An investigation of destructive leadership in a Division I intercollegiate athletic department: Follower perceptions and reactions

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Abstract

Recent events in intercollegiate athletic department organizational cultures demonstrate the need to examine the experiences of personnel who serve in a toxic leadership culture. The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify how three head coaches, one associate athletic director, and a facilities manager perceived and reacted to 6 years of destructive leadership. Each participant was interviewed for 60–90 min. Consistent with Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser's (2008) toxic triangle theory, findings suggest that perceptions and reactions to the evaluated athletic department were seemingly negative. The leadership and actions of two head coaches, the athletic director, and the university president were perceived as destructive to the department and the institution. The culprits of the destructive consequences were the university's lack of internal and external checks and balances, a president who centralized control, and an absence of effective athletic department leadership. Follower repercussions identified were avoidance of the athletic director, keeping opinions to oneself, and adherence; followers employed their strategies to avert conflict or job termination.

Keywords

Athletic director, conflict, head coach, National Collegiate Athletic Association, organizational culture, sports management

Introduction

As a society, we herald leaders and highlight certain qualities that make their leadership heroic in order to maintain these great qualities in future leaders.[1] Society makes the mistake of rarely addressing the negative attributes of leaders, especially in the realm of higher education. It seems to be counterintuitive to consider a university setting as a "conducive environment, typified by centralized power and an absence of checks and balances, coupled with flawed leaders and the submission of certain followers, [that] could lead to horrific outcomes".[2] However, destructive leadership, like any kind of power abuse, is manifested in numerous ways.

Destructive leadership and contextual factors

Leadership is a process that involves a leader, followers of that leader, and the organizational settings where the leader–follower interactions occur.[3] Most definitions of leadership "appreciate" these relationships.[4–6] However, Porter and McLaughlin[7] estimated that three of the four empirical articles ignore the followers and organizational contexts, focusing solely on leader behaviors and traits.

Studies that have focused on intercollegiate athletic directors (ADs) often focus on leadership style,[8] leader behavior,[9] job responsibilities, and women's advancement.[10,11] A "common leadership study" views a leader of an organization as almost "supernatural".[12,13] "As such, we tend to place leaders on pedestals in our society, admiring and extolling them for their uncanny capacity to motivate followers and spur positive organizational change".[14] The "great man" theory of leaders, however, "fails to consider those cases in which leaders exert deleterious effects on subordinates".[12] Negative and inept leaders' stories have not been told

nor researched. Few studies have focused on an inter-collegiate athletic department deemed destructive by its constituents.

The toxic triangle. Literature increasingly identifies leadership as a complex relationship between leaders, followers, and contexts.[14–16] According to Mulvey and Padilla,[17] destructive leadership is the product of dysfunctional leaders interacting with susceptible followers within environments that are conducive to negative outcomes. The toxic triangle theory supports the idea that followers' levels of averseness and whistle-blowing intentions will change depending on characteristics of the leader. Figure 1 demonstrates Padilla et al.'s toxic triangle theory and the characteristics which offer a more comprehensive understanding of destructive leadership as a complex social-psychological process.

Leaders. The first component of the toxic triangle focuses on the characteristics of leaders. Five critical factors are present in destructive leaders: presence of charisma, personalized use of power, narcissism, negative life themes, and an ideology of hate.[18] However, these characteristics alone do not result in destructive outcomes.[19] Charismatic leaders are attractive to followers, as they articulate a vision of a world characterized by threat and insecurity, where personal safety depends on the domination and defeat of rivals.[18] Narcissism is closely linked to charisma, involving "dominance, grandiosity, arrogance, and the selfish pursuit of pleasure" (p. 181).[18] The personalized need for power, which leaders can use for personal gain, is another variable of destructive leaders. Some destructive leaders of large organizations have spoken of negative life experiences influencing their decision-making.[20] Cramer[21] suggests this may be a reaction formation where self-hatred is turned outward.

Followers. Although studied less often than leaders, followers' roles are critical to the leadership process.[5] Followers have basic needs that must be met: safety, security, group membership, and predictability in an uncertain world.[19] Hogan and Kaiser[22] suggest that, if these needs are met, there are other intangibles that can be tolerated. For example, some followers may be unwilling or unable to resist abusive behavior from leaders. Some followers benefit from destructive activities and adopt the role of contributor of the collective identity. There is also a natural tendency to conform to social norms,[23] imitate higher status individuals,[24] and obey
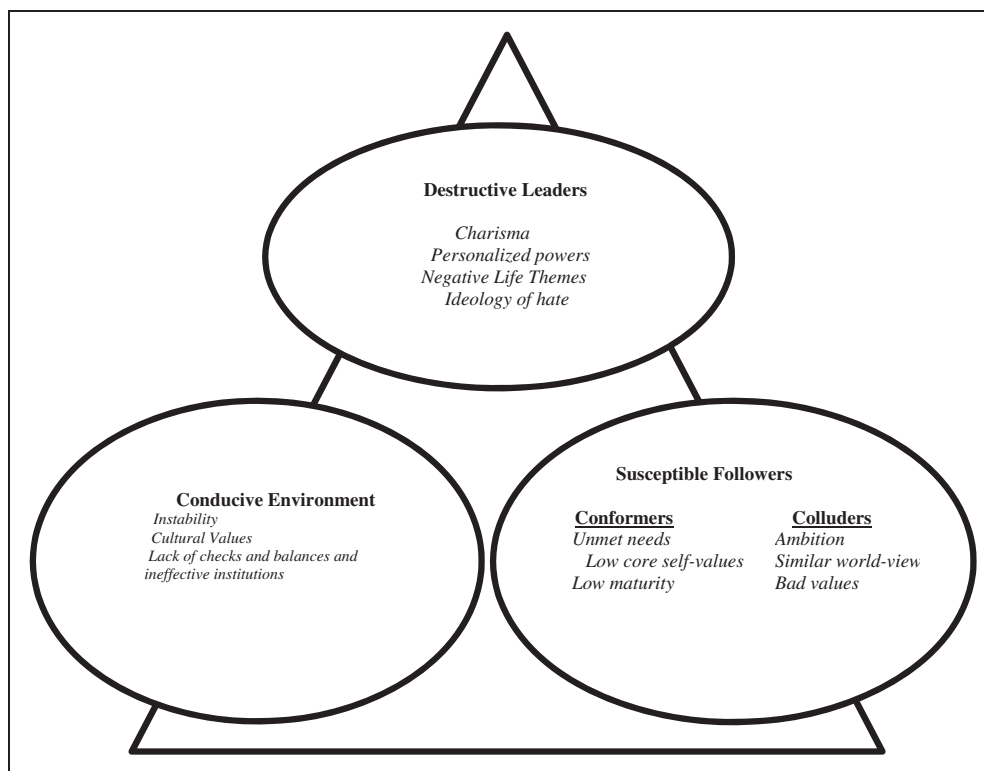

Figure 1. The toxic triangle theory.
Adapted from Padilla et al.[18]

authority figures.[25] The researchers identified two types of susceptible followers: conformers and colluders.

Conformers. Conformers comply with destructive leaders out of fear. Their vulnerability is based upon unmet needs, negative self-evaluations, and psychological immaturity. Ericson's[26] developmental theory indicates that maturity involves forming an integrated and socially valued identity. Persons lacking a firm sense of self tend to identify with cultural heroes and to internalize their values. Conformity can lead to immoral behavior and, consequently, according to Freud, mature adults must be prepared to oppose their leaders. This is the point of Milgram's[27,28] work suggesting that conforming people are at risk for harming others (e.g. shocking a stranger to death). In a direct extension of Milgram's argument, Kohlberg's theory of moral development states that people who respect rules are capable of immoral behavior in the name of authority.[29]

According to Kohlberg, such behavior is most likely among adults in the ''conventional'' ranges of ego development, which includes between 60% and 75% of Western adults.[30,31] Those that heed authority in doing the work of a destructive leader do so knowingly not blindly, actively not passively, creatively not automatically.[32] When impressionable followers internalize a destructive leader's vision, they can become committed to a destructive enterprise—conformers can become colluders. Thus, psychological maturity supported by a sense of right and wrong is needed to oppose destructive authority.

Colluders. Colluders, on the other hand, seek personal gain, share the same worldview of the leader, and are ambitious. Kellerman[33] describes colluders as ''true believers'' (p. 9). Empirical studies show that greater leader–follower value similarity leads to greater follower satisfaction, commitment, and motivation.[34] The closer the leader is to the follower's self-concept, the stronger the bond and the greater the motivation to follow. For example, Lipman-Blumen[35] describes President Kennedy's ''Irish Mafia,'' an entourage of individuals who played key roles in the neophyte's presidential administration. President Kennedy had a keen awareness of the strength and willingness of certain members to ''do whatever it took'' to protect him. ''Of Mrs. Lincoln, his secretary, the President said that if he called to inform her that he had just cut off Jackie's head and wanted to get rid of it, the devoted secretary would appear immediately with a hatbox of the appropriate size'' (p. 152). To complete the cycle, behaving in ways that are consistent with the leader's vision and the follower's self-concept boosts justifies their actions.[36,37] Followers' values are also relevant in their own right. Specifically, individuals who endorse unsocialized values such as greed and selfishness are more likely to follow destructive leaders and engage in the destructive behavior those leaders pursue.[38] Ambitious but under-socialized followers are likely to engage in destructive acts, especially if they are sanctioned or encouraged by the destructive leader.[39]

Followers of destructive leaders are more likely to call in sick, feel less empowered at work, and replicate the destructive behaviors of their abusive supervisors.[40,41] Gallup has estimated that ''disengaged employees'' result in US$3400 of lost productivity for every $10,000 of payroll.[42] Worse, this ''actively disengaged'' group is negative and potentially hostile to their organizations—often acting out their unhappiness and undermining accomplishments of those who are committed to organizational productivity and innovation.[43] Negative leadership results in human and financial costs through resignations of disengaged employees and increased turnover rates with consequent increased costs in recruiting, hiring, and training.[44,45]

Conducive environments. Followers socially construct their perceptions and formulate their reactions to destructive leaders based on salient aspects of the organizational culture.[2] Padilla et al.[19] explain that five environmental factors are vital for destructive leadership: instability, perceived threat, cultural values, absence of checks and balances, and institutionalization. Detrimental environments contribute to the emergence of destructive leadership. Once destructive administrators achieve power, they will consolidate their control by undermining existing departments and policies, and by replacing constructive units with those designed to enhance central control. The domino effect continues through people carrying out unfavorable tasks ordered by someone up the hierarchy, and the new policies become normal in the organizational culture.[33] The harm of any form of negative leadership can permeate an entire organization.[46]

Large sports programs can provide a conducive environment for individuals to accumulate power, hide behind the success of revenue earnings teams, and disregard the rules and norms that apply to others. The Penn State scandal was an extraordinary example of the toxic triangle. Whereas many organizations pride themselves on transparency and public disclosure, Penn State's power appeared to belong to a few selected individuals.[3] This allowed for the defensive coordinator, Jerry Sandusky to perpetuate his abuse of children. Thoroughgood and Padilla[19] noted the public university had transcended over the years toward an autonomous private-like institution, independent from many state regulations and controls. This, phenomena allowed the staff in the athletic

department to rely less on state appropriations and generate revenue from private donors.

Intercollegiate athletics organizational culture

The process of selecting athletic department leaders has evolved over the years. The collegiate athletics director position used to be filled by retiring coaches with experience in the administrative and bureaucratic processes, and an individual was often the focal point of department operations.[47] As spending grew, so did the need for fundraising. A new breed of career athletic administrators emerged with savvy business, fundraising and development skills.[48] In 2014, over 200 athletic department budgets were over US$10 million, and 14 were over US$100 million. Many universities are now seeking ADs who possess training, knowledge, and experience in business and corporate management, including accountability for multi-million dollar operating budgets.[49] Administrators today are focused on raising money, hiring superstar coaches, building and enhancing facilities, signing broadcast agreements, and growing multi-million dollar operations.[50]

"Organizational culture is viewed as the pattern of basic assumptions that guide organizational behavior".[51] Culture comes from several collective processes among an organization's members, making it difficult to define and evaluate.[52] Negotiation over the implications of actions, ideas, and behaviors within an organization are integral aspects of the collective process.[51,53] Once an agreement is reached regarding implications, they are linked to form ideologies.[54] As group members repeat their roles, these ideologies become patterned and are ultimately driven into members' subconscious and are then taken for granted as shared assumptions.[55] In collegiate athletics, when competition is intense and jobs are on the line, the culture can be tested by all of the changes that occur.

Much like the academic departments on campus, operations and governance of the athletic department are rooted in an independent structure, with a common hierarchy reporting to the AD, and the AD reporting to the university president. Many college presidents want open communication with athletic administrators, assigning the director to the presidential cabinet or executive administrator title with a direct reporting line to the president.[56] In theory, this structure would ensure a bi-directional relationship—the president is directly and regularly informed, and can give necessary guidance on the many issues that arise involving the athletics program.[49,57,58]

Context for the study

The USA's National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I (D1) athletics is considered the premiere level of amateurism, with high expectations of athletes, coaches, and administrators. Indeed, ADs in NCAA D1 athletic programs in the United States are akin to corporate leaders who oversee multi-million dollar organizations.[14] Alumni, fans, spectators, media pressure, constant turnover, huge egos, and a continual demand for success can affect the physical and mental well-being of collegiate sport employees.[2,14,18,19,59] Research reveals numerous sources of stress due to the pressure of varied roles and responsibilities, the competitive nature of recruiting, and a lack of effective communication or control of athletes.[60] Relationships between student-athletes and their coaches are often intimate and require trust. However, a coach can take on destructive leadership qualities, negatively impacting the student-athletes and university for years to come. When athletes are dissatisfied with coaches, some will use maladaptive alternatives to assert power over their players. This represents negative influences on the athletes' behavioral, psychological, and emotional welfare.[44] Thus, destructive ADs have the potential to polarize an entire athletic department with their decision-making and behaviors. Executive level administrators can cause damage with top-down policies and micro-managing athletic departments, with similar impacts on student-athletes, coaches, and ADs.

There is insufficient research on the behaviors of destructive leaders and their effects on the quality of life and perceptions of constituents.[19,35,41] Scholars have suggested a more holistic, phenomenological perspective on studying leadership.[19] The purpose of the phenomenological approach is to illuminate the specific, and identify how phenomena are perceived by the individuals in a situation. In the human sphere, this normally translates into gathering "deep" information and perceptions through inductive, qualitative methods such as interviews, discussions, and participant observation and, subsequently, representing it from the perspective of the research participant(s). The current study attempts to illustrate the role of the toxic triangle in shaping a destructive environment, and how such factors interact with one another to produce harmful outcomes. No previous studies have evaluated the effects of destructive leadership within intercollegiate athletics. This study investigated followers' perceptions and reactions of leadership in an intercollegiate athletic department context.

Method

Experimental design

It was the intention of the researchers to better understand the effects of destructive leadership within intercollegiate athletics. The site of analysis was an athletic

department at a large Midwestern research institution in the United States, with an approximate enrollment of 16,000 undergraduate students and an annual operational budget of approximately US$23 million.[62] The research population consisted of approximately 70 individuals (including employees and unpaid interns) within the athletic department and 460 student-athletes associated with the athletic department. At the time of the research (2013–2014), the university sponsored 17 sports programs (7 men's, 10 women's), and was a member of a Division I athletic conference. The key operations included the sports programs' coaching needs, facility / event management, fiscal management, marketing, and promotion. The examination of leadership in a Division I athletic department required firsthand narratives by subjects, which detailed specific and perceived leadership behaviors of coaching and university administration.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis

The research followed the qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach[63] that focuses on the participants' individual experiences and personal perceptions of an event rather than seeking an objective statement of what occurred.[64] IPA[65] is concerned with exploring in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social world, and the main focus for an IPA study is the meaning that particular experiences, events, and states carries for participants.[66] IPA is both phenomenological, because of its basis on a detailed exploration of participants' personal experience and perception, and interpretive, due to the researcher's attempt to make sense of the participant's world through a process of interpretation.[66] Lastly, IPA is also an idiographic research approach whereby one case is analyzed in detail, as an end in itself, before moving to similarly detailed analyses of other cases.[66]

The primary aim of an IPA study is to provide a detailed and nuanced analysis of the lived experiences of a small sample of participants with an emphasis on the convergence and divergence between participant accounts.[66] This contrasts with a grounded theory[67] study on the same topic, which typically utilizes a larger sample to develop theoretical claims.

Participants

Elite coaches and their staff within the profession were considered to be ideal participants since the intensity of competition at this level of coaching is likely to play a significant role in perceived levels of occupational stress. Invitations to participate in this study were sent via email to ten head coaches, five administrative

personnel, two assistant ADs, and two staff members from within the targeted population. Upon receiving institutional review board approval, seven candidates consented to participate prior to the interview.[68] All seven employees had experienced the phenomenon studied.[69] Two participants did not meet the inclusion criteria and were not interviewed for this study. The inclusion criteria were that all participants (1) worked at the college for a minimum of 6 months prior to the AD employment, (2) directly reported to the AD, and (3) were currently employed at the university.

For the IPA studies such as this one, a homogenous sample of between five and seven participants is recommended.[66] Given that individual interviews may produce a large amount of data, there should not be a need for a larger sample if the participants talk at length about their experiences.[70] When utilizing an IPA approach, the specificity of a sample is often defined by the topic under investigation.[66] Purposeful sampling was used to access a more closely defined group for whom the research question was significant. The AD referenced in this study left the institution 2 years prior to data collection. Since this was a retrospective study to explore the possible impact of a destructive leader, the study targeted participants who were likely to have been influenced by the AD.

Participants included: athletic department administrators ($n = 1$), head coaches ($n = 3$), and athletic department staff ($n = 1$). The participants consisted of three men and two women, each with a range of 10–40 years of employment at this university. Data review and analyses were completed in conjunction with data collection.

Data collection

In-depth, semi-structured, tape-recorded interviews were conducted with five individuals over a 3-month period between November 2013 and January 2014. The selected athletic department setting was a natural fit to study destructive leadership due to the national news coverage regarding racial and gender discrimination lawsuits over a 3-year period. The central guiding questions were: (a) Did you work with a destructive athletic director? If so (b), "What was the impact of working within a destructive intercollegiate athletic department?" The interviews focused on challenges and issues in various stages of their career at the institution working under various athletic administrators. Additional probing questions were asked to gain further insight into the participants' experiences and reactions to the leadership approach. Collectively, the participant accounts of the events allowed for the gradual development of a meaningful understanding of key themes.

Table 1. Toxic triangle categorical themes.

Category	Thematic category	Key terms
Leadership	University President	President's Destructive Behaviors
	Athletic Director	AD Behavior
		Lack of Communication Skills
		AD Aversive Behaviors
		The AD as Colluder
Followers	Colluding Coaches-Compliance/Legal issues	Colluded Coach # 1
		Colluded Coach # 2
	Susceptible Followers	Experiences of Conformers
		Coping Skills of Conformers
Conducive Environment		

Note: Adapted from Padilla et al.[18] Copyright 2007 by Elsevier.

Interviews lasted 60–90 min. Journal articles were used to verify the correct spellings and titles of people mentioned in the interviews. Online athletic periodicals were used to obtain specific details about timelines and legal information. Field notes and scratch notes were used to enhance the quality of data obtained.[71,72] Information such as dress, body language, and environmental details, as well as observations and documentation of the interviews were added to the field notes. The accumulated field notes permitted an ongoing reflective dialogue to help the researcher understand when saturation and completeness had been reached.[73]

The researcher's role

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary data collection instrument, which requires an identification of personal values.[69] The dangers associated with attempting a phenomenological study include: personal closeness, difficulty in treating the institution as an unknown entity, nonspecific references, facts and conclusions from other areas of information based on previous familiarity (thus hindering interviewee's personal account), and explanatory permission. An inherent feature of the IPA approach is that while "the participants are trying to make sense of their world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world".[74]

One potential limitation of the study is that the initial assumption that the AD was destructive was based on implicit bias. This limitation stems from researcher awareness regarding the manner in which the AD was hired, written about in local newspapers, his abrupt head coach firings, and two personal lawsuits. As qualitative study, we accept that there is no such thing as personal objectivity; bias exist social science research. Some instances called for explanation by the interviewer to compact length, but employing this method could inappropriately affect results.[63] To avoid the initial bias affecting the results, the primary researcher committed to analysis of the field notes in as objective a manner as possible, which is detailed below.

Data analysis

Interpretation of phenomenology studies includes attentiveness to themes, terms, descriptions, idioms, cultures, and relationships that build upon or illuminate theories.[69,75] Each interview was transcribed verbatim. Every participant was given a copy of their interview transcript and asked to proofread and make necessary changes to ensure accuracy. All data were prepared and downloaded into the qualitative software NVivo 10. NVivo is a platform for analyzing of unstructured data. It was used in this study to help organize and analyze uploaded transcripts, notes, and articles (Table 1).

In the first step of the method, the researcher annotated the text closely for insights into the participants' experiences.[76] The second step included a "reduction" of the object, where the meanings of a subject for the participants were located, interpreted and developed into a tentative expressive statement.[76] In the next steps, data were grouped into meaningful clusters, explicated, and synthesized into a structure.[77] The final step required the researcher to analyze the structured data to reveal the collective results of the participants' shared experience.

Results

The results are presented according to the purpose of the study and the research question, and include an interpretation of the findings in relation to the toxic

triangle theory[19] and previous research. The head coaches, assistant AD, and the facilities manager all described their athletic department's destructive leadership in harmonious terms. There were three common patterns in their narratives: perceptions of aversive and destructive leadership, reactions and coping behaviors of the participants, and repercussions for the athletic department and the university.

Destructive leadership behaviors

There were two destructive leaders identified in this study—the president of the university and her senior AD. The biggest impact on the followers was caused by the AD. The larger authority, the president of the university, shaped the demands of the athletic department, meaning she controlled personnel issues, fundraising efforts, handling the media, team travel logistics, and departmental budgeting

The University President (and her husband). The president of the university displayed destructive behaviors which affected the athletic department in several ways. Participants proclaimed the president as charismatic, demonstrating a personalized need for power. Leaders with personalized needs for power use authority "in an impetuously aggressive manner for self-aggrandizing purpose, to the detriment of their subordinates and organizations".[79] In the analysis, the formulated observations and inferences are clustered into Table 2. The president was hired 6 months prior to the AD's appointment into his new job. Three members of the president's cabinet were fired and the previous AD chose to leave shortly after the new president was hired. One of her first hires was a new AD. The president's spouse, who was unaffiliated with the university in an official capacity, hired a search firm. Once a short list was compiled the president and her husband chose the AD who never set foot on campus prior to his first day in the position. Typically in public universities, faculty and staff serve on hiring committees of their respective departments for new faculty, chairs, deans, and executive administrators. This was not the case when the AD was hired. While the press conference was conducted an hour away from the campus, coaches were encouraged to attend.

The AD knew no one except the president when he moved to the university. Ergo, the vulnerability of the AD as a colluder was already a plausible concept. More widely across the University, the president was the ultimate decision maker, and her decision-making became centralized across campus.

The AD. Not all participants perceived the senior AD (AD) as the archetypal destructive boss in the organizational culture. The typical charismatic behavior that has been empirically linked to the destructive leader paradigm was never described. That said the AD was depicted as narcissistic and having a need for power. The AD was also deemed aversive, a form of destructive leadership based on coercive power.[14] These findings are supported by the analysis of the phenomenological data, as compiled in Tables 3 to 6.

A common theme shared by all participants was the AD's lack of leader communication skills. Participants initially perceived that his lack of communication went far beyond a fear of public speaking and was intentionally malicious.

The participants' perceptions of the AD's broken promises, abrupt firings of employees he hired, and

Table 2. Observed/inferred president's destructive behaviors.

Coach 3 "We weren't privy to any information [during the AD search was conducted]. No one in athletics was privy to that. It was her search. In the past, it was very methodical how we hired people. Coaches always had input. There were always two coaches, one faculty member, a booster club member, and a board of trustees' member on a search committee for an athletic administrator."	Facilities Manager: "Nobody wanted (to hire) the men's coach the president wanted. All of a sudden he was on the AD's list. I don't know what you know about our beloved president, but she's all about appearances, so she can look good. Whereas, if we would have hired the coach who we hired after the fiasco coach initially, the program would have been significantly better off. 'John Doe' is a man of character and integrity. But he wasn't a flashy name."
Coach 1 "There was a decision to make a women's major sport coach the highest paid coach in the department all of a sudden. I can only speculate who made that decision [insinuating the president]. It wasn't the AD. There isn't an AD at an FBS school in the nation who would pay a women's major sport coach more than the football coach, because that's embarrassing, a joke, and disgraceful."	

Table 3. Observed/inferred AD behavior.

Coach 1 "Cold, very difficult to talk to. He was the ten-second man. If you didn't get everything in the first ten seconds upon your conversation you might as well forget it, 'cause he stopped listening to you."

Coach 2 "Flat, as in 'are you even here? Do you want to be here? Are you even interested in this athletic department? Are you passionate about this? Because we're not getting that from you."

Associate AD "He said he had an open-door policy, but I don't think with him you felt comfortable doing it. He wasn't personable, more introverted, a withdrawn type in that role."

Associate AD "I think there were some other people at the university that encouraged him to do some other things with my career path. I think the major sport head coach that he hired had an effect on some of the decisions that he made. I think after all of that happened (when a major sport coach resigned and the media storm occurred), he was trying to establish some control that he was in charge and making decisions. Um, when in fact it was pretty obvious he wasn't the one in charge or making any of the decisions. I think that was his way of trying to rally the troops and say were okay this is my department, I'm going to run it the way I want to."

Comment deserving special treatment:

Coach 3 "The AD is the coach of a big team, a team of coaches. As a coach, you have to instill honesty, faith, and trust. Trust is a big thing. He was untrustworthy. You have to show that to your athletes. So they can trust you and show that you are leading the team in the right direction. That you care about them…and he didn't care. When he lied, he became untrustworthy. When you know your players trust you, when they believe in you, they'll do anything to perform. Those were the missing ingredients he didn't have. The lies he told were unbelievable. The only people he cared about were the ones in football, men's and women's basketball, and baseball."

Table 4. Observed/inferred lack of communication skills.

Associate AD "You always knew he had a different agenda. When you were talking to him, you knew he didn't care."

Coach 1 Women's athletics were growing very rapidly, and a lot of the programs in our conference were moving ahead of us with budgeting, staffing, facility upgrades, and scholarships. We were held back. I think the lack of support didn't necessarily destroy us, because I wouldn't let that happen, but he held us way back. He didn't give us the funds to grow. We were never in the front running but we were at least in the middle. We were the worst funded (program in the conference)."

Coach 2 "I don't know how the major sports felt and that's what he focused on. He put a lot of his attention on football and basketball. I don't know if they would speak the same. But I knew a lot of the minor sports, the Olympic sports, were stifled. He held them back and never allowed them to grow."

Coach 3 "When one of our teams beat a national powerhouse in a basketball playoff game, he was in the locker room. He didn't know what to say. I was thinking 'wow…you put anyone in a room where an underdog just beat a national powerhouse, like; it's kinda easy to say something'. That struck me. My program does not get a lot of resources, we're kinda low end. He treats the [revenue generating] sports coaches the same way. Awkward is awkward. Inability to communicate is inability to communicate. It trickled all the way through."

Table 5. Observed/inferred AD aversive behaviors.

Coach 3 "We host one tournament a year where he could be visible, but he very rarely came to practices or tournaments. He did come to an event that was at least an hour away once. There's no doubt he could've been seen more. It wouldn't be that hard to come to a practice because he lived close by, but he never did."

Coach 1 "When you have a leader you feel disassociated with, it becomes a two-way street. He doesn't talk to you, so you don't talk to him. You stay more in your own little world and function inside your little cell of your own team."

Associate AD "The one thing he did was remove me from his senior staff, which I think affected my career. He also had me report to someone other than himself AD and that was the first time for that experience. I have now worked through seven ADs. So he was the only one that had me report to someone other than the AD. So I think from a career standpoint that was damaging. I'm not sure I'll ever know the answer to why he removed me from the senior leadership group."

Table 6. The AD as the president's colluder.

Coach 2 "I think the people he (AD) relied on for his decision-making and his decisions were his biggest downfall. Our president has a lot of control and a lot of decision-making power over those in executive positions. And that's part of the way she does things from the vice president level down- she hires people she knows she can control and manipulate, and it always sets us behind a little bit. That's why the previous AD we had left once the president got hired at the university. He quickly realized that she was too controlling and he got out of here."	Associate AD "She hired him. It was her guy. It's just like an AD hiring a coach. She's going to do everything she can to stand behind the person because ultimately if he gets fired, that's making a mistake, her hiring the wrong guy. It's kind of like when the AD hired our football coach, they want to do everything they can to help that football coach succeed instead of facing the fact he hired the wrong guy. Who, by the way, he ended up firing after two seasons."
	Coach 1 "The president controlled the AD."

Statements deserving special treatment:
Facilities Manager "I think the AD was in a tough position. He had very little autonomy from the president and her husband."
Coach 3 "There's no question that a lot of things that happened under his tenure I totally disagreed with. Decisions, fires, and hireswere made that I felt were wrong at the time. As I look back, I still feel that way. But I have no idea as to what degree those decisions were his or above him."

Table 7. Statements – Comments on colluded C×1.

Equipment Manager "C 1 talked trash about everybody. He was a fiasco from the get-go."	Coach 2 "He was Satan. He single-handedly destroyed our athletic department. He destroyed countless lives here yet the AD protected him as long as he could."
Coach 3 "The coach was significant for the school because of his legendary family name in the sport. The university administration would not go there, they wanted out, pay him his $250,000 (remaining contract) we're not fighting him or his family, Al Sharpton, Jessie Jackson, were not going to be in the news fighting racism. Hear whatever you want and goodbye."	Coach 1 "He (C 1) planted all the racial signs [n-word] and notes around the office. The police personally told me so."

lies were represented as ''unconscionable and chaotic'' by all three head coaches. Across his 5-year tenure as AD he fired 16 coaches; 11 of the 12 head coaches for women's sport teams resigned or were fired. Some coaches developed agendas with clearly defined goals. The AD notoriously avoided attending rivalry games and tournaments which was expected of someone in that position. Administratively, the AD distanced himself from his staff. An organized group of female coaches met twice with the AD to advocate for greater gender equity in the school's athletic department.

Colluding Coaches – Compliance/Legal issues. All participants perceived two head coaches as particularly destructive to the athletic department: the new men's major sport coach (colluded Coach 1, C×1) and a women's Olympic sport coach (colluded coach 2, C×2), who had 20-year coaching career in the department. Tables 7 and 8 present a comprehensive view of observed and inferred behaviors of those coaches.

The assistant coaches committed secondary NCAA rules violations over a 3-month period, by briefly attending players' open-gym practices at a time when players are off-limits to coaches, according to a report filed by the school with the NCAA. Players' attendance at strength and conditioning workouts were reported to the head coach, even though the workouts, under NCAA rules, were deemed voluntary. After his second season, C 1 alleged that administrators harassed and racially discriminated against him. The president and AD publicly denied the allegations, asserting instead that they did everything in their power to support C 1. C 1 substantiated some charges by offering audiotaped conversations with athletics administrators, alleging they used racial slurs in reference to him. The associate AD felt C 1 intentionally forced an unethical, racially-driven exit strategy to save face in the world of his sport. C 2 was identified by all participants as displaying destructive characteristics.

Susceptible followers – reactions and coping behaviors

A second domain of the toxic triangle is susceptible followers. Descriptions of conforming followers aligned with the toxic triangle paradigm (Tables 9 and 10)

Table 8. Comments on colluded Coach # 2.

Facilities manager "She used to have head coaches meetings, on her own, for only the female coaches of the women's sports teams. She did not invite the male head coaches of women's sports. So she had a clique all of her own." Coach 2 "C 2 was a bad person dragging the athletic department through the mud."	Coach 1 "The coach, who was all about title IX and gender equity, never gave a full allotment of scholarships. She did not use one [scholarship] every single year. That never made sense to me. If you are someone who's trying to promote women's rights and you have the chance to change someone's life with an education so she (a student-athlete) can further her goals in life, get a chance to compete, and come out of college with a zero debt, wouldn't you want to do that? You're a hypocrite. There are a number of student athletes over those 22 years that could've gotten a free education. Maybe they found someplace else, but if you had the chance to help young women and you're supposedly pushing for Title IX and equality, but you don't provide them a scholarship, that's hypocritical."
Coach 3 "Her whole life was absorbed with this whole vendetta against the department. It's unbelievable. She should've been fired a long time ago just for performance. She's horrible. She lived in her own little shell thinking she was a good coach. Administrators were scared of her, instead of firing her for her poor performance. It didn't matter she didn't win a conference match. When they finally fired her for rules violations, it bit them in the butt. She contrived up this gender equity lawsuit and ended up getting a ton on money. If we'd have gone to court she would've lost, she was guilty, there was no merit to her lawsuit, but the judge said there was enough evidence to go to a jury trial. At that time, the university decided that we weren't going to spend any more money."	Associate AD stated "For some reason she was only evaluated twice in her 22 years here. The second evaluation was at the end of her tenure here. The assistant AD, who oversaw the women's Olympic sport program, told her she was on the hot seat and gave her a negative written evaluation. Immediately she went into protective mode, holding these meetings."

Table 9. Experiences of conformers.

Associate AD: "There were some of us that said some things opposing the AD's decisions and it did end up hurting our careers. I know some of the coaches met a few times with the president about the AD. I think that was their chance to voice concerns, but it was known the president wasn't going to react to the allegations."	Coach 2 "One of our former female coaches was trying to draw attention that we were breaking laws here, not being equitable and we were going to be a voice and make change. A group met with the AD on two separate occasions. He said he'd be available to hear all our concerns. All that turned into was him screaming at us."
Coach 3 "Female sports were being treated differently than male sports and not given as many resources. The groups concerns were about gender equity. There was one time he lost it in a meeting. He tossed a clipboard. He screamed at all of us. He kind of went from flat and uninvolved to angry. Just like that. At that particular time, it seemed that he had no ability to temper or want to remedy the situation or talk through it. He went straight to yelling."	Coach 1 "I don't think I ever put myself out there where I felt, 'I shouldn't have said that.' I protected myself in that environment as well as I needed to. It was the efforts of other coaches and they got, well, fired."

Employees became concerned about losing their jobs. Coaches began to feel, and then felt sure, that their sports programs were considered less important than others. Some followers' prescribed action was to avoid the AD. This included in the office lounge, hallways, and near bathrooms. Because he never visited coaches in their offices or sporting events, they reported having less stress, more productive and more satisfied when left alone. Coaches found solace in running their programs with autonomy, especially if they were

Table 10. Coping skills of conformers.

Associate AD "When you have a leader you feel disassociated with, it becomes a two-way street. He doesn't talk to you, so you don't talk to him. You stay more in your own little world and function inside your little cell of your own team."	Facilities manager "I'm not a real emotional person. I'm pretty even keeled. So it was easier for me than other people around here. Again, like it is with coaches, we know we're going to go through ADs. I've been here long enough and weathered some storms. It certainly hurt from a career standpoint, but it's not something I dwelled on because I knew that I was going to outlast him. Just like football coaches and basketball coaches, some of them can make your life miserable. I know for the most part, I am going to outlive them here."
Coach 3 "I stayed away from my office when I knew he (AD) was in the building. I never introduced him to recruits and most of my players never knew him."	Coach 3 "It was kind of like two separate worlds dealing with administration. At the end of the day though, I was able to coach the way I wanted to coach and was able to run the program the way I wanted to run my program."
Coach 1 "I was very cautious as to what I said in meetings because of my visa. Some days I was just needed to shut up and be thankful I had a job. I just kept to myself and just listened to the hum of the roller coaster."	

successful. The AD did not communicate with coaches although he directly supervised these coach's programs.

Conformers were drawn toward the behaviors emanating directly from the AD. All participants believed they would outlast the AD's tenure considering they had been at the institution for the majority of their careers. Moreover, the AD was the neophyte at his job which was more of a reflection upon him than followers. For example, the football team had the opportunity to play a nationally significant bowl game at the opponent's institution. The AD chose to reject the offer, even though it meant an increase in national exposure and more revenue for the athletic program. The reasoning behind his decision was that he feared the opposing team's would not just win the game but run the points up for embarrassment. This decision generated considerable anger, especially among the coaches, as these games can motivate student athletes to compete at the highest level. That negative message sent a powerful deficit signal throughout the entire university that ended with the determination that the AD was not qualified to run an athletic department as he didn't value competition—a fundamental value of intercollegiate athletic culture. It was also at this time that the conformers either resigned or decided to ride out the AD's tenure.

Conducive environment

A third domain in the toxic triangle is the environmental context. This "envelops leaders, followers, and their interactions".[19] The athletic department was considered by insiders as unstable and chaotic for the 6 years of the athletic director's tenure, which are some of the factors for destructive leadership. Related to the structural and organizational instability is the perception of imminent threat.[19] The history of the athletic department, while the president and AD were at the helm, had its share of public humiliation, resulting in two lawsuits, multiple NCAA violations, turning down football bowl game offers, and problems retaining women's coaches of women's teams. Between 2005 and 2011, 12 head coaches of women's teams left the university or were fired.

The environment within the athletic department permitted the DC 2 to continue coaching for 20 years without winning a conference championship, but then abruptly fired her once she formed a group countering the practices of the athletic department and discovering moderate degree NCAA infractions. DC 2 sued the president, the AD, and the University for gender equity; moreover, when the university was offered the chance to self-investigate discriminatory practices in hiring and firing, the president personally issued a finding that there was no discrimination. At the time of making this pronouncement no investigation had occurred, and no one from the athletic department had been interviewed.[79] The president said she didn't think it was necessary for an external investigation, yet the university incurred US$1.61 million since 2008 to coaches who have been fired or left the university under maladaptive terms.

Discussion

The toxic triangle highlights the importance of understanding issues related to destructive leadership.[79] Destructive leadership is conceptualized in this study in four particular ways: (1) it is seldom absolutely or entirely destructive, (2) it involves control and coercion rather than persuasion and commitment, (3) it focuses

on the leaders individual objectives and goals, as opposed to the needs of constituents and the larger social organization, (4) it produces organizational outcomes that compromise quality of life for constituents and detracts them from their main purposes.[80] In our interpretation of these findings the two head coaches, the AD and president of the university were deemed to be destructive individuals. Equally, just as Padilla et al.[19,79,81,82] point out, leadership requires more than a leader. This situation was much larger than one or two destructive individuals. Regardless of how brilliantly devious they may have been, they depended on assistance to accomplish their goals.[19,83]

Among their "assistants" were several types of susceptible followers.[80] Participants perceived that the colluded coaches perpetuated the destructive ecology of their respective sports teams, the athletic department and the university. C 1 was charismatic and skilled at self-promotion. He was capable of convincing assistant coaches to commit NCAA violations. Several participants alleged that the racial notes were planted by C 1 in the athletic office to save-face and to establish a racial discrimination lawsuit on the university, with him as the victim. C 2's narcissism was evident in her unwillingness to admit to any mistakes in her two decades of employment or lack of success in her sport. She was also found to commit minor NCAA violations and was perceived to threaten her colleagues.

A significant finding in this study was that the AD played a dual role; he was both colluder and destructive leader. This duality compounded the countervailing abuse of power. The AD and university president were perceived as destructive leaders who could consistently and effectively insulate themselves from professional evaluation. It was unclear if the president was evaluated for her work on the athletic department. While the AD was perceived as less aversive in the context of the tolerant university,[14] he was no less destructive.

The participants reported six behavioral categories similar to Schilling's[81] qualitative study comparing 1525 statements concerning participant's views with negative leadership. These were laissezfaire, insincere, exploitative, restrictive, failed, and avoiding (passive). Unlike previous descriptions of destructive leader traits,[19,41] the AD was not described by participants as charismatic, bold, idealistic or bright. His personalized use of power was experienced in the way he utilized aversive behaviors, avoided coaches and staff, deprived coaches of money to run competitive sports programs, and failed to attend official sporting events. The AD and the president were also capable of attracting colluders to achieve their goals.

A third factor in the toxic triangle, the university's environment, identified important factors conducive to

destructive leadership. The University's board of trustees represented a vital cohort of stakeholders who contribute to a centralized governance structure where few confronted the president who appointed them. This structure lacked effective oversight and internal controls. As Thoroughgood and Padilla[2] remind us, members of the Board of trustees are typically strong supporters of the athletic programs who directly or indirectly benefit from the success of the university's teams. "The wide variety of ways in which board members are chosen-some are appointed by the governor, others elected by alumni, and others represent industry – makes it difficult to assess who will be impartial and who will not".[2]

In this case, a lack of checks and balances was apparent. The internal reviews, undertaken at many institutions including faculty and staff unions, a faculty liaison, or a faculty committee on athletics guarantee transparency in practice and procedures, were only deployed after the Office of Civil Rights stepped in to review gender equity compliance of the athletic department during the final year of the AD's employment. Another factor that contributed to the conducive environment is the culture of big time college sports. As long as football and basketball teams are winning, and boosters and fans transform into charitable donors, "the environment provides leaders the powers to disregard the rules that apply to others".[2]

Drucker reinforces that positive culture will be the pinnacle of organizational success. Ideally, positive culture is imbibed by all constituents to create a sense of worth and meaning in their careers. Zimbardo argues human behavior is not based upon the kind of person who does the deed, but by the situation in which the person is placed.[31] One's true character is revealed in the face of adversity. While Haslam and Reicher[32] identify the importance of effective leaders being those who best "champion the group". Leaders of athletes are assumed to be champions themselves. The more a person is seen to be prototypical of the group, the more they will be seen as a leader and able to influence other group members.[16] However, it would be patently absurd to represent leadership as a passive process of prototypicality. "Rather, would be leaders actively construe the nature of the shared identity and of their own selves in order to claim prototypicality-and the right to speak for the group" (p. 58).[16]

The major results are highly congruent with the toxic triangle theory and with previous research. One major limitation of the study was the small number of participants and their role in the athletic department. It is possible that further conformers—the silent ones who are apt to obedience and do not engage in destructive behavior themselves—did exist in the athletic department, but were unwilling to participate in the study.

The participants in this study were considered mid-level management in the organization, educated, and financially capable of career mobility. Due to the lack of self-serving bias, it seems to be unlikely that the participants described what they perceived the researcher wanted to hear. The researcher, in interviews, never prompted the perceptions of their president as a destructive leader. Neither was there was any limiting instruction, which permitted participants to talk as they wished about their own and other's behavior. Thus, the underlying topics and relationships developed here may or may not be replicated. The elicitation procedure described antecedents and outcomes of destructive leadership, evoking the participants' thoughts and beliefs concerning negative leadership in general.[83]

Conclusion

High levels of perceived stress that result from subordination under destructive leadership clearly led to performance deficits, compromised physical health, and dark psychological issues. For some followers, the very model of a destructive leader turns them against the entire leadership process. They see the rise to leadership positions as tantamount to giving up valued facets of their own character, including their integrity. Slowly, motivation for the organization dissipates and group members are left to make a difficult decision: to stay or to leave. To ignore or to try to reform or perhaps, overthrow the leader. Coaches are encouraged to reduce the negative impact of their destructive leadership tendencies by becoming involved in the program's vast activities and identify early signs of destruction. First, get to know other coaches and their struggles and successes. Sometimes, individuals are immersed in their own experiences they forget other group members are searching for truth and justice. Coaches are encouraged to avoid the pitfall of contributing to DL of aligning with colluders, which deepens the impact of the destructive leader. Second, support groups can grow into planning groups for strategizing about how to deal with, reform, or possibly unseat a destructive leader. Serving on hiring committees is becoming an afterthought in large D1 universities, as many administrators pay external head hunters to land their next big hot shot. This is where athletic oversight committees must challenge the new hiring process. Seek support from university tenured faculty who are willing to listen and advocate for reform. Lastly, coaches are also encouraged to utilize the results of this study to practice self-evaluation. Identification of destructive leadership characteristics within one's own leadership may be a first step to self-correction. Coaches may benefit from surrounding themselves with trusted peers, ones that will help to engage in honest self-evaluation. As we

shape meaning in our lives, anxiety and fear can be transformed into imaginative enthusiasm and focus. Our struggles can help us come to terms with and create new important symbols through which we can better understand the world we live and affect. Through implementing these strategies, coaches are better equipped to meet the needs of all those involved with their athletic program.

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