

The Dark Side of Leadership



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Few nonprofits can thrive or even survive without strong leadership. Yet what happens when forceful leaders cross the line and become bellicose bullies or just plain bad bosses? Sadly, the nonprofit sector is not immune from the harm that destructive leaders leave in their wakes. Destructive leaders are those whose actions cause catastrophic effects on everything from staff morale to workplace safety.

Defining Destructive Leadership

Destructive leadership can come in a variety of forms, such as toxic, abusive, and/or narcissistic leadership and bullying. Although the term is still relatively new and the subject of ongoing study, a widely accepted definition is: “The systematic and repeated behavior by a leader, supervisor or manager that violates the legitimate interest of the organization by undermining and/or sabotaging the organization’s goals, tasks, resources, and effectiveness and/or the motivation, well-being or job satisfaction of subordinates.”

Source: www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1048984307000422

Destructive leaders aren’t always easy to spot. Yet their actions can cause harm that permeates a nonprofit’s mission and core objectives, as well as the morale of the ranks of paid and volunteer staff. In some cases, destructive leadership may negatively impact staff without visible impact to the mission of the nonprofit. For example, a narcissistic CEO may be a terrible boss, but an effective fundraiser. Since the board and donors rarely if ever see that CEO’s bad behavior, they remain in the dark and unaware.

The Scary Shapes of Destructive Leadership

Diagnosing a leader as destructive is especially difficult if the leader is passive-aggressive or mistreats staff in an indirect fashion. To begin the difficult process of putting an end to destructive leadership, boards need to know what to look for. Here are a few examples of destructive leader personas.

- **Laissez-Faire Leadership** — Although it may be relatively common, laissez-faire leadership is often overlooked. The term refers to leaders who are overly hands-off and unavailable to their direct reports. Although many staff members appreciate the opportunity to step up and be trusted by their bosses, no one wants to be abandoned completely. What looks like excellent delegation skills to the board may feel like painful neglect to a staff member who needs support, mentoring, and guidance—or who simply

desires occasional face-time with the boss— Laissez-faire leaders sap creativity and productivity from their employees, and their staff members often withdraw or experience tension and dissatisfaction.

- **Tyrannical Leadership** — A tyrannical style is unique because it causes irreparable harm to the leader's subordinates, but not necessarily the organization. If you've ever been humiliated, belittled, or manipulated at work, you're familiar with this destructive leadership style. Tyrannical leaders may justify their behavior as part of a driven work style, or ask for forgiveness and offer empty promises to change their behavior. Nonprofits led by tyrannical leaders typically suffer costly turnover. Worse, the talents and idealism of staff members who suffer under this leadership style are wasted. Since a tyrannical leader may be deferential to his or her board while meeting financial and program targets, board members may be unaware of the costly damage the leader is causing.
- **Supportive-Disloyal Leadership** — If you've seen an episode of "The Office," you're familiar with the supportive-disloyal leadership style portrayed by Steve Carell, as Michael Scott, the Regional Manager of Dunder-Mifflin. Supportive-disloyal leaders like Michael Scott show exaggerated interest in the welfare of subordinates, but little to no regard for the interest of the organization. The abuses committed by this type of destructive leader may include stealing, such as the theft of materials, time, or financial resources.
- **Derailed Leadership** — This style of leadership is a dangerously passive form of destructive leadership which can negatively affect both subordinates and the organization. An example would be a leader who regularly humiliates her subordinates and thereby demonstrates anti-subordinate behavior, and who also engages in manipulation or deceit with respect to the organization's assets, through absenteeism or theft.

The Unacceptable Risks of Destructive Leadership

The leadership styles described above open a Pandora's Box of dangerous and unacceptable consequences for a nonprofit, its dedicated employee and volunteer teams, and eventually for the destructive leader him/herself. Some of the risky effects of destructive leadership include:

1. **Toxic Culture:** Although the elements may differ, employees know a toxic culture when they are in its midst. And most employees attribute culture dysfunction to the actions or neglect of the nonprofit's senior leaders. Like toxic substances, the effects of a toxic culture can quickly move from one workstation to another, with no limits.
2. **Post-Traumatic Stress, Depression, and Emotional Exhaustion:** According to OfficeVibe, American companies spend an estimated \$360 Billion each year in health care costs as a result of bad bosses. And 44% of employees report that they have been verbally, emotionally, or physically abused by a supervisor during their career. Wellness should be a sincere goal, not a joke. Providing healthy snacks will be of little benefit to overall employee health if employees are subjected to ridicule, tantrums, or unhealthy workloads. Source: www.OfficeVibe.com
3. **Absenteeism and Low Productivity:** According to StackHands, unhappy employees take 15 more sick days each year than the average worker, and are 10% less productive.
4. **Costly Turnover:** StackHands also reports that 75% of people voluntarily leaving aren't quitting their jobs, they are quitting their bosses!
5. **Increased Workplace Conflict and Tension:** Peers and camaraderie are the #1 reason employees go the extra mile—not money. Source: www.StackHands.com

Defusing Destructive Leaders

Realizing that a leader on your nonprofit's payroll is destructive is the easy part; the real challenge is figuring out what to do about it.

DO...

1. **Try and have a conversation with the leader.** Civilly explain exactly what you need in terms of direction, feedback, or support. Clearly and precisely outline the information that you want to gain—or the objectives that you want to achieve—from the conversation.
2. **If confronting the leader doesn't work, consider going to the leader's manager to ask for assistance.** Proceed with caution, however, as this may fuel the leader's fire and lead to greater animosity aimed at you. Although gossiping about a bad boss is rarely productive, in some cases, going with a group to share different views about the same bad behavior may be necessary, either in a direct

conversation with the bad boss, or with his or her manager.

3. **Keep in mind the position of the destructive leader, and plan accordingly.** Your plan of action should be different depending on if you are dealing with your CEO versus a Board Member or Volunteer Supervisor. For example, if the destructive leader is not your direct supervisor, it may be better to speak to the head of HR, or another senior manager.

DON'T...

1. **Simply tell the boss that he or she is being destructive.** Not only will this cause even more tension in the workplace, but it may even make the situation more toxic. Instead, try to approach the conversation with positive, team-centric goals in mind.
2. **Have the conversation with your leader while she is already on a tangent or in a bad mood.** Make sure to wait for a moment of calm so that the conversation can be as civil as possible. The last thing you want to do is create an unnecessary conflict because of bad timing.
3. **Let the leader get away with abusive behavior such as yelling or direct aggression.** As soon as there is a private moment after the conflict has deescalated, draw attention to the behavior and clarify to the leader that you do not feel comfortable with it.

Additional Risk Tips/ Preventative Measures

1. **Gauge employee sentiments.** There are a variety of online tools and apps available to employers who want to measure employee happiness. Options include the “Smiley Terminals and Reporting Service” provided by happiness experts Happy or Not (www.happy-or-not.com/en), or MoodApp (www.moodapp.mobi/), which measures how employees are feeling at the workplace, or the anonymous reporting and comment software offered by OfficeVibe. Or invite staff to take the “How Awesome is Your Office” survey created by SnackNation (www.snacknation.com/blog/how-awesome-is-your-office).
2. **Track employee turnover and absenteeism.** What causes most voluntary turnover? Does absenteeism correlate with specific company events or days that the boss is scheduled to be in the office? If these patterns appear in your nonprofit, the problem is internal and fixable.
3. **Listen to your employees.** Care about what they have to say, and demonstrate that care by providing multiple outlets for providing honest (and anonymous) feedback.
4. **Always conduct exit interviews with departing staff and longterm volunteers.** Exit interviews provide an opportunity to express appreciation to the departing team member, as well as a chance for the individual to reflect on the quality of leadership and supervision they received, the degree to which their talents were used, and whether they witnessed or experienced any illegal harassment, discrimination, or other forms of destructive leadership. For additional information on the topic of exit interviews, see our article “[Closing Time: Effective Exit Interviews.](#)”
5. **Resolve to improve employee engagement.** Whether it’s through special outings to celebrate personal and team ‘wins,’ or giving employees inside information—such as changes in direction being considered by the board or the top challenges facing the nonprofit—the success of your nonprofit is inextricably tied to employee engagement. Moving off-site is great way to celebrate, because it gives employees a break from their email inboxes, long to-do lists, and normal duties, thereby enabling them to celebrate an important victory or milestone, welcome a new team member, or just pause to build trust and camaraderie. To view or download a list of 59 cool and kooky ideas to boost employee engagement, visit: www.snacknation.com/blog/employee-engagement-ideas/.

Simon Sinek, the author who popularized the concepts “the golden circle” and “Start With Why,” reminds us that, “Leadership is not about being in charge. Leadership is about taking care of those in your charge.” Both destructive and great leaders all have something in common—room for improvement. Whether your nonprofit’s leaders are inspirational and award-winning, or dastardly and deserving of discipline, you and your colleagues can help them grow into leaders worthy of tomorrow.

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