

ABSTRACT

Recent organizational scandals have increased the focus on toxic aspects of leadership. Generally, toxic leadership has been shown to have negative consequences for employees. However, employees need not always to be negatively affected. Here we argue that team-member-exchange (TMX) is such a boundary condition on the outcomes of toxic leadership. In a multi-source cross-sectional study we confirmed this and showed that the negative relation between toxic leadership and outcomes is moderated by TMX so that the relation is weaker for high TMX.

Moreover, we proposed and showed that partially overlapping concepts of toxic leadership such as rule breaking, abusive supervision, and self-serving leadership largely show the same moderated relationship of TMX and toxic leadership. Findings are discussed in light of research on toxic leadership and the different underlying constructs.

Keywords: toxic leadership, TMX, boundary condition, abusive supervision, supervisor rule breaking, self-interested behavior

SURVIVING A TOXIC LEADER: THE MODERATING ROLE OF TEAM-MEMBER-EXCHANGE

Even though leaders have been described as fair and responsible, recent organizational examples, such as certain financial institutions worldwide, have shown that leaders often act toxically. As a result, over the past few years, organizational scholars have paid increasing attention to “bad behavior” within organizations (e.g., Griffin & Lopez, 2005; Harris, Kacmar, & Zivnuska, 2007). Due to abuses of authority in business, politics and religion, there has been a shift of focus from the negative behavior of lower-level employees (Tepper, Duffy, Henle, & Lambert, 2006) to that of their leaders (Padilla, Hogan & Kaiser, 2007).

Toxic leaders have been defined as those individuals who, because of their destructive behaviors and dysfunctional personal qualities, generate a serious and enduring poisonous effect on the individuals, families, organizations, communities and even entire societies they lead (Lipman-Blumen, 2005). Within this definition, research has focused on different conceptualizations of toxic leadership such as abusive supervision (Tepper, 2000), supervisor rule breaking (Greenbaum & Folger, 2008), or destructive leadership (Einarsen, Aasland & Skogstad, 2007). In this paper we suggest the term ‘toxic leadership’ as a unifying concept of these negative leadership behaviors. For example, it has been suggested that toxic leadership is inherently self-serving behavior (Padilla, Hogan & Kaiser, 2007; Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Conger, 1990; Howell, 1988; Howell & Avolio, 1992; McClelland, 1970, 1975; O'Connor et al., 1995; Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006). Therefore, we focus on three exemplars of toxic leadership: rule breaking, abusive supervision, and self-serving leadership.

In general, research convincingly showed that toxic leadership behavior (in terms of different conceptualizations) has a negative impact on a variety of organizational outcomes, such as satisfaction and commitment (Duffy, Ganster & Pagon, 2002; Tepper, 2000) and supervisor-directed citizenship behaviors and effort (Greenbaum & Folger, 2008). This shows that leaders are held responsible for their toxic behavior.

However, recently, it has been argued that followers do not necessarily react to their leader’s toxic behavior (Stouten & Tripp, 2009). Here, we propose that there may indeed be boundary conditions on toxic leadership so that followers are more tolerant to their leader’s behavior, if those conditions are met. We focus on the relationship that leaders have with their team, or team-member-exchange (TMX; Seers, 1989), as such a potential boundary condition.

That is, followers who have a poor relationship with their leader are expected to react more strongly to toxic leadership in contrast to those who have a good relationship with their leader.

Finally, we do not only focus on how toxic leadership affects employees, but also how it might affect the leader. That is, we argue that toxic leadership also has implications for the leader’s work experience in terms of satisfaction and commitment.

Toxic leadership

From the onset of research that focused on the dark sides of leadership, different conceptualizations have been put forward. A large body of research focused on the abusive side of leadership. According to Tepper (2000, p. 178), abusive supervision “refers to subordinates’ perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact”. It is important to note that this definition views abusive supervision as a subjective assessment. One subordinate could see the supervisor’s behavior as abusive while another might not. This evaluation as “abusive” may also vary with the context. Behavioral examples of abusive supervision are public criticism, loud and angry tantrums, rudeness, inconsiderate actions, and coercion (Bies, 2000; Bies & Tripp, 1998).

Research has shown that subordinates whose leaders were more abusive, reported several dysfunctional effects from this behavior, such as higher turnover, psychological distress and less favorable attitudes toward their job, life, and organization (Tepper, 2000).

A more recent conceptualization of the dark side of leadership is the extent that leaders are willing and wanting to break rules: supervisor rule breaking (Greenbaum & Folger, 2008). This line of research is relatively new, but taps on leaders whose main goal is to reach the bottom line and therefore are tempted to cut corners. Supervisor rule breaking can be defined as supervisor self-interested behaviors that go against established organizational rules. Subordinates respond unfavorably to such behaviors, even if the behavior does not directly affect them (Greenbaum & Folger, 2008). In turn, subordinates’ reactions to supervisor rule breaking may reveal “unrealized” harm that could amount to high cumulative costs (Cialdini, Petrova & Goldstein, 2004).

Greenbaum & Folger (2008) found considerable support for the negative consequences of supervisor rule breaking as it was negatively related to subordinates’ job satisfaction, organizational commitment, supervisor-directed citizenship behaviors and effort. In fact, these researchers pointed out that the rule breaking is contagious as it is associated with employee rule breaking.

Even though there is clear evidence that abusive supervision and supervisor rule breaking have a negative impact on follower outcomes, recently it has been argued that the destructive behavior of leaders may also be tolerated (Stouten, 2008; Stouten & Tripp, 2009).

Indeed, followers may not always react negatively to toxic leaders. Padilla and colleagues (2007), for example, said that, if followers may benefit from the toxic behavior of their leader, they are unlikely to protest their decisions or actions. We argue that boundary conditions of abusive supervision and supervisor rule breaking are consistent even though these concepts may only be partly overlapping. That is, followers may be tolerant to an abusive leader as well as to a leader who cuts corners under similar conditions. Therefore, we argue that both abusive supervision and supervisor rule breaking share a common ground, which we define as toxic. Moreover, it has been suggested that many toxic behaviors are inherently self-serving. Therefore, we also wish to focus on the self-serving aspect of leadership next to abusive supervisor and supervisor rule breaking to explore the interplay between the different concepts in terms of self-serving behavior.

Thus, we consider toxic leadership an umbrella concerning negative leadership behaviors that are inherently self-serving. This is consistent with Padilla et al. (2007), who stated that a selfish orientation is a vital part of toxic leadership. That is, toxic leadership focuses on the objectives and goals of the leader, and less on the needs of constituents and the larger organization. However, this assumption that toxic leadership is related to self-serving behavior has not been tested. Therefore we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1. Abusive supervision and supervisor rule breaking are related to self-serving leadership.

TMX as a Boundary Condition to Toxic Leadership

As was described above, we argue that there are boundary conditions of toxic leadership. Research indeed showed that the meaning of work (Harris, Kacmar & Zivnuska, 2007) or subordinates' personality (Tepper, Duffy & Shaw, 2001) moderates the relationship between abusive supervision and follower's outcomes. Given that workers wish to have a positive and constructive relationship with their colleagues as well as their boss, the ongoing relationship between colleagues may equally be important for how employees will perceive their work. Relationships among co-workers have been studied as team-member-exchanges (TMX; Seers, 1989).

TMX represents an individual's overall perception of exchanges with other members of the work group; this exchange can vary in terms of the content and process of exchange. In case of low TMX, exchanges are limited to what is required for the completion of the task.

High TMX on the other hand involves exchange of resources and support that extends beyond what is necessary for task completion (Liden, Wayne & Sparrowe, 2000). Co-workers from a high TMX team offer work-related expertise and feedback and provide thus the conditions necessary for enhanced perceptions of meaning and impact. Perceptions of competence will also increase due to the appropriate feedback and social support that can be found in a high TMX team. If team exchanges include sharing of power and authority in the completion of team's tasks, they also support perceptions of self-determination (Liden et al., 2000). Those feelings of meaning, impact, competence and self-determination result in positive work-outcomes (Spreitzer, 1995). Research has indicated that such feelings are linked to vulnerability to toxic leadership (Luthans, Peterson & Ibrayeve, 1998, in Padilla et al., 2007).

Moreover, TMX provides work-related and social support to individuals (Murphy, Wayne, Liden & Erdogan, 2003), which has been shown to buffer the negative effects of several job – related stressors (e.g., Caplan, 1972; Cobb, 1976; House & Wells, 1978). It is therefore our believe that TMX may act as a buffer for the negative effects of toxic leadership.

Since we view toxic leadership as a broader term than what has up to now been studied, we base ourselves on the research of abusive supervision for determining our outcomes. Extensive studies from Tepper (2000) have shown that subordinates who viewed their leaders as abusive, were more likely to quit their jobs. Those who remained in their jobs, experienced lower job and life satisfaction, lower normative and affective commitment, higher continuance commitment, higher work-family conflict and more psychological distress.

According to a meta-analytic review of turnover literature by Griffith, Hom and Gaertner (2000) the above mentioned negative effects such as lower job satisfaction and affective commitment are antecedents of voluntary turnover. The decision to in fact quit your job may be influenced by other circumstances, such as the situation of the labour market, the age of the person involved, his or her financial situation, .. Therefore we do not measure actual turnover, but we focus on the intention to quit. The concept of intention to quit was first described by Mobley (1977) as the proximal step in a chain of variables that links unfavorable attitudes toward the job to the decision to voluntarily leave one's employer.

Intention to quit refers to a person's subjective assessment about the probability that he is permanently leaving his employer in the near future. In his study, Mobley (1977) showed that the intention to quit was actually a good predictor of actual turnover (see also Coverdale & Terborg, 1980).

Given that we wish to explore the consistency of the moderated relationship between toxic leadership and TMX we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 2a. Abusive supervision is moderated by TMX so that the relationship between abusive supervision and intention to quit is weaker if TMX is high.

Hypothesis 2b. Supervisor rule breaking is moderated by TMX so that the relationship between supervisor rule breaking and intention to quit is weaker if TMX is high.

Hypothesis 2c. Self-interested behavior is moderated by TMX so that the relationship between self-interested behavior and intention to quit is weaker if TMX is high.

Furthermore, even though abusive supervision and supervisor rule breaking have shown important negative consequences for employees, it may well be that the leader's behavior is also related to his or her own work experience. This has not yet been studied by organizational scholars. Leaders can essentially be seen as part of the work team. In accordance to high TMX providing social support and work-related support, we believe that toxic leaders will feel supported in their behavior and therefore experience higher levels of job satisfaction. Thus, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 3a. Abusive supervision is moderated by TMX so that the relationship between abusive supervision and supervisor job satisfaction is stronger if TMX is high.

Hypothesis 3b. Supervisor rule breaking is moderated by TMX so that the relationship between supervisor rule breaking and supervisor job satisfaction is stronger if TMX is high.

Hypothesis 3c. Self-interested behavior is moderated by TMX so that the relationship between self-interested behavior and supervisor job satisfaction is stronger if TMX is high.

We do not only expect the job satisfaction of the toxic leader to be positively affected by the high TMX environment, but also his affective commitment to the organization. We add following hypotheses to our design:

Hypothesis 4a. Abusive supervision is moderated by TMX so that the relationship between abusive supervision and supervisor affective commitment is stronger if TMX is high.

Hypothesis 4b. Supervisor rule breaking is moderated by TMX so that the relationship between supervisor rule breaking and supervisor affective commitment is stronger if TMX is high.

Hypothesis 4c. Self-interested behavior is moderated by TMX so that the relationship between self-interested behavior and supervisor affective commitment is stronger if TMX is high.

These research questions will be examined in a multi-source cross-sectional study. Such an approach has been argued to reduce common-method bias as ratings will be obtained from multiple sources, in this case leaders and followers (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003).

Method

Participants and Procedure

Two hundred twenty-four employees of various organizations in Belgium received the survey via mail. One hundred seventy-three surveys – of employees and their matched supervisor - were returned, yielding an overall response rate of 59.8 percent for employees and 52.2 percent for supervisors. Participants were from a variety of different organizations, including telecommunication, health care organizations, manufacturing, government, financial institutions, and technology centers. Participation was completely voluntary. Respondents were assured that the answers would be processed anonymously and treated confidentially.

Employees were 42 percent males with an average age of 39 years ($SD=10.84$). 47.1 percent of respondents only received a high school diploma, and 52.9 percent had a college degree. Respondents had an average tenure in their organization of 13 years ($SD=11.48$) of which on average 8 years ($SD= 8.7$) in their current job.

Leaders were 43 percent males with an average age of 47 years ($SD=7.59$). 31.4 percent of respondents only received a high school diploma, and 68.6 percent had a college degree. Respondents had an average tenure in their organization of 19 years ($SD=8.79$) of which on average 9 years ($SD= 5.85$) in their current job.

Measures

All measures were assessed on a 5-point Likert-scale ranging from 1 (= ‘Strongly Disagree’) to 5 (= ‘Strongly Agree’).

The following measures were used in the leader version of the survey.

Affective commitment. Affective commitment was assessed with six items (Allen & Meyer, 1991). Sample items include: “I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with this organization.” and “I really feel as if the organization's problems are my own.”. Cronbach’s alpha was .74.

Job Satisfaction. Job satisfaction was measured using the three-item overall satisfaction subscale from the Michigan Organizational Assessment Questionnaire (Cammann, Fichman, Jenkins, & Klesh, 1979). The three items were "All in all, I am satisfied with my job," "In general, I don't like my job," and "In general, I like working here" (see Tepper, 2000). Cronbach’s alpha for this measure was .93.

Team-Member-Exchange (TMX). Team-member-exchange was assessed with 9 items (Liden, Wayne & Sparrowe, 2000). TMX represents an individual's (in this case the leader) overall perception of exchanges with other members of the work group. Sample items are “When I am in a bind, my coworkers will take on extra work to help ensure the completion of my important tasks” and “I respect my co-workers as professionals in our line of work.”. Reliability of this scale was .68.

Employees completed the toxic leadership measures abusive supervision, supervisor rule breaking and self-interested leadership. In addition to these measurements, they also rated their turnover intention.

Toxic leadership. The toxic leadership style was measured using three different scales: Self – Interested behavior, Supervisor rule breaking (Greenbaum & Folger, 2008) and abusive supervision (Tepper, 2000). Since there was no measure of self-interested behavior available, we constructed a measure based on Skarlicki and Folger (1997), Kaptein (2008), Brown and Treviño (2006), and Craig and Gustafson (1998). The five items were: “My superior would forge a document if this could improve his position”, “.. is selfish and thinks of himself as very important”, “.. does not take others into account, he only thinks of himself”, “.. uses money or materials from the company for his own good” and “.. does not pay attention to the needs and wishes of his/her employees”. Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was .86, indicating a good internal reliability.

The supervisor rule breaking scale created by Greenbaum and Folger (2008) was used as a second measurement method for negative leadership style. The seven items were prefaced with the statement “How likely would your supervisor be to..”. Sample items are “.. cut corners in order to complete work assignments more quickly” and “.. ignore company protocols in order to get what he/she wants”. Reliability of this scale was very good (Cronbach’s alpha = .90).

Abusive Supervision was measured with 15 items (Tepper (2000)). The items were prefaced with the statement “My boss..”. Sample items are “.. ridicules me”, “..reminds me of my past mistakes and failures”. Reliability of this scale was very good (Cronbach’s alpha = .94).

Turnover intentions. Employee intentions to quit their job was assessed with two items that were based on Spector and Jex (1988). These were “To what extent do you intent to leave the organization within the year for a similar job?” and “To what extent do you intent to leave the organization within the year for a different kind of job?”. Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was .87.

Results

Intercorrelations between the different measures are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations

| Variable | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
|------------------------------|----------|-----------|-------|-------|-------|------|---|---|---|
| 1. Self-interested behavior | 1.66 | .74 | - | | | | | | |
| 2. Supervisory rule breaking | 1.76 | .71 | .65** | - | | | | | |
| 3. Abusive supervision | 1.39 | .55 | .68** | .49** | - | | | | |
| 4. TMX | 4.18 | .33 | -.15 | -.10 | -.17* | - | | | |
| 5. Job Satisfaction (S) | 4.38 | .72 | .16 | .13 | .09 | -.00 | - | | |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|-----------------------------|------|-----|-------|------|-------|-------|-------|-----|---|
| 6. Affective Commitment (S) | 3.80 | .63 | .23** | .19* | .12 | -.18* | .41** | - | |
| 7. Turnover Intention (E) | 1.66 | .98 | .27** | .12 | .36** | -.09 | -.09 | .17 | - |

Note. *p<.05 **p<.01 (S) = Supervisor; (E) = Employee.

To test our hypotheses, hierarchical regression analyses showed a significant interaction effect between all three measures of toxic leadership and TMX for job satisfaction and affective commitment of the supervisor (Table 2).

Table 2
Overview of hierarchical regression analyses

| Variable | TMX x SRB | | | TMX x SIB | | | TMX x AS | | |
|-----------------------------|-----------|-----|------|-----------|-----|-------|----------|-----|-------|
| | b | SD | β | b | SD | β | b | SD | β |
| 1. Job Satisfaction (S) | .57 | .29 | .18* | .65 | .30 | .19* | 1.14 | .47 | .22* |
| 2. Affective Commitment (S) | .52 | .25 | .19* | .68 | .24 | .24* | .99 | .40 | .22* |
| 3. Turnover Intention (E) | -.30 | .39 | -.07 | -.74 | .38 | -.17* | -1.14 | .57 | -.17* |

Note. *p<.05 (S) = Supervisor; (E) = Employee.

Hypotheses 1 predicted that abusive supervision and supervisor rule breaking are related to self-serving leadership. The two measurements show indeed a significant correlation with our self-interested behavior scale (R = .68, R = .65 respectively, p < .01).

Subordinate's intention to quit

Hypothesis 2a predicted that TMX would moderate the relationship between abusive supervision and subordinate's intention to quit. As a result of this moderation, the relationship between abusive supervision and subordinate's intention to quit would be less strong when TMX was high. The same goes for hypothesis 2b and 2c: TMX was predicted to moderate the relationship between supervisor rule breaking/self-interested behavior and subordinate's intention to quit. As a result of this moderation, the relationship between supervisor rule breaking/self-interested behavior and subordinate's intention to quit would be less strong when TMX was high. Interaction effects could be revealed between SIBxTMX and ASxTMX for turnover intentions of the employee, but not for the interaction between SRBxTMX (Table 2). Simple effect analyses showed that the slope was significant when TMX was low (p<.001 for self-interested behavior and abusive supervision).

For hypothesis 2a, we explored the shape of the interaction by comparing the correlation between abusive supervision and subordinate's intention to quit for those who fell above the median on TMX (N = 64) and those who fell below it (N = 72). In a high TMX environment the correlation between abusive supervision and subordinate's intention to quit was less strong (r = .271, p < .05) than in a low TMX environment (r = .409, p < .01). This provides support for hypothesis 2a.

We performed the same median-split for hypothesis 2c: the correlation between self-interested behavior and subordinate's intention to quit was indeed less strong in a high TMX environment ($N = 65, r = .180, p = .151$) than in a low TMX environment ($N = 72, r = .304, p < .01$).

Supervisor's job satisfaction

Hypothesis 3a/b/c predicted that TMX would moderate the relationship between abusive supervision/supervisor rule breaking/self-interested behavior and supervisor job satisfaction. As a result of this moderation, the relationship between abusive supervision/supervisor rule breaking/self-interested behavior and supervisor job satisfaction would be stronger when TMX was high. Simple effect analyses showed that the slope was significant when TMX was high ($p < .05$).

The TMX median-split confirmed all three hypotheses: the correlation between abusive supervision and supervisor's job satisfaction was stronger in a high TMX ($N = 65, r = .209, p = .098$) environment than in a low TMX environment ($N = 72, r = -.114, p = .353$). The correlation between supervisor rule breaking and supervisor's job satisfaction was also stronger in case of high TMX ($N = 65, r = .235, p = .059$) than in case of low TMX ($N = 72, r = -.067, p = .588$). And the correlation between self-interested behavior and supervisor's job satisfaction was equally stronger in case of high TMX ($N = 65, r = .239, p = .055$) than in case of low TMX ($N = 72, r = .068, p = .582$).

Supervisor's affective commitment

Hypothesis 4a/b/c predicted that TMX would moderate the relationship between abusive supervision/supervisory rule breaking/self-interested behavior and supervisor affective commitment. As a result of this moderation, the relationship between abusive supervision/supervisory rule breaking/self-interested behavior and supervisor affective commitment would be stronger when TMX was high. Simple effect analyses showed that the slope was significant when TMX was high ($p < .01$ for supervisor rule breaking and abusive supervision; $p < .001$ for self-interested behavior).

The TMX median-split confirmed again all three hypotheses: the correlation between abusive supervision and supervisor's affective commitment was stronger in a high TMX ($N = 64, r = .347, p < .01$) environment than in a low TMX environment ($N = 72, r = -.072, p = .549$). The correlation between supervisor rule breaking and supervisor's affective commitment was also stronger in case of high TMX ($N = 64, r = .289, p < .05$) than in case of low TMX ($N = 72, r = .096, p = .421$). And the correlation between self-interested behavior and supervisor's affective commitment was equally stronger in case of high TMX ($N = 65, r = .442, p < .01$) than in case of low TMX ($N = 72, r = .076, p = .526$).

Discussion

Although the interest in unethical leadership and its consequences has increased in the past few years, it has been limited mainly to the abusive supervision research by Tepper (2000) and Tepper et al. (2001; 2006). There has been research about the consequences of ethical leadership (Brown, Trevino & Harrison, 2005), but less is known about the consequences of unethical or toxic leadership.

Toxic leadership research is starting to suffer from the proliferation of terms, e.g. abusive supervision (Tepper, 2000) and social undermining (Duffy et al., 2002) that are interpersonal in nature, or supervisor rule breaking (Greenbaum & Folger, 2008), which does not necessarily involve direct supervisor-subordinate interactions.

We therefore think that it's important to unify the research into one direction: we believe that toxic leadership should be seen as a general term which includes different kinds of bad leadership behavior. Our study largely confirms this: we found a clear pattern among the different toxic leadership scales, which suggests that the different concepts have something in common. They intercorrelate to a certain amount (Table 1). This means that the concepts are not completely interchangeable and measure the same, but do share a common ground. We believe that they differentiate between different aspects of the broader concept of toxic leadership, which all are, in essence, self-serving.

The present study also confirms that there are boundaries to the effects of toxic leadership, as was already suggested by research from Stouten (2008), Stouten and Trip (2009) and Padilla et al. (2007). Although there has been some research on moderators in the toxic leadership research, none have considered TMX.

TMX has proven to moderate the relationship between the three different measures of toxic leadership (abusive supervision, supervisor rule breaking and self-interested behavior) and the three outcomes (subordinates' intention to quit, supervisor job satisfaction and supervisor affective commitment). One exception to this rule is the non-significant interaction effect between TMX, supervisory rule breaking and turnover intention. This was something that we did not expect. The reason behind it remains unclear; it may indicate that a supervisor who breaks rules is not reason enough to think about leaving your job.

We also considered the possibility that toxic leadership may have an effect on the toxic leader himself. We have proven that in accordance with high TMX, leaders may experience more job satisfaction and affective commitment, even though they are considered toxic leaders. We offered the explanation that leaders may feel supported in their 'bad behaviors' in a high TMX team.

Strengths & Limitations

Every research has its limitations; so does ours. A first important limitation is the cross-sectional nature of our research. It is therefore not possible to infer causality. Previous research, however, has shown that toxic leadership is an antecedent of plenty negative outcomes (e.g., Tepper, 2000). This provides some support for our assumption about the direction of the relationship.

A second limitation to our research is that all toxic leadership behavior is based on subjective reporting by the subordinates. In an ideal situation, we should have objective data about toxic leaders, but this is not easily attained. A strength of our research is the multi-source nature of our survey. Both supervisors and subordinates were asked for their input. Such a multi-source design has been argued to be able to reduce common method bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003).

A further concern is that subordinates may have given socially desirable answers, in fear of retaliation by their leader. Although everything was assured to be strictly confidential with anonymous surveys, the latter were sent out at work addresses. However, it is our belief that most people were aware that, since there was no need to fill in a name, their leaders could not be informed of their answers.

Because we conducted online surveys, these were not in a controlled environment. This brings the danger that some respondents did not follow the directions of the mail which stated that subordinates should use a different link than supervisors. To prevent this we gave clear instructions and additional questions concerning the number of people under their lead. Surveys that indicated a possible mistake in target group were withheld from the analysis.

Practical Implications

An important practical implication of our research is that in the case of high TMX, toxic leaders may actually feel supported in their behavior and even experience a higher level of job satisfaction and affective commitment. Stouten, De Cremer and Van Dijk (2005) and Stouten and Tripp (2009) already showed that subordinates sometimes tolerate the abusive behavior of their supervisors. An organization may thus not be fooled by the good relations that a team may have and the satisfaction of the team leader. In the long run, a toxic leader is never good, neither for the organization nor for the subordinates. Organizations must be vigilant that they look beyond what's on the surface, to prevent the toxic behavior of a leader and its effects. The effects can be more serious than is traditionally considered, as it has already been argued by Cialdini et al. (2004).

More specifically, Cialdini et al. (2004) referred to the negative effects that unethical practices can have on employees, such as lower productivity and job satisfaction, and higher absenteeism. Managers should thus be aware of the high, but sometimes forgotten, costs of toxic behavior.

Supervisors in particular, who are seen as representatives of the organizations, serve as a role model and are thoroughly watched by subordinates. This may have the effect that we investigated, that is, intention to quit, or other retributive means such as reducing effort, citizenship behaviors and commitment, with the intention of getting back at their supervisors (Greenbaum & Folger, 2008). It may also lead to rule breaking behavior of the subordinates themselves, leading to negative spiraling effect in which other organization members start to copy the behaviors (see Andersson and Pearson, 1999).

It's also important to know that good relations in a team can at least partially buffer the negative effects of toxic leadership. If the toxic leader is there to stay, it can be useful to work on team relations so that the subordinates experience less negative effects of their toxic leader.

Future Research

The present study points out the fact that there is a common ground in the different toxic leadership concepts. Organizational scholars have been employing many different concepts, terms and definitions in their research. Future research should thus not bring more concepts, but should rather unify the different aspects of previous studies for a more unifying and intercomparable research field.

Another aspect that needs to be considered by scholars are the boundary conditions to toxic leadership. The negative effects are well-known, but for practical reasons it may be important to investigate what limits these negative effects. We have proven that TMX can, at least partially, buffer the effects of toxic leadership. If researched further, important practical advice toward organizations may be found.

Thirdly, more attention should be paid to the effects of toxic leadership on the leader himself. We found no previous research on this topic. We have made a first step in this direction by showing that toxic supervisors in a high TMX team are more satisfied and committed to the organization.

An interesting area of research may be a further investigation on why people react the way they do to toxic behavior. Greenbaum and Folger (2008) suggest that outcomes of unethical interpersonal behavior are explained by the fact that people do not like to be treated poorly (see interpersonal justice; Greenberg, 1993).

They also mention that unethical behaviors that do not directly involve people but do elicit a reaction may be explained by Folger's (1998; 2001) statement that people care about fairness out of moral obligations that emanate from universal principles of morality. It can be interesting to investigate if Greenbaum and Folger (2008) are right in stating that different reasons underlie the reactions of people to toxic behavior.

We have taken a first step in showing that there is more to toxic leadership than abusive supervision, and that relations may be more complicated than a straightforward negative effect. We have shown a significant effect of toxic leadership behavior on the leader himself. We hope that our research will inspire others for additional research on this topic.