dark leadership in government agencies examined bring out valuable lessons for leaders at all levels. Leaders must be ethical and lead with integrity. The cases presented how unethical behaviour undermined the trust level within an organisation and hampered its effectiveness. The maintenance of ethical standards for an excellent working culture is a means to enhance the public trust and credibility of organisations. Leaders should set up strong transparency measures, including regular audits, clear whistleblowing mechanisms, and public disclosure around activities within the institution. Strengthen accountability frameworks that put leaders and employees under scrutiny for their actions. Leaders must be role models, set the tone, and

articulate expectations for ethics-based behaviour throughout the workforce. Employees at all levels in the organisation should be frequently exposed to and provided with ethics and compliance training to help bring organisational values to life and support ethical decision-making. Internal controls are a fundamental safeguard against corruption and misbehaviour. Leaders need to invest in an efficient internal control system that monitors financial transactions, procurement processes, relations with stakeholders, etc. All these controls help identify and avert unethical behaviour at its early development stages before it becomes severe. Leaders should establish confidential reporting channels and, vice versa, protect whistleblowers from any retaliatory measures. Allowing employees to report unethical behaviour empowers them to lead a culture of accountability and is a strong signal of commitment to ethical governance. As the governance and leadership landscape changes, leaders must be informed about the emerging risks and best practices in ethical leadership. Continuous learning and adaptation enable leaders to respond to new challenges and support high governance standards.

These lessons can help leaders control the risks associated with dark leadership and build a culture of integrity, enabling institutions to follow their mandates more effectively and resiliently in serving the interests of all stakeholders.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter on dark leadership in the public sector underlines how bad leadership harms organisational culture, operational effectiveness, and citizens' trust. Leaders should set an example by being advocates of ethical standards, creating transparent climates, and taking every measure possible to ensure the establishment of adequate control mechanisms. The standards call for leaders to demonstrate ethical behaviour, offer ongoing ethics and compliance education, and establish sound internal controls to monitor and prevent destructive behaviours. Whistleblower protection is critical to identifying improper actions and acting upon them (Manesh et al., 2024). This encourages accountability, transparency, and openness within the organisation. Once leaders keep a continuous learning and adaptive posture, they will remain current with emerging risks and ethical practices.

Strengthening governance structures, ethical leadership development, and anti-corruption laws are essential to reducing the risks of dark leadership. Of importance in rebuilding trust would be open communication with

stakeholders on efforts to rectify past misconduct and set in motion necessary reforms. Continuous monitoring and assessment are fundamental to ensure that the governance frameworks and ethical standards remain effective and responsive. These lessons and practices can reduce the risks of dark leadership, improve ethical behaviour, and build a culture of integrity and trust in organisations. The onus lies on leaders to implement processes that will ensure enhanced organisational performance, positive societal impact, and sustainable development.

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