The Impact of Destructive Leadership in Higher Education

Abstract

Leaders within multiple industries claim cynicism is a factor in employee burnout, emotional exhaustion, turnover, adversely affecting organizational citizenship behavior, commitment, and effectiveness. Leadership is frequently constructed positively, but recent abuses of authority have revived interest in the dark side of leadership. Terms like destructive, toxic, and abusive are used interchangeably but describe the same phenomenon: interpersonal influences and downward hostility by those in positions of authority negatively affect followers and undermine the best interest of the organization. While organizations have emphasized the benefits of effective leadership, aspirational notions of leadership differ from what is actually experienced. This paper examines connections between toxic leadership and cynicism in an institution of higher learning, and argue they are worthy of additional exploration for leadership scholars and practitioners.

Introduction

The impact of poor leadership and cynicism is increasingly recognized as a problem in organizations. Research suggests that human capital may be an important, sustainable, competitive advantage that organizations have, as employees represent the source of courage, innovation, future leadership, and creativity (Chaleff, 2003; Johnson, 2009; Kellerman, 2008). In addition, they are the link between the organization and its stakeholders. More specifically, research indicates that cynical employees are more likely to challenge or speak negatively about their employer (Stanley, Meyer, & Topolnytsky, 2005). Additionally, there is evidence that employee's negative comments adversely affect the customer's experience, and the bottom line (Meyer & Schwager, 2007; Verhoef, Lemon, Parasuraman, Roggeveen, Tsiros, & Schlesinger, 2009). Therefore, how a follower feels about his or her institution is of importance. Given that connections have been established between job satisfaction and performance, the importance of fostering a positive work environment and developing human capital becomes a worthy item of focus. Additionally, the extent of the problem of worker cynicism appears to be pervasive. Polls report that over 50% of survey respondents describe themselves as cynical at work (Hochwarter, James, Johnson, & Ferris, 2004). These broad-based feelings of cynicism show little sign of decreasing as companies continue to lay off workers, outsource operations, and cut entire branches of organizations to increase revenue.

The problem of follower cynicism is not limited to the workplace, but rather is endemic throughout the world across a broad spectrum of organizations. Mistrust of institutions across multiple and diverse sectors such as academia, government, banks, big business, and the military is more pervasive now than at any time since the era of the Great Depression (Andersson & Bateman, 1997; Caldwell, 2006; Kanter & Mirvis, 1989; Kouzes & Posner, 1993). According to the National Leadership Index that surveys Americans' attitudes toward their leaders in 13 major sectors, confidence in leaders fell to the lowest point since the index was established in 2005 (Rosenthal, 2011). Follower cynicism appears to be widespread, and it negatively impacts the organizations tainted by it. The complex relationship between perceived poor leadership and cynicism, and its effects, is worthy of additional attention and exploration.

Literature Review

Cynicism in the Organization

The term cynicism originated from ancient Greek philosophers called Cynics, who rejected all conventions designed to control men, such as religion, manners, or rules of decency, advocating instead the pursuit of virtue in a simple and non-materialistic lifestyle (Caldwell, 2006). Early research defined cynicism as an attitude distinguished by a "dislike for and distrust of others" (Cook & Medley, 1954, p. 418). More recent work has equated cynicism as an attitude characterized by scornful or jaded negativity, suspicion, and a general distrust of the integrity or professed motives of others (Andersson & Bateman, 1997). Defined concisely, cynicism is the condition of lost belief. Lost to cynicism is belief in the possibility of a change, improvement, or betterment of current or future circumstances along with the ability to aspire to a different state. The hurt, disappointment, and anger that follow unmet expectations and unfulfilled goals give rise to a perspective that is overwhelmingly negative. As such, cynics "agree that lying, putting on a false face, and taking advantage of others are fundamental to human character" and conclude that people are "just out for themselves" and that "such cynical attitudes about life are paralleled in attitudes about work" (Mirvis & Kanter, 1992, pp. 50-52). Thus, members who are cynical can influence an entire organization and perhaps even hinder an organization from reaching its goals. Cynicism in the workplace is emerging as a new paradigm resulting from a critical appraisal of the motives, actions, and values of an employer and is a construct worthy of further exploration.

Most studies defined organizational cynicism as a negative work attitude that has the potential to affect numerous organizational and individual outcomes (Abraham, 2000; Andersson, 1996; Andersson & Bateman, 1997). Cynicism's influence upon an organization is not extensively examined by scholars, nor is the essence of the attitude "characterized by frustration, hopelessness, and disillusionment, as well as contempt toward and distrust of a person, group, ideology, social convention, or institution" (Andersson, 1996, pp. 1397-1398). Scholars differ in defining the origin, and therefore, the complete nature or definition of organizational cynicism. James (2005) defined organizational cynicism as "attitudes related to one's employing organization, characterized by negative beliefs, feelings, and related behaviors in response to a history of personal and or social experiences susceptible to change by environmental influences" (p. 7). Thus, an individual's prior history is key to unlocking the door of cynicism. Dean, Brandes, and Dharwadkar (1998) described organizational cynicism as a negative attitude toward one's employing organization, comprised of the belief that the individual's organization lacks integrity, fairness, sincerity, and honesty. These definitions are not entirely at odds. In fact, they could be said to have similarities to Abraham's (2000) suggestion that cynicism toward the organization could result from workers' perceptions of a lack of congruence between their own personal values and those of the organization. This idea of value congruence between individuals and organizations is particularly appealing for the study of cynicism and leadership because values play a central role in leading followers, and influencing organizational culture (Schein, 2010).

There is ample literature supporting the importance of value congruence between leaders and followers. For example, Lord and Brown (2001) theorized that values influence follower affect,

cognition, and behavior by interacting with follower self-concepts. While Argyris' (1964) seminal work on shared values and goal congruence theory emphasized the importance of promoting the integration of individual and organizational goals, and suggested that incongruence between the two may cause unintended consequences such as passivity and aggression. Such results may interfere with system (organizational) effectiveness and individual growth and satisfaction. This is consistent with Dean and colleagues' (1998) conceptualization that cynicism is a multidimensional construct developed by a person and the organization, made up of three components: beliefs, affects, and behavioral tendencies. Specifically, the cognitive dimension of organizational cynicism is the belief that organizations lack such principles as "fairness, honesty, and sincerity" (p. 346). The affective dimension refers to the positive and negative emotional reactions individuals may feel toward an organization, and the behavioral dimension of organizational cynicism refers to the negative tendencies in the expression of strong criticisms toward the organization. In the simplest of terms, cynicism is the feeling that develops whenever expectations do not match with reality.

With regard to consequences of cynicism, research has shown that cynicism has important *negative* ramifications, contributing to substantial costs for both organizations and individuals resulting from increases in stress, emotional exhaustion, burnout, job tension, job satisfaction, and turnover (Abraham, 2000; James, 2005). It also reduces citizenship behavior, productivity, commitment, and organizational identity (Andersson & Bateman, 1997; Bedian, 2007; Mirvis & Kanter, 1992). In essence, cynicism can undermine leaders, institutions, and the practices they support.

Given the pernicious impact of organizational cynicism, it is surprising that a close examination of the literature in this area reveals little empirical research or rigorous inquiry on organizational cynicism and its relationship to leadership styles or behaviors. This is especially notable, given that as Bass (1990) stated, "leadership is often regarded as the single most critical factor in the success or failure of institutions" (p. 8). The majority of studies have focused on the consequences and effects of cynical employees in business models conducted in the private sector, and typically presented very specific antecedents for study (e.g. workforce reduction, layoffs, organizational performance, and executive compensation; Andersson, 1996; Andersson & Bateman, 1997; Brandes, Castro, James, Martinez, Matherly, Ferris & Hochwater, 2007). These studies are largely silent on the role a leader's behavior might have in influencing organizational cynicism of their followers.

Destructive Leadership

Research in the area of leadership traditionally tends to be seen in an overly positive light. Every week commentaries post feature tables, posters, or quotes exhorting all the good things associated with leadership and the bad attributes associated with being a manager, boss, and the like. The leadership publishing, recruiting, and development industries have all promoted the notion that leadership is a good thing. All it takes to be a leader is to be authentic, leverage one's strengths, demonstrate executive presence, serve others, or adopt these seven habits. However, recent abuses of authority in a range of organizations—business, politics, education, and the military—have revived interest in the dark side of leadership. In recent years, scholarly publications have used a variety of constructs to describe these dark or destructive forms of

leadership: abusive (Tepper, 2000), tyrannical (Ashforth, 1994), unethical or bad (Kellerman, 2004), and toxic (Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Pelletier, 2009; Reed, 2004; Whicker, 1996). Although these terms are used differently by different authors, they are often used to describe the same phenomenon: interpersonal influences and downward hostility by those in positions of authority that negatively affect followers and ultimately undermine the best interest of the organization. For example, Lipman-Blumen (2005) maintained that leaders are considered toxic when they "engage in numerous *destructive behaviors* and exhibit certain dysfunctional personal characteristics" (p. 18), whereas Reed (2004) stated that a single specific behavior does not necessarily cause toxic leadership, rather it is the "cumulative effect of demotivational behavior on unit morale and climate over time that tells the tale" (p. 67).

Attempts to define toxic leadership are numerous, and vary from study to study. For example, Einarsen, Aaslad, & Skogstad (2007) propose that destructive leadership should account for destructive behavior aimed at both subordinates and at the organization. With that in mind, they suggested the following all-inclusive definition of destructive leadership: "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" (p. 208). Thus, Einarsen and colleagues focused their definition on the receivers or victims of the toxicity. Taking a slightly different vantage point, Schmidt's (2008) research systematically attempted to bring some comprehensive understanding to the topic of toxic leadership by defining what toxic leadership is and is not, while developing and evaluating a new measure he called the Toxic Leadership Scale. His research concluded that toxic leadership is a much broader construct than abusive supervision. Toxic leadership is a multidimensional construct that includes elements of abusive supervision along with narcissism, authoritarianism, self-promotion, and unpredictability. Whicker (1996) stated "toxic leaders may be of one of several types, but all toxic leaders share three defining characteristics: deep-seated inadequacy, selfish values, and deceptiveness" (p. 53). Scholars Kusy and Holloway (2009) summed up the literature aptly, addressing both the leader and the follower, cause and effect, saying that toxic personality is "anyone who demonstrates a pattern of counterproductive work behaviors that debilitate individuals, teams, and even organizations over the long term" (p. 4). The underlying tenet to toxic leadership is that it is "viewed as a detractor from motivation, alignment, and commitment to organizational goals that serve as the hallmark of good leadership" (Reed & Bullis, 2009, p. 6).

Although there are obvious similarities among these concepts, researchers have yet to adopt a common definition or conceptual framework of toxic leadership. Thus, Reed's (2004) claim that "toxic leadership, like leadership in general, is more easily described than defined, but terms like self-aggrandizing, petty, abusive, indifferent to unit climate, and interpersonally malicious seem to capture the concept" (p. 71). Based on national research using interviews and surveys, it has been stated that "toxic people thrive only in a toxic system" (Kusy & Holloway, 2009) where organizational leaders enable toxic behavior through lack of attention to and ignorance of the problem (Reed & Olsen, 2010). Like organizational cynicism, toxic leadership has emerged as a phenomenon of concern and a topic of discussion and research.

Methods

The data for this paper was conducted at an undergraduate university in the Mountain West region with a student body numbering approximately 4,000. [Author 2] gathered attitudinal data during Spring 2013 through the administration of three instruments and a demographic questionnaire: Cynical Attitudes Toward College Scale (CATCS), Toxic Leadership Scale (TLS), and the effectiveness scale on the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ). [Author 2] conducted a reliability analysis to measure how well a set of items measure a single characteristic or one-dimensional construct (Cortina, 1993). Although existing reliable instruments were chosen for this study, Cronbach's alpha was used to test whether the Toxic Leadership, Effective Leadership, and Organizational Cynicism instruments maintained their reliability and validity in this study after adjustment and modification. All reliabilities for the construct scale scores fell above the acceptable minimum of .70 established by Nunnally (1978). Of particular note, Schmidt's (2008) 15-item scale used to measure Overall Toxic Leadership was calculated at .95. Thus, low reliability was not a limitation of the study.

The survey was administered electronically via the internet using the Qualtrics electronic survey platform. All recruitment of participants was done through the online SONA research system. Participation was strictly voluntary and while demographic information such as gender, race or ethnicity, and class year was collected, individual respondents were not identifiable. Consent was sought electronically, in conjunction with the survey, but prior to administration. If consent was denied, connection to the survey halted without providing access to any survey questions.

A power analysis using the software package GPower (Erdfelder, Faul, Lang, & Buchner, 2007) revealed that a sample size of 285 participants would achieve 80% power to detect a medium effect size at the p=.05 level of statistical significance. Initially, 809 students were recruited from a research subject pool populated with students from psychology and leadership courses. Of that number, 315 signed up for the survey and agreed to the informed consent. Of that total, 285 students completed the entire survey, and constituted the final sample size for this study: a participation rate of just over 35 percent from the eligible subject pool. Among the 285 study participants, there were 193 (67.7%) men and 92 (32.3%) women. Additionally, the study volunteers included all four academic classes: 40 were seniors (14.0%), 138 were juniors (48.4%), 28 sophomores (9.8%), 54 freshmen (18.9%), and 25 (8.8%) did not report their class.

A multiple regression analysis was required to determine if two or more toxic leadership styles would collectively better predict organizational cynicism than any single style alone. The dependent variable was the organizational cynicism score. Five toxic leadership style scores were entered into a stepwise model selection procedure.

To achieve a comprehensive understanding of the research issues, [Author 1] collected data using qualitative methods including interviews (Rubin and Rubin 2011; Warren and Karner 2010). Survey research shows a spectrum of attitudes and behaviors and measured trends over a period of time. By supplementing surveys with interviews, we focused attention on the processes influencing such attitudes and behaviors. Students participated in unstructured, in-depth, active interviews, much like guided conversations between two individuals. To guide

conversations, a freely organized interview guide allowed [Author 1] to address several themes while providing flexibility to change focus on the fly, depending on the direction in which participants took the interview.

In total, 29 students were interviewed over a period of four months, in Fall 2013, generating an average of six pages of single-spaced fieldnotes for each interview. Nine participants were women, roughly a third of our participants and a much higher representation than in the student body (22% women). Among the 29 students who volunteered for this study, 16 were juniors (55%) and 13 were freshmen (45%). Participants responded to several themed questions eliciting conversation about their experiences as a student, the cultural climate of the institution, expectations, frustrations, leadership, and training. For each interview, main questions remained the same but follow-up questions changed as interviews progressed, focusing on specific and individualized issues. The inductive nature of these methods allowed the testing of categories and concepts in the field as they arose (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Charmaz 2001). Collectively, the interviews took about 2,000 minutes with the average length of the interview taking one hour and ten minutes. The interviews were transcribed from audio recordings and participants assigned pseudonyms.

Results

In summary, [Author 2] found evidence that a relationship exists between perceived toxic leadership and increased levels of organizational cynicism, and that followers of toxic leaders are likely to have more negative attitudes toward their organizations as a whole. This could be due not only to the toxic leader being perceived as representative of the organization, but also due to the perception that the organization does not intervene to protect its personnel. [Author 1] corroborated these discoveries with in-depth interviews. These findings reflect Reed's (2004) research that toxic leaders are anathema to the health of organizations, undermine confidence levels, and erode cohesion and esprit de corps.

Table 1

Correlations Between Perceived Predictor, Moderating, and Outcome Variables

Type of toxic leadership style	Self-promotion	Abusive	Unpredictability	Narcissism	Authoritarian	Overall Toxic leadership style	Effective leadership	Organizational cynicism	Policy cynicism
Self-promotion	-	.71*	.73*	.74*	.74*	.88*	-.68*	.38*	.29*
Abusive supervision	.71*	-	.74*	.72*	.72*	.86*	-.62*	.26*	.24*
Unpredictability	.73*	.74*	-	.78*	.73*	.89*	-.68*	.26*	.26*
Narcissism	.74*	.72*	.78*	-	.76*	.90*	-.64*	.24*	.23*
Authoritarian	.74*	.72*	.73*	.76*	-	.90*	-.70*	.28*	.23*
Overall toxic leadership style	.88*	.86*	.89*	.90*	.90*	-	-.75*	.32*	.28*
Effective leadership	-.68*	-.62*	-.68*	-.64*	-.70*	-.75*	-	-.32*	-.32*
Organizational cynicism	.38*	.26*	.26*	.24*	.28*	.32*	-.32*	-	.55*
Policy cynicism	.29*	.24*	.26*	.23*	.23*	.28*	-.32*	.55*	-

Note. Entries are Pearson correlations. $N = 285$; * $p < .01$.

The correlation matrix (see Table 1) shows statistically significant, strong positive correlations between the organizational cynicism score and various toxic leadership styles. There is evidence to suggest that students who perceive their leaders to have higher levels of toxic leadership styles on any of the five dimensions: abusive supervision, authoritarian leadership, narcissism, self-promotion, and unpredictability, tend to be more cynical about their organization.

Figure 1 is a scatter plot, which graphically depicts the relationship between the organizational cynicism score and the overall toxic leadership style score. The figure gives some indication of a positive correlation between the variables.
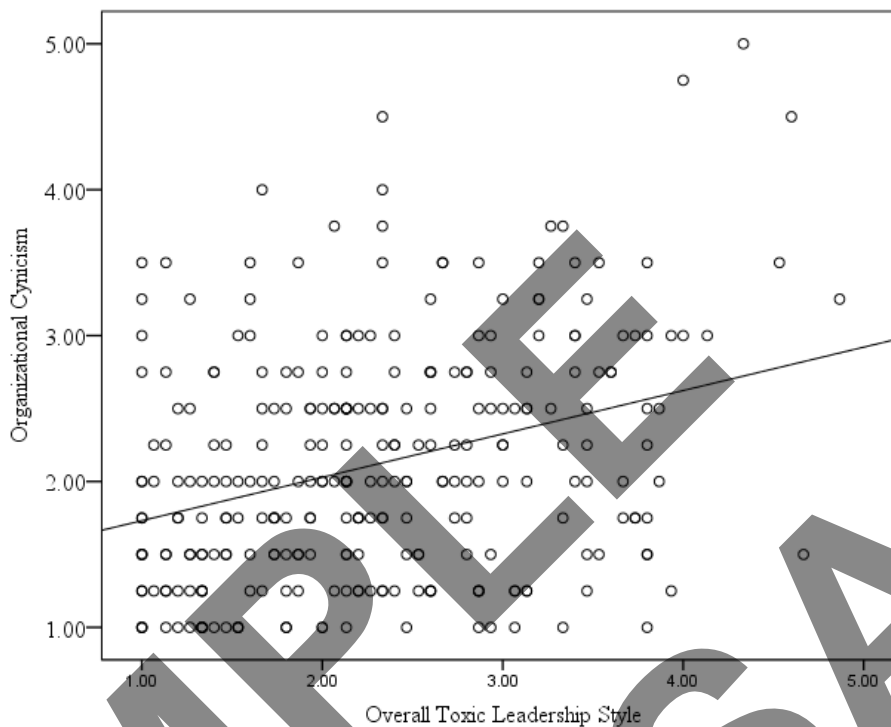
Figure 1. Scatter plot of the organizational cynicism score and the overall toxic leadership style score.

There was a statistically significant, strong positive correlation between the organizational cynicism score and the overall toxic leadership style score, $r(283) = .32$; $p < .001$. [Author 2] concluded that there is strong evidence to suggest that students who perceive their leadership to have a high level of overall toxic leadership style tend to be more cynical about the organization.

[Author 1] conducted qualitative interviews, which corroborated [Author 2's] quantitative findings, and found that almost all the students he interviewed mentioned feelings of cynicism toward the organization (26 of 29 did so without prompting). Most students attributed their cynicism to treatment by their leadership in several specific circumstances: the use of a classic trope "When I Was Your Age", tailored for use at [institution] as "We Had It Tougher Last Year" (WHITLY), authoritarian leadership in the form of micromanagement, perception that leadership did not care for students, and the experience of unmet expectations.

In the case of WHITLY, which 16 students discussed in detail (10 freshmen and 6 juniors), students accept that their upper-class peers and leadership will tell them the institutional experience was tougher in the past; however, the general consensus is that this phrase is detrimental to the morale of the student body. Glen, a freshman, tiredly mentioned, "[Our leadership] tell us that all the time." His classmate, Matt, stated, "Well, there's a common saying 'back when it was hard'. Every class before us had it harder…I don't really know how someone can say they had it harder than other classes. That happens basically every time you get [new leadership]." When asked how this narcissistic viewpoint impacted student morale, Arthur (a freshman) felt devalued: "It kind of feels like other people don't think our accomplishment was as big as what they did." Lars agreed and added his leadership repeats this phrase "to add that

ounce of pride to themselves. 'Yeah. I'm better, I've pushed myself harder, I've worked harder [than you].'" These views support a cynical reaction to toxic leadership behaviors, specifically exhibiting deep-seated inadequacy and selfish values as previously mentioned. Ronnie, a junior, is dismayed by self-interested leadership, "It's stupid. Everyone is always going to have their own struggles, their own internal struggles and difficulties so I think it's kind of a selfish thing to say. I don't think that's fair at all to say to people."

Fifteen students (4 freshmen and 11 juniors) who perceived their leaders to have higher levels of authoritarian leadership, specifically related to micromanagement, spoke out about their experiences at their institution. Several participants felt that their leaders treated students like children or maintained a rigid and overbearing style of leadership. Dave, a freshman, expressed his concern, "I feel like I'm going back to elementary school almost where they have to monitor everything you do." Chris and Mary, both juniors, stated that their leadership treats them "like babies" and "you just follow orders". Damian, a junior, reflected on a transactional reason why leadership behaves in such a manner:

> If they just let us do our own little things and fail out without holding our hands when we're deficient, they lose investment. They're incentivized to more or less hold our hands when we're struggling rather than letting us swim or drown.

In a conversation with Mary, [Author 1] expanded a conversation on trust and the student honor system in place, which is similar to honor systems across institutions of higher learning.

> [Author 1]: Can you tell me a little more about people not taking you for your word?
> Mary: Yeah, that happens all the time here. We have [an] honor system so we can trust each other. But we always have to verify. I understand that but sometimes if you have to verify every single time it shows that you really don't trust that person. [The leadership doesn't] really practice the system of trust and [they're] not actually trusting people.

These student interviews reflect a cynical reaction to an organization's destructive leadership behavior. In almost all of the interviews, students' negative feelings toward leadership carried over to negative feelings about the organization, reinforcing a study by Burris, Detert, and Chiaburu (2008). This could be due not only to the leader(s) being recognized as representative of the organization, but also due to the perception that the organization does not intervene to protect its personnel. To understand how the institution fell short in this aspect, [Author 1] asked follow-up questions to place focus on the overall health of the student body. Several participants, including juniors Mary, Kelly, and Whitney, disclosed they were clinically diagnosed with depression, joining many other students in the university counseling center. They perceived their leaders did not take care of them so their only option was to seek help in counseling and managed with antidepressants. Mary expressed her dismay in the institution's leadership and shortage of assistance for students:

> I know a lot of people here who have recently developed mental issues that they need to work through since they got here. I wish the help was more available. I know a handful of other people here who are on antidepressants. It's kind of weird that you go to a school where you need to take drugs and talk to people constantly.

In an even more severe case, Kelly divulged that she almost committed suicide as a freshman. She struggled at school and noticed that people, specifically leadership, did not notice her difficulties:

> Nobody really cared. People said "I don't know why she looks so sad." "Oh, why is she so upset?" But nobody really took the time to ask me "What's going on? Can I help you?" You know, things like that. [People here] just don't care. People get left behind. People get kicked out. Somebody failed. A lot of people failed that kid in so many different ways because they didn't care about the kid. Stuff like that.

Based on results that the strong positive correlation between the organizational cynicism score and the overall toxic leadership style score, regressions were conducted to determine which of the toxic styles or combination of styles best predict organizational cynicism. The final model was statistically significant, $F(4, 255) = 12.9$; $p < .001$; however, none of the three demographic control variables (e.g., gender, ethnicity, and academic class) were statistically significant. Of the five toxic leadership styles, self-promotion was the strongest predictor of organizational cynicism ($p < .001$). The adjusted R-Square attributed to the final model was .16, which means the control variables and the self-promotion toxic leadership style score collectively explain 16% of the total variance in organizational cynicism scores.

This last finding could be attributable to several reasons. Violations of contracts have been cited as primary determinants of employee cynicism (Andersson, 1996; Johnson and O'Leary-Kelly 2003). According to this research, cynicism results from violations of specific promises to the employee, violations of generalized expectations, and/or observed violation experiences of others. If students perceive their leaders acting in ways that promote their personal self interests above and beyond the interests and welfare of the organization they are leading, this could be perceived as a failure of obligations and produce unmet expectations. The cynicism literature has identified the experience of unmet expectations, and the feelings of disappointment that go along with it, as one of the primary determinants in the development of cynicism; unmet expectations have been labeled as a direct antecedent of cynicism in organizations (Kanter & Mirvis, 1989).

During interviews, the topic of unmet expectations transpired organically with 25 of 29 students. Most of the participants expected this institution would be a beacon of excellence, which Erica (a junior) observed and connected to cynicism: "I think that's where the cynicism comes from. That basis of the dream school you wanted to come to and how the school actually is." When asked for more detail about cynicism in the student body, Hans (a junior) surprisingly stated, "The only thing that missed my expectation was the cynicism. I didn't anticipate everyone hating the place so much. I was like, what the heck."

Damian was very particular with how he described this institution and his disappointment with the inner workings of a large organization. He was passionate and discussed many pressing issues in the student body, remained upbeat and positive, however, appeared upset at times when speaking about the disconnect between his expectations and current reality. [Author 1] noticed this shift in posture and asked him to elaborate:

> I think the biggest divergence I could solidify has got to be how [this institution is] a ridiculously well-oiled machine that makes the right decisions, the best leaders on top, and you get here and realize that it's just another bureaucracy. You get here and realize how the system is just as convoluted as any other bureaucracy and you kind of get frustrated with it and aggravated. I feel like I've learned everything I could learn from here and anything else they're trying to teach me is garbage or useless. It's critical and it might not all be true but that's how it feels most of the time. It's aggravating because that's not what I was promised. It wasn't inherently promised to me or said to me, but people coming here want to be good leaders.

To summarize, cynicism is not unique to this institution. Related to destructive leadership, it may affect any undertaking in which humans are involved. Students do not enter this institution, and people do not enter into organizations, with inclinations toward cynicism but, somewhere along their journey *something* occurs that changes their outlook. Perhaps the most appropriate assessment of the situation comes directly from someone who has experienced this first hand (Bill, a junior):

> Cynicism is one thing that I hate. I've been here two and a half years. I do not want to come off as arrogant when I say this but I feel like I got it figured out in some ways. What is cynicism exactly? It's hatred toward the organization or hatred toward what you're doing or what you believe you're doing or how you're doing it. At least that's how I look at it. How does that develop? [The freshmen] didn't come in here with any cynicism at all. They weren't cynical about [this institution]. They came in here excited, ready to work; they knew [school] was going to be hard. They knew what they had signed up for. Do you know what scared me the most? They were going to turn into cynical upperclassmen, kind of like how my class has been. I'm not going to lie, I have a little bit of that cynicism, too. Then you ask how, how did that happen?

Limitations

Although this study contributes to the literature on the relationship between perceived toxic leadership and organizational cynicism, and measures with sound psychometric properties were used, several limitations must be considered. The first concerns the unique sample that was chosen. Data was obtained from only one source and one institution. Although arguments have been made as to the costs and benefits of such a population, the generalizability of the findings may still be of a concern. It is possible that students are in some ways not representative of the broader U.S. population of college-age youth or even similar to students at other institutions. Furthermore, it is unknown if the leadership perceptions of the students are representative of other students in this particular institution, or other organizations in general. Generalizing these findings within the broader context of higher education should be approached with caution because the results reported in this study were based on correlations, and as such do not verify causal directionality but simply the existence of a linear relationship. This study does not consider the dynamic nature of cynicism in the workplace because longitudinal data was not collected. Because data was collected at a single time, raising the possibility that data collected at another time might produce different results, it is not possible to view how the relationships

between leadership style and cynicism develop over time. Thus, the relationship between these variables may be overestimated.

Discussion

The appeal of destructive behaviors as a research target lies in its potential to influence numerous individual and organizational outcomes. Specifically, harmful leadership behaviors have been found to negatively affect subordinates' job satisfaction levels, organizational commitment and create an erosion of trust. Additionally, abusive supervision has been positively related to subordinates' intentions to leave their jobs. Furthermore, subordinates of abusive supervisors show higher levels of anxiety, burnout, depression, and work-family conflict, as well as diminished self-efficacy and more frequent health complaints that could lead to deteriorations in performance and morale.

Given the relationship between cynicism and perceived toxic leadership, leader development programs would be well served to include the concept of toxic leadership as a fundamental component in their training. Three hundred and sixty-degree assessment of leader perceptions, including a comparison with self-ratings would be particularly insightful. The more awareness leaders have regarding their harmful leadership behaviors and tendencies, the sooner they can correct their deficiencies and positively affect the organization and their followers. This recommendation aligns with those made by scholars Reed and Olsen (2010) in their discussion of the need to discuss destructive leadership practices in organizations. Specifically, they recommended that negative examples of leadership should be examined, in addition to stories of exemplary leadership in policy and doctrinal publications. Organizations and its members can learn much from negative case studies, and stories of failure are powerful influencers of organizational culture.

Next, the implementation of formal mentoring programs could be especially useful in this regard. Considering that Kusy and Holloway (2009) exposited, "toxic people thrive only in a toxic system" (p. 10), a proactive approach by top-level leaders would be to volunteer their time to create opportunities for more supervisor–employee interactions. These interactions could foster important relationships and generate an organizational culture within which senior leaders ensure that intermediate-level leaders and managers engage in appropriate, healthy behaviors.

Finally, given the linkage between these two constructs, it is advisable that administrators, supervisors, and others in leadership roles spend some focused time learning about toxic leadership and cynicism. More specifically, leadership training programs should focus on the highly destructive toxic leadership dimensions of self-promotion and unpredictability. The prevalence of cynicism in the workforce could be significantly reduced by the introduction of leadership education programs for personnel in positions of authority. Applying an understanding of the relationship between toxic leadership and organizational cynicism to the training and education of leaders in corporate, government, academia, and military organizations might ultimately serve to mitigate/lessen the negative impact of cynicism on those institutions.

Conclusion

Cynicism might be widespread among employees in organizations but as a construct it is inadequately understood. The purpose of this paper is to gain a better understanding of the complex relationship between how a follower's perception of a supervisor affects organizational cynicism, and understanding how behaviors of toxic leaders that may predict cynicism.

This paper examined the role of leadership to the pervasiveness of cynicism within public and private institutions. Drawing on the belief that leader behavior has both positive and negative impact on the prosocial and antisocial behavior of followers, we suggest that the results of this study have implications for the development of both leaders and organizations. Findings from this research could assist administrators, supervisors, and others in leadership roles to better understand the impact of perceptions of toxic leadership on cynicism. Cynicism can be mitigated but cannot be attacked directly nor can we battle against attitudes themselves. However, by identifying its origins, measures can be taken to engage against the conditions that allow cynicism to propagate in an organization. Applying this understanding to the training and education of leaders in institutions of higher education might ultimately serve to militate against the negative impact of cynicism on those institutions.

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