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Advancing leadership in sport: Time to 'actually' take the blinkers off?

John P. Mills · Ian D. Boardley

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Key points

1. When assessing socially undesirable attitudes such as dark leadership traits, we urge scholars to avoid relying on qualitative accounts alone and encourage the use of indirect methods, and theory-driven empirical research.

2. Sports leadership research should move beyond assessing behavioural outcomes alone and instead assess cognition alongside behaviour.

3. We strongly question the 'ends justify the means' attitude suggested in Cruickshank and Collins' work and suggest that practitioners consider the longer term ramifications associated with such an approach.

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Abstract

In a recent article entitled Advancing Leadership in Sport: Time to Take off the Blinkers?' published in Sports Medicine, Cruickshank and Collins presented what they deemed to be a critical analysis of extant leadership research in sport, attempting to establish a rationale for a greater emphasis on both the cognitive and 'darker' (i.e., socially undesirable) sides of leadership. The purpose of the present article is to challenge and clarify a number of misrepresentations in the arguments made in the foundation article, and to question some of the resultant recommendations made. Specifically, the present response will focus on Cruickshank and Collins' (a) lack of specificity regarding the actual 'dark' traits they are apparently purporting to be effective leadership traits, (b) the dearth of theoretical and empirical support for their claims relating to the benefits of 'dark' leadership (c) misrepresentation of transformational leadership theory, (d) decision to ignore other relevant theoretical frameworks when presenting their arguments, and (e) apparent confirmation bias in the selective use of literature to support their arguments. Leadership research in sport may well benefit from new directions and methodological advancements and on this level we concur with the aims of Cruickshank and Collins' article. However, we believe their misrepresentations and inappropriate recommendations do little to advance this area of research, and potentially serve to take it backwards not forwards.

1 Introduction

Discussions around the bright (i.e., socially desirable) and dark (i.e., socially undesirable) sides of sports leadership have resurfaced recently [1,2,3]. While discussing both the bright and dark side of leadership has its merits, it is important not to glorify behaviours and traits that can potentially be harmful. As such, the present article aims to clarify a range of theoretical misconceptions of both dark and transformational leadership, as discussed within Cruickshank and Collins [1,2]. Specific attention is paid to the following arguments.

First, Cruickshank and Collins [2] (p.4) argue that leaders are not necessarily more effective should they "have a more complete, brighter, or stronger set of 'gold standard' behaviours", suggesting that both bright and dark traits can work in tandem. Second, they suggest that the findings from their recent research encourage an 'it depends' approach to the study of leadership. Rather than behaving in an authentic manner, Cruickshank and Collins [2] (p.4) appear to suggest that those who can manage the impressions of others and present the impression of multiple competencies will ultimately achieve greater success: "...it is those who can use a host of different methods in a host of different ways for a host of different purposes in an optimum fashion who will achieve expertise and outperform others". Finally, Cruickshank and Collins [2] criticise transformational leadership; particularly focusing on the attribution of labels and their impression that the approach cannot inform day-to-day practice.

2 Conceptual concerns related to dark leadership.

While Cruickshank and Collins [2] fail to define the specific traits they are referring to when discussing dark leadership, given their previous work [1, 4] it is likely that narcissism, Machiavelianism, hubris, and social dominance will be the focus [5]. First, narcissism can be characterised, within non-clinical settings, as arrogance, self-absorption, entitlement, and hostility [6]. Individuals high in narcissistic tendencies exhibit a grandiose view of self, often perceiving themselves as unique and worthy of admiration [5]. They are often viewed as self-confident (i.e., hubris), which helps them to rise to positions of power. However, these same traits may result in their eventual downfall [6]. Ong et al. [7] (p.1) provide an amusing analogy of the process of following a leader that possesses highly narcissistic traits:

> "Relationships with narcissistic leaders can be a paradoxical experience, much like eating chocolate cake. The first bite is usually rich in flavor and texture, and extremely gratifying. After a while, however, the richness of this flavour makes one feel increasingly nauseous. Being led by a narcissist could be a similar experience."

Consistent with the deleterious aspects of narcissistic leadership alluded to through this analogy, recent research has linked coach narcissism with increased dominance, reduced empathy, increased frequency of controlling coach

behaviours and reduced frequency of autonomy-supportive coach behaviours [8]. If Cruickshank and Collins [2] were indeed including narcissism within their categorisation of dark leadership, the outcomes associated with more narcissistic coaches in the work of Matosic and colleagues [8] are not ones we would consider to be representative of advanced leadership.

Second, Machiavellianism is characterised as the manipulation and exploitation of others. Those who present Machavellian tendencies are considered cunning and possess a willingness to deceive for their own gains. Leaders described as Machiavellian seek control over followers and are driven by a need for power [9]. They tactically self-present and use their skill in impression management to coerce others into behaving as they desire [10]. Third, hubris is categorised as excessive pride and an inflated sense of self-confidence [5]. Leaders high in hubristic tendencies over value their own contributions and downplay the achievements of others. Likewise, because hubristic leaders have a distorted view of their self-worth, they tend to discount information that conflicts with this self-perception [11]. Lastly, social dominance is categorised as an individual's preference for stable hierarchical systems [12]. Leaders high in social dominance tend to place high demands on others, which often results in the leader creating a pressurised, unsupportive, inconsiderate, and unfair environment [5].

While Cruickshank and Collins [1,2] assert that supposed dark traits such as Machiavellianism, narcissism, hubris and dominance may be effective, there is little empirical evidence to support such a claim. Further and like many before them, they fail to define what they mean by 'effective'. While effectiveness is often gauged from a leader's performance, the latter is susceptible to a range of extraneous influences and this approach takes a narrow view of the processes involved [5]. Further, much of the dark leadership literature is either qualitative self-reports from leaders or cross-sectional surveys of followers. Given the socially-sensitive nature of the topic, self-reports may be fallible to recall error and in particular, social desirability bias [31]. Furthermore, given the lack of longitudinal research [7, 37], cross-sectional data may be skewed towards short-term snapshots of a moment in time before the influence of dark leadership traits and behaviours can truly become apparent.

As Dasborough and Ashkanasey [13] suggest, the relationship between leader and follower is likely to suffer if the follower perceives their leader to be demonstrating characteristics associated with dark leadership. Once the followers realise that their leader has been manipulative, controlling, and egoistic it is likely their satisfaction with the leader will suffer [14,15,16,13,17]. Within sport, such an approach is unlikely to produce long-term relationships. Athletes may tolerate such selfish, manipulative, and dominant coaches in the short-term pursuit of their goals, but once results suffer, as they inevitably will, it is unlikely that the relationship will endure [21,22].

For contemporary sport leadership scholars such as Arthur et al. [29] and Ong et al. [7] the issue is less around the traits possessed by leaders and more about examining the outcomes associated with the characteristic. Using

narcissism[1] as an example, Ong et al. [7] examined whether individuals higher in narcissism have leader emergent tendencies and also whether perceptions of such leadership qualities are stable over time. Based on two samples (i.e., $N = 112$ and $N = 152$), Ong et al. [7] reported narcissism was positively associated with peer-rated leadership during initial group formation, but that these perceptions were not stable over time. While Cruickshank and Collins [2] (p. 3) acknowledge that identifying the outcomes of such behaviours has done much to advance the literature, they argue that little has been done to examine how and when these behaviours should be selected and utilised:

> "behaviour-focused work has done much to identify possible leadership 'tools' (i.e., behaviours) but little for how and why they may be successfully selected, combined and deployed; issues which lie at the true heart of leader effectiveness in applied settings."

Like Cruickshank and Collins [2] (p.3), we agree that leadership scholars could broaden their horizons beyond behavioural outcomes alone. We disagree, however, that the focus should now turn to how behaviours can be "successfully selected, combined and deployed". Rather than encouraging spurious behaviours and self-presentation, scholars should attempt to find ways of examining the antecedent motives behind the behaviour and examine the prior mental representations, which form the character. While followers may not initially see through false idols using scripted behaviours, when they do, trust is inevitably damaged [16]. Should followers be manipulated to work for the leader's self-interest, once the motive for the manipulation becomes apparent, it is likely that the relationship will be annulled [16]. We would like to propose that, rather than examining the outcomes of behaviour and leadership training, scholarly attention should be directed at examining the effects of value congruence and group dynamics. Like Cruickshank and Collins [2] we agree that context is key in the perceived effectiveness of the leader, but argue that the notion of a proverbial toolbox of disingenuous behaviours is flawed. Until we have a greater empirical understanding of the mechanisms involved within the leader-follower dynamic, it is unlikely that meaningful change will be achieved.

3 Conceptual clarifications related to transformational leadership.

We also believe there are some misinterpretations of the transformational leadership literature present to Cruickshank and Collins [2]. First, Cruickshank and Collins [2] (p.4) argue that it is unhelpful and arguably pointless for Bass and Steidlmeier [17] to "try and classify leaders with general labels". While the point Cruickshank and Collins [2] make regarding labelling leaders is arguably valid, Bass and Steidlmeier [17] do not do this. We believe the inherent suggestion that an archetypal transformational leader exists represents a common

[1] Narcissism, in this instance, refers to extreme selfishness, a grandiose view of one's own ability and a craving for admiration [6].

misinterpretation of transformational leadership theory. A more critical examination of relevant theory reveals there is no such thing as a transformational leader, merely those who display transformational qualities [30]. Our issue with this particular assertion of Cruickshank and Collins ([2]) is further highlighted by the fact there is currently no universally accepted definition for the number of qualities or behaviours that need to be demonstrated by a leader in order to be classified as transformational. As such, Bass and Steidlmeier's [17] are no different to Cruickshank and Collins in using overarching terms to discuss behaviours and traits (i.e., authentic and pseudo-transformational leadership, and bright and dark leadership).

Next, Cruickshank and Collins [2] question whether transformational leadership is able to inform day-to-day interaction – suggesting that transformational leadership is sub-optimal. While we agree that transformational leadership is sub-optimal, for us, all theories and models are sub-optimal to some degree. As the first reviewer of this manuscript notes "Throwing a theory away because it is sub-optimal is like throwing a good car away because it has a puncture. If all the sub-optimal theories in psychology were thrown away, in my opinion, there would be no theories left." Further, were transformational leadership behaviour unable to inform day-to-day interaction, as Cruickshank and Collins [2] suggest, then the question we pose in response is how else can the results of the many intervention studies [32,33,34,35,36] that have been conducted be explained?

They then go on to question how to deploy transformational leadership behaviours such as intellectual stimulation and high performance expectations. Like much of their manuscript, the examples Cruickshank and Collins [2] provide regarding the use of such behaviour unfortunately demonstrate their misunderstanding of what transformational leadership is and the research literature that surrounds it. In their first example, Cruickshank and Collins [2] offer the example of high performance expectations being achieved through the manipulated sacking of an underperforming colleague. This is not and can never be considered an example of high performance expectations from the transformational leadership literature. It may (or may not) be some other method of achieving high performance, but it is unquestionably not transformational. Again, to imply this clearly demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding of the very basic theoretical premise of transformational leadership. Instead of being transformational in nature, such an example is a clear example of a transactional behaviour, thus it cannot represent transformational leadership. Further, we are unclear why manipulation is required given that the colleague is underperforming, but this is a secondary point. Further, a subtlety that the authors are perhaps missing is that a transformational leader may of course use transactional leadership (e.g., reprimanding, sacking, rewarding, praising) behaviour within their practice. Indeed, Bass [25] clearly states that transactional leadership (appropriately administered) will serve as the foundation by which transformational leadership operates.

Next, Cruickshank and Collins [2] (p.4) argue that Bass and Steidlmeier [17] (p. 186) contradict themselves when stating "authentic transformational

leaders may have to be manipulative at times for what they judge to be the common good, but [this] manipulation is ... an infrequent practice". We believe this represents another common misconception within the transformational leadership literature. While the term authentic transformational leadership' implies authenticity (i.e., genuine), it actually means 'true' [13]. Although authentic or 'true' transformational leadership qualities are proposed to include integrity, moral and ethical principles and authenticity [18,19,23], these qualities are not requirements of transformational leadership [17]. While leaders may have to, at times, be manipulative, according to Bass and Steidlmeier [17] if the manipulation is not for the common good, the behaviour can no longer be considered truly transformational. Alas, this is not a contradiction. It would only be contradictory were Bass and Steidlmeier [17] to state that manipulation for selfish gains was acceptable for those displaying truly transformational qualities.

As Cruickshank and Collins [2] point out, there were some initial disagreements around whether leaders using supposed dark behaviours could be transformational. Burns [24] and Bass [25] disagreed over whether immoral leaders could induce positive outcomes in followers while demonstrating the behaviours and qualities associated with transformational leadership. Burns [24] proposed, broadly, that only leaders of moral virtue could advance followers towards self-sacrifice for the greater good. For Burns [24] (p.36) "leadership is a process of morality to the degree that leaders engage with followers on the basis of shared motives and values and goals". In contrast, Bass [25] argued that leaders should not be distinguished based on the behaviours they present, but rather on their intentions.

Herein lies the crux of the problem, in that traits and behaviours are, in the main, value neutral [17]. As such, labelling them without context is futile. The characteristic and subsequent behaviour are arguably unimportant. What is important, however, is the individual and the motive behind the presentation of the behaviour. Should leaders present supposed dark traits or behaviours in the interest of the group, as Cruickshank and Collins [2] suggest, then arguably, they are no longer dark. For example, while manipulation is generally considered a dark behaviour, should the manipulation be for the greater good and not in the self-interest of the leader, then the behaviour should not be considered dark. Leaders do not use these behaviours in silos and are rarely all 'dark' or all 'bright'. As discussed within the transformational leadership literature, leaders use both bright and dark behaviours and are often two sides of the same coin [13]. What differentiates the leader is not the behaviour itself, but rather whether the behaviour is adopted for egoistic or altruistic reasons.

4 Broader methodological concerns

Alas, it seems that there may be an element of confirmation bias, either implicitly or explicitly, within Cruickshank and Collins' [1,2] work. Evidence that supports their position appears to be favoured, methodologies selectively used,

and participants purposely sampled (i.e., qualitative interviews with suspected leaders who display dark leadership behaviours). Further, 25% of the total references within their [2] article were self-citations (i.e., 14/56). That said, we appreciate that there are few sport-based manuscripts examining the issues discussed within this article. We should not, however, jump to conclusions based on a few pieces of primarily qualitative research to further a research agenda.

It is also worth noting that the basis for the assertions within Cruickshank and Collins [1,2] also appear fundamentally flawed. According to Cruickshank and Collins [2] (p. 3):

> "...leaders of British Olympic and professional sports teams selectively used Machiavellian, ruthless, dominant and sceptical behaviours as defined by Hogan and Hogan (2001) and Judge, Piccolo, and Kosalka [5] to further their own agendas and/or shape, block or derail the agendas of others. Significantly, these behaviours were also felt to be effective parts of their approach [1], with some reporting that they would have been more successful if they had used these behaviours more often in relevant scenarios."

However, such misguided beliefs are not uncommon within self-report research. Many perpetrators of immoral acts throughout history have justified, sanitised and cognitively reduced the effects of their actions [27]. However, rationalising behaviours based upon purportedly desirable outcomes, does not make them any less harmful. For us, arguing that 'the end justifies the means' is a potentially dangerous rhetoric, especially when it is largely supported by qualitative evidence from people who appear to already hold such beliefs. While this may appeal to those who hold similar beliefs, it may be the case that they are looking for evidence that supports their own distorted position, rather than considering the impact their actions have on those who follow. Like Cruickshank and Collins [2], we agree that greater focus on leader cognition would be beneficial to the field. However, given the socially undesirable nature of dark leadership traits and the aforementioned methodological issues when conducting such research, we suggest that a greater emphasis be placed on the use of indirect/ implicit[2] measures in future research rather than relying on interview data or explicit measures of deliberate attitudes alone.

5 Conclusion

In sum, like Cruickshank and Collins [2], we agree that leadership scholars could broaden their horizons beyond behavioural outcomes alone. However, rather than focusing on explicit cognitive processes (i.e., decision making) or behaviours, we suggest a third way where implicit and explicit attitudes are

[2] Note that there is some linguistic ambiguity within the literature regarding the term 'implicit'. For the purposes of this review the term implicit refers to an indirect measure of assessment [26]

collected in tandem with their behavioural outcomes. We do not, however, suggest a ‘toolbox’ based approach, whereby behaviours are selected based on their perceived effectiveness. Like Gardner and Avolio [10], Luthans and Avolio [19], and Banks et al. [20] we believe authenticity to be an important characteristic of leadership and would discourage the use of tactical impression management. Furthermore, we would also discourage an ’ends justify the means’ type attitude. While the participants recruited within Cruickshank and Collins [1,2] may have justified their use of darker behaviours in the name of effectiveness, such an approach only tells one side of the story. In fairness, Cruickshank and Collins [1] acknowledge this as a limitation of their research and it is hoped that this will be addressed in future studies. As a reviewer of this manuscript commented ”It is time for us to stop ”preaching from the bleachers, roll up our sleeves, and conduct some theory-driven empirical research in this area”.

Future research should, therefore, at a minimum, include athlete perceptions and preferably, be conducted over multiple time points. While we do not in anyway discredit qualitative leadership research (we have conducted similar research ourselves Mills and Boardley [28]), we urge caution when drawing assumptions from skewed (i.e., all middle aged male) samples offering self-reported data. Finally, we question why Cruickshank and Collins have focused on transformational leadership alone when criticising the leadership literature. While we clearly see overlaps between bright and dark leadership and the authentic and pseudo-transformational leadership, it appears that Cruickshank and Collins have failed to fully immerse themselves within the literature. Their work has attempted to set a new agenda for sports based leadership research, yet the literature they have reviewed fails to cover a range of seemingly relevant theories and models (e.g., path-goal-theory, servant leader, sacrificial leadership, leader-member-exchange, charismatic leadership, visionary leadership, authentic leadership, implicit leadership theories, sceptical leadership, contingency theory, situational approaches, narcissistic leadership, to name a few). While we agree that transformational leadership has its flaws, no theory is perfect and we see no benefit in attempting to discredit the theory through misinterpretation. Finally, we hope that this response is accepted with the spirit of collegiality that is intended. We commend Cruickshank and Collins for their effort and hope that our comments go some way in clarifying the misrepresentations made.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

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Conflicts of Interest

John Mills and Ian Boardley declare that they have no conflicts of interest relevant to the content of this article.

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