

Learning From Bad Leadership: MBA Students Reflect on Bad Leadership and Lessons Learned

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ABSTRACT

An analysis of MBA students' beliefs regarding learning from bad leadership was conducted. MBA students were surveyed to discover how they recognize bad leadership, what they have learned from the bad leadership they have observed, and how they would lead as a result. Findings revealed that bad leadership has significant impact on the students' attitudes and behaviors. Students had a great deal to say about how bad leadership has negatively affected them, their coworkers, and their organization as a whole. Students appeared to be more motivated towards achieving positive outcomes when leaders led by example rather than by command and control techniques. Bad leadership had a high negative impact on individual decision-making and performance as well as on feelings of well-being. Finally, analysis of the data revealed that bad leadership causes an erosion of trust, resulting in decreased contributions to the collective work effort. Following the analysis are implications of the findings and recommendations for further study.

Key words: Bad, Leadership, Lessons, Learning, Students, Perceptions

Introduction

Research about leadership describes the virtues and qualities of transformational leadership, a term Burns (1978) coined, extolling the importance of leaders inducing followers to act to achieve goals driven by shared values, motivation, and collaborative satisfaction. Tichy (1997) and Kotter (1999) built on Burns' assertions, stating leaders motivate followers to action by appealing to shared values and by satisfying the higher order needs of the led, such as their aspirations and expectations.

Bass (1985) pointed out followers of such a leader feel trust, admiration, loyalty, and respect for the leader and because of the leader's qualities are willing to work harder than originally expected. Bennis (2003) posited effective leaders provide followers with an inspiring mission and vision and give them an identity through modeling integrity, dedication, magnanimity, humility, openness, and creativity. Kouzes and Posner (1987) further contended successful leaders challenge the process, inspire a shared vision, enable others to act, model the way, and encourage those led.

In contrast, researchers and theorists have developed a number of labels and descriptors that describe destructive leadership aimed at employees and subordinates. Hornstein (1996) described an abusive leader as "one whose primary objective is the control of others and such control is achieved through methods that create fear and intimidation" (p. 38) whilefor Tepper (2000), "abusive

supervision” is defined as “subordinates' perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact” (p. 178).

In that same vein, Ashforth (1994) described a petty tyrant as “someone who uses their [*sic*] power and authority oppressively, capriciously, and perhaps vindictively” (p. 126). Lipman-Blumen (2005) described “toxic leaders” as “leaders who act without integrity by dissembling and engaging in various other dishonorable behaviors” (p. 18), including behaviors such as “corruption, hypocrisy, sabotage and manipulation, as well as other assorted unethical, illegal, and criminal acts” (p. 18). Lipman-Blumen described that these leaders appeal to one’s deepest needs and play on anxieties; fears; on yearnings for security, high self-esteem, and significance; and on a desire for noble enterprises and immortality.

Kellerman (2004) also pointed out that leaders may involve themselves in corruption, by lying, cheating, and stealing, or otherwise putting their self-interest ahead of the organization's legitimate interest. Although there are obvious similarities among these concepts, researchers and theorists have yet to adopt a common definition or conceptual framework of destructive leadership or the impact on work culture or work climate.

Leaders with immoral personalities abuse power. Amoral leaders are one of the two overarching leadership types Burns (1978) described, the other being moral leaders. Burns states the amoral leader is a power-wielding, self-serving individual who is insensitive to followers’ needs and beliefs, using coercion and fear as the method of influence. This description is echoed by Allio (2007), who suggested that the causes of this current epidemic of bad leadership include the leaders' personality disorders, akrasia (weakness of will), flawed values, immoral character, and avoidance of reality, where a leader grows tyrannical, wields power wrongly, and evolves into only self-serving decisions and actions.

Einarsen, Aasland, and Skogstad (2007) suggested that such kinds of bullying and non-sexual harassment at work may be as frequent as both sexual harassment at work and bullying in schools and may even have consequences as severe.

Many words describe bad leadership, such as ineffective, inferior, inadequate, defective, and Adverse to more harsh terms like toxic, abusive, or even evil (Kellerman, 2004). The fact is that bad leadership is expensive. Vazquez (2006) noted that under the watch of poor leaders and managers, staff morale declines, and workers feel less committed to the organization and its mission, which tends to lead to work of lesser quality and things getting done more slowly.

Kellerman (2004) wrote that too often callous leaders get away with heartlessness toward the very people whose well-being they are supposed to enhance and protect. Kellerman noted intemperate leaders lack self-control and are abetted by followers who are unwilling or unable to intervene; consequently, incompetent followers, people who ignore or discount warning signs and let bad leadership linger, usually support incompetent leaders.

Poor leadership in good times can be hidden, but poor leadership in bad times is a recipe for disaster according to Zenger and Folkman (2009). To find out why leaders fail, the authors scrutinized results from two studies. In one, the researchers collected 360-degree feedback data on more than 450 *Fortune* 500 executives and then identified the common characteristics of the 31 who were fired over the next 3 years. In the second, they analyzed 360-degree feedback data from more than 11,000 leaders and identified the 10% who were considered least effective. They compared the ineffective leaders with the fired leaders to come up with the 10 most common leadership shortcomings: lack energy and enthusiasm, accept their own mediocre performance, lack clear vision and

direction, have poor judgment, do not collaborate, do not walk the talk, resist new ideas, do not learn from mistakes, lack interpersonal skills, and fail to develop others. Every bad leader had at least one such shortcoming and most had several.

Prominent leaders in business, education, and the arts identified examples of both good and bad leadership (Collingwood, 2001). General Electric's Jack Welch, Disney's Michael Eisner, and other notables credited certain people with teaching them the principles of good leadership and explained why they believed certain others showed them examples of bad leadership. The leaders shared various leadership principles and philosophies, but the ultimate conclusion was that leadership is action - it is about showing, not telling; it is about setting the right example, modeling ideals and ethics, and developing talent, something bad leaders do not do.

Riggio (2009) reflected on bad leadership, and noted some of the tactics used by bad leaders. He stated bad leaders use threats and punishment to stop undesired behavior; use fear tactics to get followers to toe the line; let power go to their heads; do things that are in their own best interests without considering collective interests; and create factions of "in-groups" and "out-groups," rewarding in-group members not because they are top performers, but because they show loyalty or fawn over the leader.

Strang (2005) examined effective and ineffective leader behaviors from direct participant observations in several cases of a large, multiyear, cross-industry, international research project to determine if effective team performance management requires strong transformational leadership. His research illuminates that both effective and absent transformational leadership behaviors were practiced (idealized influence, inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation), which can go unnoticed in the everyday workplace of busy project schedules, competing values, and organizational crises. Yet these results show that team members and sponsors notice passive or absent leadership; moreover, such leadership negatively impacts both project effectiveness and stakeholder satisfaction.

Purpose of the Study

The literature reveals that followers are subject to learning from leaders in organizational interactions, and ineffective (bad) leadership is detrimental to followers and organizational performance. More importantly, bad leadership is something that leaders must constantly be on guard for. How can leaders identify bad leadership and then determine from their observations how to become more effective leaders? Answers to this question may be beneficial to designing leadership education that enhances students' understanding of the impact ineffective leadership may have on management's and followers' behavior and attitudes. In an effort to design a more focused curriculum for leaders in training and prepare MBA students at Augsburg College's Rochester, Minnesota, campus, these students were surveyed to determine their perceptions of bad leadership. The study asked them to provide their perceptions of bad leadership and what they have learned from bad leadership. The goal was to help them recognize ways to cope with ineffective leadership. Vast insights gained from experiencing bad leadership were revealed.

Research Methodology

Participant Selection

Realizing that people enter business degree programs to learn how to manage and lead people and organizations effectively, MBA students were selected to provide feedback regarding perceptions of bad leadership. The MBA students selected were adult learners in southeastern Minnesota and

reflective of the graduate business student population in the region pursuing their degree on a part-time basis. These students typically work in full-time positions during the day and attend class at night, earning their degree within 2 years. Through their work positions and their involvement with individuals and organizations outside of their work setting, these students are exposed to leadership. Their curriculum includes one leadership course and one business ethics course, and leadership principles and applications are woven throughout the curriculum. The sample included all 15 students of a cohort (a group of students moving through the curriculum together) who enrolled in the Augsburg College MBA program at Augsburg College-Rochester, Minnesota.

The study was submitted to the Augsburg College Internal Review Board for approval. The students were not coerced to respond, nor was there any form of retribution if they did not respond. The students responded openly and freely. Consent to participate was implied through survey completion. All responses were gathered as e-mail responses and documented in a database without names, e-mail addresses, or any other identifying characteristics.

Survey Design

The descriptive survey was kept short; questions focused on the aspects that would identify how the MBA students identified and learned from bad leadership. Participants were e-mailed the open-ended questions and were instructed to provide short responses to each of the three questions within 1 week for compilation of results:

1. How do you know if leadership is bad?
2. What can you learn from bad leadership?
3. What would this learning make you do differently if you were in a leadership role?

Data Analysis

The data were reviewed using an interpretivistic descriptive analysis approach (van Manen, 2003). Two faculty with doctoral degrees reviewed the survey results. They read all data and identified overarching key themes related to the question of how participants identified and learned from bad leadership. Shared meaning among respondents was assessed and identified. In addition, they identified and assessed shared meaning among responses. Insights gained will assist in curriculum design and course development. Inter-rater reliability was achieved through comparing independently identified overall themes and coming to consensus on what constituted core themes and subthemes.

Survey Internal Instrument Validity

To achieve content and construct validity, the survey was designed to ask specific questions related to students' perceptions of bad leadership and what they have learned from their interaction with bad leaders. A group of leadership professors at Augsburg College and Saint Mary's University of Minnesota, and two consultants who provide training in leadership and organization development for non-profit and for -profit organizations reviewed the questions before the surveys were distributed. This group of professors and consultants agreed that the questions would be effective in drawing out the responses needed for this research study. In addition, the survey was pilot-tested with eight randomly selected MBA students in the Augsburg College MBA program at the Minneapolis campus. All the responses were specific to each of the questions.

Findings

Of the 15 surveys sent, 14 were returned with complete responses to all three survey questions within 1 week. This 93% response rate is considered by Miles and Huberman (1994) representative of the beliefs and perceptions of the MBA student population.

All survey transcripts were analyzed in terms of the three leadership questions posed. Questions and related responses were analyzed independently for context and meaning, and the most prevalent and frequently cited responses were tabulated as Fink (1995) prescribed. Emerging constructs were determined through a coding and thematic process Miles and Huberman (1994) and van Manen (2003) recommended.

Question 1: How do you know if leadership is bad? Analysis of Responses

Students responded to the identification of bad leadership question with numerous insights and lessons. The responses were coded thematically for key phrases and words. Five subtheme constructs were recognized as core indicators of bad leadership: (a) a lack of mission and vision, (b) poor leader communication, (c) a resulting lack of trust in the leadership, (d) lack of leadership accountability, and (e) failure of leadership to maintain current professional development. The constructs will be explained in narrative terms with statements serving as evidence for forming response aggregates and emerging, summative constructs.

Lack of mission and vision. Emerging from the responses are three central subthemes related to mission and vision integrity: mission ambiguity, mission and values are measured by employees, and mission adherence.

A leader's ambiguous communication of mission appears to be most evident when team members have different views of the direction of the company and of the mission, vision, and core beliefs. Such ambiguity may mean employees are unclear about organizational purpose, ambitions, and where the company is heading and was seen as a sign of trouble attributable to ineffective leadership. Also apparent was that the leader might not see the value of change and vision. Leaders' failure to communicate a clear vision was revealed in the statement *"employees have differing ideas and beliefs about... vision, mission, values."* There appeared to be an *"inability to clarify the big picture and our purpose when the opportunity arose."* A consistent response was that the leader *"never understood the importance of providing a platform for change, vision, and company founding values."*

Another aspect of mission and vision integrity appears to be the ability of leadership to preserve mission and values and achieve targeted results, something bad leaders do not do. The participant who wrote, *"You need to weigh . . . current results and how those play into the overall mission and values of the organization"* spoke to the inability of some leaders to do this. Mismatch of mission and vision integrity was expressed in the statement *"there was no purpose for the firm beyond providing a service to make money,"* illustrating associated lack of lived mission as evidence of the leader missing the mark.

Responses indicated that all respondents believe adherence to mission and values is required of effective leaders, and those who cannot adhere are seen as bad leaders. A response referred to bad leadership as *"leadership consistently deviates from the mission, and core values."* The respondent's insight may mean that employees are watching leaders for living and modeling the organization's mission and values, and deviating from these foundational elements is a troubling sign of bad leadership.

Low employee morale and motivation. Additional indicators of bad leadership emerged as a core construct of low morale and poor motivation. The following statements exemplify these perceptions indicating that a bad leader *“has no regard for employee feelings or emotions”* while *“a good leader considers all that are involved.”* Ultimately, the participants often identified low morale as resulting in *“low work performance.”* One comment revealed insight into the damage done to an organization when the bad leader was *“successful at maintaining and embracing a culture that did the minimum.”* Respondents were clear in identifying that bad leaders do *“not inspire or support innovation and support only like thinking, avoiding or disregarding others that challenge or find other solutions.”* The core construct of low morale and poor motivation is also supported by beliefs that bad leaders use threats and forms of punishment versus rewards and positive reinforcement. They tend to give no encouragement as one participant expressed, *“They use negative reinforcement such as the threat of punishment as motivation.”* Leaders’ negative approaches were reflected in the predominance of words like “low morale” and “poor morale” threading through all participants’ responses.

Further, students see favoritism and disparate treatment of the various employees as de-motivating, thus lowering morale when the bad leader *“treats everyone differently.”* The word *“favoritism”* appeared again and again in the narrative. One respondent captured the quintessential belief regarding inequality and its association with bad leadership: *“You can determine if leadership is bad by measuring inequity among employees.”*

The responses indicated that if motivation is lacking, then morale is low, too, and if morale is down, motivation is diminished.

Poor leader communication. The core construct of poor communication is derived from perceptions including a disconnect or lack of a venue for feedback and input, bad direction, and no pronounced and clearly understood goals. Goals, if communicated, keep changing with employees becoming possibly both confused and frustrated.

These constructs were supported by statements like *“employees don’t know their jobs”* and there appear to be *“conflicting, undefined, and un-communicated goals”* and a *“lack of direction”* with *“confusion and inefficiency.”* The problem of lack of clear goals and communication was exacerbated by *“disorganization”* and leaders asking *“too many irrelevant questions,”* which led to further confusion.

No trust in leadership. Though the core construct of no trust in leadership and resentment are potential outcomes of bad leadership, the perceptions making up this construct are quite descriptive and definitive. Participants pointed out *“if leaders take all the credit ...[the]leader is not really a leader.”* A leader’s lack of acknowledging subordinates’ contributions is compounded when the leaders *“generally talk down to their subordinate or openly talk behind people’s back.”* Leading without crediting others’ efforts pairs with the poor leader communication discussed previously.

Similarly, if leaders are unapproachable and negative, strong resentment is a probable result, expressed as, *“People stopped coming to him (leader) with issues because past experiences taught them that it was not worth their time.”* One respondent summarized it as *“He [leader] was a very negative person.”*

Respondents indicated bad leaders undermine the success of employees, stating that *“many times, the tasks given hadn’t even been taught to the employee yet.”* A leader’s undermining actions inhibit employees from being effective and purposely keep employees in the dark. Feelings of being intentionally left in the dark and not understanding the goals are described in the following statement: *“I could not get a straight answer, and I was not able to get his [leader’s] support in*

helping to resolve inter-department conflicts with key initiatives.” The ultimate undermining of success appears to be leaders owning the successes. They tend to *“think the only strategy is their strategy, they are the only ‘genius’ needed, [and] will be intimidated by brilliant people.”* Not recognizing subordinates’ contributions and then undermining them is represented in the following statement: *“If an employee does something wrong, it is never brought to attention in a one-on-one meeting, but is addressed in either a group meeting as a wrong way to perform a task or comes out in a performance review where an employee may feel blindsided by the assessment.”* Clearly lack of trust and resentment result from bad leadership.

Finally, analysis of the narrative revealed that respondents will not be confident in leaders if there is no faith in the leader’s leadership abilities. This theme was repeated over and over by participants, who had a *“lack of confidence in his leadership ability”* and *“no faith in the leaders”* resulting in making *“people leave.”* One respondent wrote that the organization should *“fire their [sic] boss!”*

It can be assumed that effective leaders do not take the credit for employee work, do not try to lessen employees’ effectiveness and success, and are quite approachable, thus producing trust in leadership. Bad leaders do not do these things, thus inhibiting the ability of employees to trust leadership.

Lack of leader accountability and failure to assume responsibility. Respondents expounded on beliefs that bad leaders avoid conflict, generally side-step responsiveness and responsibility related to challenges, and do not address damaging situations: *“By not addressing the brutal facts of a changing market and declining income, they failed.”* An example of lack of assuming accountability was that the *“leader admitted that he hated to put anything on paper or in an e-mail because then he was held to it.”* An example of this failure to assume responsibility was when the leader *“perfected the art of the ‘no-decision.’”*

Another subconstruct of accountability and responsibility was that bad leaders display unethical leadership behavior and in the extreme, illegal behavior. The common phrases and words used to identify these behaviors were *“dishonesty, manipulation, lack of professionalism”* and *“loyalty to the company is replaced by greed.”*

Failure to maintain current professional development. Finally, respondents believe bad leaders do not participate in ongoing professional development to maintain competency and stay current. One respondent decried, *“a leader [who] does not participate in continual learning regarding the field or subject they [sic] lead.”* Lack of professional development suggests leaders *“are not paying attention to current practices or have become complacent with current organization practices.”*

The results of responses to identifying bad leadership are not only that bad leadership can be recognized but that it has impacts that can be clearly articulated.

Question 2: What can you learn from bad leadership? Analysis of Responses

Students again responded with numerous insights and lessons covering a broad range of beliefs and applications. The emerging constructs are somewhat similar with those identified in responses to perceptions and awareness of bad leadership.

Improve motivation, engagement, and recognition. Respondents revealed the need for effective leadership to motivate employees. Respondents expressed that engagement and morale increase when employees are engaged, committed, developed, and rewarded properly. A recurrent theme was that *“bad leadership affects the whole organization, and people become less motivated and enthused.”* A recurrent theme was that becoming less motivated is detrimental to the functionality and

well-being of followers. An example was that *“employees must be part of the solution, because this generates a positive attitude. Lack of participation produces unmotivated workers.”* It is interesting to note that the act of *“de-motivation”* actually was identified as *“more powerful than motivation.”*

Lack of motivation affecting team performance and engagement was a clear learning outcome of working under bad leadership. As one respondent wrote, *“an uninspired team suffers.”* Another wrote, *“Employees will complete the tasks at hand simply because they do not want to get in trouble. However, in the long run, this creates low employee morale and does not move a team forward.”* Lack of strong leadership results in unmotivated teams not using *“the extraordinary skills that can be solid contributors to the success of the company.”*

The sense of motivation and morale directly impact one’s commitment to the agency. One respondent pointed out with *“simply, low morale – people leave.”* Several identified the need for collaborative environments as elements affecting motivation and morale. One respondent encouraged leaders to assume *“a responsibility to create and coordinate a better collaborative environment across departments.”* Consistently throughout the narratives was the recognition that *“the mood of the staff affects how people work.”* Bad leaders do not recognize this key element in maintaining commitment. What workers learn from bad leaders is that it is important *“to work towards greater employee motivation and morale, [and] provide recognition.”*

Bad leadership restricts the development of performers because *“it may cost you overall as bad leadership can restrict already solid performers from being truly great ones.”* The bad leader fails to provide constructive criticism and positive feedback, and *“nobody grows.”*

The essential need to reward employees properly emerged repeatedly, supported by statements such as *“reward good work publically [sic],”* and *“Don’t just measure performance, reward it.”* A consistent theme in the students’ responses was summarized by one student who learned from the bad leader to *“make a point to praise people as often as possible for their contributions to the mission.”*

Communicate mission, vision, and values. Not surprising is many students learned that direction setting, vision articulation, and shared values were crucial for effective leadership. Students recognized that *“just knowing what to do will not always give you a good plan of action.”* When leaders provide clear direction, define success factors, and incorporate planning methods, they will be more effective. A statement that captured this recurrent belief was, *“I think you need to weigh input from the team against current results and how it plays into the overall mission and values of the organization.”*

The importance of clearly articulating the vision so followers can understand ideal outcomes is evident in these statements: *“Cast the vision and discuss it often”* and *“Keep the focus on the vision rather than allowing the focus to shift and drift.”* As one student wrote, *“Even the most competent people need to have a clear understanding of a vision and be included in decisions along the way.”*

Shared values are seen as crucial for effective leadership. The students identified a variety of constructs, but one was central to all students’ responses: consistently repeated were the phrases *“shared values,” “clear values,”* and *“knowing one’s values.”* One student explained, *“The needs of the patients come first. In such a large institution it can be difficult at times to fulfill this value. Without proper leadership and support of the institution’s values, the concept is lost very quickly.”* Another key phrase emerged, the need for *“consistency”* in values. A lesson learned from bad leadership was evident for one respondent who wrote, *“I also learned from my time working with him how important it is to stick with one particular philosophy based on our values.”* Embedded in each of the responses was the implication that these values must be grounded ethically, but several respondents

pointed this out in statements like *"the culture should be made up of values including respect, ethics, and morals."*

Build trust. Respondents indicated that instilling trust is necessary for effective leadership and plays out in vital areas. This involved demonstrating trustworthiness and also trusting employees. This construct requires follow through: *"Do what you say you are going to do."* The respondent who wrote, *"work to create a culture of discipline, thoroughness, and completion"* summarized the construct. Recognizing the need for follow through is based on observing bad leadership. The respondents learned that respect cannot be mandated: *"You cannot demand respect – it must be earned."* Others also identified this construct as an essential component of good leadership. As one respondent wrote, *"[you] can't dictate a solution and expect everyone to just carry it out because you said so."* Good leadership built on trust recognizes that a top-down, *"I'm the boss – do what I say" style* will not build trust in one's leadership. Wheatley (2005) pointed out the old hierarchical models of leadership block creativity and trust in the organization.

Acts of diplomacy and tact were two other emerging constructs of trustworthiness. Many students identified these two qualities as an essential insight gained from working under bad leadership. As one respondent wrote, *"yelling at employees without reason will decrease productivity."* That careful communication was important was alluded to frequently in the narratives: *"I'm learning from my bad leadership examples to be very poignant in choosing my words and my tone when working with clients or employees."* Another wrote, *"People are never going to see exactly eye to eye, but it is the leader's responsibility to negotiate, recognize the differences, and ultimately solve the conflict."* The good leader recognizes that *"when dealing with people, discussion and people skills will reduce fears and leave the best impressions."*

The second major subtheme of trust, believing in one's employees, is a key part of effective leadership, expressed as *"trust employees to do their jobs and get off their backs"* and *"trust your employees and they will trust you."* Complexity science (Wheatley, 2005) teaches the learner that cocreation and emergence are built into systems that are grounded in rich communication and trust. Respondents who worked for bad leaders learned this lesson the hard way.

Watching bad leaders micromanage limits creativity and personal contributions, but stepping back and trusting allows workers to live up to the expectation of high performance. As one respondent wrote, *"leave the employee to explore what works best for them [sic] to accomplish the task and trust that they [sic] want to do well in their [sic] job."* Being trustworthy and trusting creates an atmosphere where creativity flourishes.

Model the way. Clearly evident in a majority of the responses was the need to learn from both bad and good examples of leadership and know effective leadership is best demonstrated in actions and words in challenging situations such as during times of change.

A subset of this construct is to avoid bad habits and proactively create a not-to-do list after experiencing bad leaders. As one respondent said, *"It's simple, do the opposite of bad leaders,"* and *"avoid taking others' bad habits of bad management style"* by not falling *"into the same pitfalls of bad leaders."*

Looking to great examples of leadership is important. The narratives supported the value of modeling effective leadership in statements like *"I think the best learning comes from examples of great leadership, rather than the study of bad leadership,"* and *"Studying only the traits, style, and methods of capable leaders will reveal the traits that make leaders ineffective."* The lessons learned from a good leader gets to the heart of the organization and its mission. As one respondent wrote, *"[did you]ever notice how the best leaders always put people before profits?"*

Emerging from the construct of what one learns from good leaders was the subset of setting good examples as crucial to learning about bad leadership. Leaders should *“be behind the scenes, but pitch in when needed and show employees it is a team effort.”* The respondents recognized that adapting to *“meet the needs of your employees shows an example of good leadership.”* Based on the reflection of bad leadership in comparison to good leadership, a statement was, *“some [leadership] characteristics I need to see include natural curiosity, relentless ambition, [and] a passion of rigor and self-discipline.”*

A subset of the construct modeling the way is the ability of a leader to be a change catalyst and champion of change initiatives. Positive leadership for change is seen *“when leaders ask questions, facilitate discussions, and make sure employee energy is aligned with necessary change.”* A leader who is a change catalyst does not *“hand out tasks and that’s it. They [leaders] explain why things are important to get people more involved.”* In summary, the key to being a change agent and effective leader is that *“a manager must be aware and want to make change happen or they [sic] will never achieve effective leadership.”*

Empower employees. Respondents revealed that developing employees and delegating work to them while removing inhibiting factors is important for leaders. The need to grow and develop good employees is revealed in a statement like *“recognize employee learning needs[and] ask for their feedback.”* It was clear that *“the most important part of the job as the manager should be to focus on developing and teaching employees and give them the tools and training they need to succeed.”*

Delegating work to employees in *“agreed upon roles, responsibilities, and alignment of talent”* is seen as empowerment and is a vital factor for effective leadership. The narrative had repeated references to statements like *“Hire good people and let them do their work”* and *“Assign a team to create a mission statement, company goals, and ways to do priorities, not just busy work.”* The bad leader behaviors teach those observing that *“callous manipulation and smothering stifles performance.”*

Removing obstacles and reducing inhibiting barriers free up employees to do what they do best and is the power of good leadership. In a bad leadership setting, *“Fear will take over creativity. Fear to speak up. Fear to try something new. Fear to be an individual. Get rid of fear.”* In comparison, under good leadership, the good leader knows *“where we need to go, how we should get there, and anticipate and attack obstacles for the team to succeed.”* Flexibility of action results in the leader using *“different styles on a team and [knowing] that there are multiple ways to work through a problem to get to a solution, and people should feel good about contributing.”*

Learn coping mechanisms. Respondents described the need to persevere, be resilient, be proactive in changing what one can, and work on stress-reducing techniques. These learning insights appear to describe ways to cope with challenging situations and difficult people.

Persevering and developing resilience for both employees and self are crucial constructs associated with good leadership. One respondent wrote, *“If you can survive bad leadership, certainly you have given your work ethic some honing.”* Another wrote, *“From bad leadership, one can learn to take initiative in his/her job. By taking ownership, motivation and sense of worth is [sic] increased, which should increase well-being.”* The narratives repeatedly mentioned phrases associated with the need for inner strength under bad leadership: *“I’ve learned that it is important to be an engaged and engaging leader who both trusts and guides employees to be adaptive and not give up.”*

Bad leadership challenges those within that system to think of ways to react and improve their situations. Several respondents identified that *“there are numerous ways to improve a business ... look for opportunities.”* Finding those opportunities to influence the system was revealed in statements like *“learn ways to communicate to and influence a bad leader to take care of business.”* It is clear that

working under a bad leader poses challenges that present an opportunities for personal growth of those willing to take on the challenge.

Practice awareness and scanning. Respondents indicated they learned several things from bad leadership in terms of the need to be aware, the need to study complexity, the necessity to accurately interpret what is seen and heard, and the need to assess the impact of environmental forces both internally and externally.

The need to increase awareness and keep an open eye is because it is *“through being able to identify a bad leadership situation and evaluate it”* that one can learn and grow. The recurrent phrases and words that addressed this sub-construct were summarized by *“first, listen to the people around you, even if you don’t like what they’re saying”* and then *“take a step back and get to the root of why people are unhappy.”* It is through this process of awareness and reflection that one can learn alternative approaches.

That the complexity Wheatley (2005) described is inherent in real life work settings was revealed by the respondent who wrote, *“no matter what a person does, they [sic] will almost always encounter someone who has no clue about what is going on.”* Accepting that there will be misunderstandings and addressing this upfront would *“allow for everyone to grow as employees because they would know what was expected from them and their coworkers. There would be no guessing what the project of the month would be.”*

Responses return to the theme of trust and looking to better communication to make sure that all are communicating. *“The people in the day-to-day dredges know a lot more about how things work, what is going on, and how things could be made.”* Leaders can harvest the wisdom that rest with those in the trenches.

Making sense by viewing matters through unbiased interpretation was another insight and theme throughout the narrative. One respondent’s statement summarized others: *“Make sense of chaos. I have learned that you need to gather information and not jump to conclusions.”* Viewing the organization objectively, the respondents recognized that *“bad leadership is worst when one couldn’t even recognize that it is bad”* because *“true leaders define reality.”*

Finally, assessing the impact of bad leadership is a major learning construct that was repeated over and over in the narratives of all three questions. Recognizing and learning from the effects of bad leadership is reflected in the statement *“you can take a look around you and see the effect that bad leadership has on your work unit and your company as a whole, and learn what behaviors not to engage in.”*

These responses illustrate that recognizing characteristics of bad leadership can lead to learning that averts destructive outcomes and is worthy of further examination.

Question 3: What would this learning make you do differently? Analysis of Responses

The student responses were themed by key words and phrases and then aggregated for similarity, a process that revealed the importance of effective communication, practicing awareness and scanning, and actively reflecting on employees’ work and development. Once again, the importance of clearly defining mission, vision, and values as central constructs is apparent in the learning from bad leadership. From the aggregation of responses, the following five major constructs and supporting subsets or subconstructs emerged and are supported by statements students made.

Communicate effectively. Respondents indicated they learned several things from bad leadership: to listen carefully and empathetically, create open communication environments, and accurately interpret what is seen and heard.

Empathetic listening was highlighted as an important leadership behavior and expressed in statements like *“learn the importance of listening and empathizing with people in order to be able to communicate more effectively,”* and *“listening and understanding allows you to share in their joy and appreciate their struggles.”*

Open communication and an environment of connectedness was an important construct all recognized as expressed in the following statement: *“Be open to feedback, because employees disclose much more to other employees than they do to their leader.”* It is clear that a bad leader does not often build environmental connectedness. Many recognize that a leader needs to actively *“communicate to have employees feel much more connected and informed.”* When the leader builds an environment of open communication, the result is a *“safe environment for sharing.”*

Respondents indicated they learned several things from bad leadership in terms of the need to be aware of and *“clearly define goals and objectives.”* The need to share decisions and explain the rationale for them was also a recurrent theme, as one respondent wrote, *“Communicate the ‘why’ for decisions and goals.”* To achieve this shared understanding of the “why,” the need to train and educate employees was revealed in statements like *“focus on developing and teaching employees and giving them the tools and training they need.”* It became clear in the narrative that respondents recognized the importance of the leader to *“know and share the organizational structure and functions and how decisions are made to get things done.”*

Ultimately the subconstructs of *“showing respect”* and *“building trust”* were cited as a necessary leadership behaviors going forward: *“ensuring the group understands my suggestions are intended for the development of the department, company, and the individuals . . . will produce an atmosphere of trust.”*

Two subsets of the construct of communication are interacting and connecting with employees. Respondents recognized the need for these behaviors and found them crucial for leadership effectiveness. As a result of learning from bad leaders, one respondent wrote that the experience will *“change the way I interact with employees.”* The experience helped the respondents realize that *“my influence and leadership has a direct influence on the attitude and culture.”*

Practice awareness and scanning. Students had strong beliefs about the need to assess and interpret the internal and external environment to appreciate and adapt to changing conditions. Awareness is a necessity for future leadership. The words and phrases like *“aware,” “being aware,”* and *“constant mindfulness”* were repeated over and over in the responses. One respondent learned that it was important to *“scan the environment and modify leadership to the changing needs.”*

Sensitivity to people is another subset construct that was seen as a necessary quality for good leadership: *“Put yourself in your people’s shoes and understand what they are thinking and need”; “Find out what makes your workers tick and how they think.”* Learning how others think and feel helps define what good leadership is all about.

Ultimately a good leader recognizes staff needs and makes plans to help them develop to their fullest potential through the process of measurement and assessment: *“Measuring staff development is subjective, but can be reflected through employee actions and attitudes.”* Succinctly stated, *“You cannot improve what you do not measure.”*

Conduct reflection and realization. Students expressed the need for leadership to be reflective and visualize reality while determining shortcomings and having strength to resolve vexing problems. Realizing a situation's impact on self and others is a leadership aspiration that grew out of experiencing bad leaders; one respondent wrote, *"My realization of the impact of my leadership would help me do everything in my power to change."* Having experienced the opposite, another respondent wrote, *"I would also want them to know how their efforts were impacting the overall success or failure of the company."*

Realizing bad leadership pitfalls and ability gaps is crucial. One respondent pointed out that one must *"realize the pitfalls of bad leadership. Not only what they are, but what causes them."* The challenge of realizing the pitfalls is then to *"use the strengths, beliefs, and expertise of others to counteract bad leadership weaknesses."* Being astute to leadership pitfalls and employees' ability gaps is a challenging role for a leader.

In addition to a leader's role, others must take ownership of acts and expectations: *"I need to know the answers to the questions I pose and accept what I cannot change or have failed to change."* Another wrote, *"When I make mistakes, I will admit it [sic], and then go on to fix them."*

Develop human resources. Students believed their future as successful leaders relied on motivating and rewarding good employees. But they also expressed that they, as a human resource, personally needed care and attention, too.

As identified earlier, providing recognition is seen as a crucial factor for effective leadership and will be applied in future leadership situations as shown by these statements: *"reward and use positive reinforcement," "communicate compliments,"* and *"through recognition and job satisfaction, employees will have greater morale and motivation."* Ultimately the respondents recognized they need to *"make it a priority to recognize staff for their contributions."*

Part of developing human resources includes reducing stress for staff and self. Statements like *"try to reduce the employees' stress level allowing them to better focus on their current assignment"* and *"appreciate the fact stress is everywhere and you, as a leader, must deal with it in others and yourself"* clearly illustrate this insight gained from working under a bad leader.

Respondents recognized the need for hiring the best people to enhance leadership effectiveness and strengthen the general work culture. Ideally, *"the new company will be filled with dedicated, hard-working, and self-motivated individuals."* Another wrote, *"Those selected are the ones who are able to make the culture one of values, respect, ethics, and morals."* One respondent plans to *"hire the right people and make sure they are in the right seats."*

Coaching *"not drive"* is a priority for future leadership effectiveness. Leaders in training recognize that as good leaders, they need to *"share [their] knowledge to enable others to act on their goals."* Sharing knowledge will hopefully *"empower my employees to do as much as possible with as little management intervention as possible."* It is clear that learning from bad leaders has helped people understand that they need to develop a culture that will *"help employees become more agile and adapt to conditions."*

Analysis of the narrative reveals that respondents learned the importance of mentoring and team building as integral for employee performance enhancement. Statements like *"provide good direction and help clear the path to success"* and *"help them reach their personal goals through mentoring and by providing opportunities that would lead to each person's personal strength"* reveal insight into the role mentoring plays. Consistently appearing in the narrative were *"teamwork," "team building," "the team,"* and *"the group."* A statement that captured the relationship between mentoring and team

building was to *“make sure we are a winning team through training, hard work, and personal accountability.”*

The final subset of the construct of developing human resources was a culture of discipline fundamental for future leadership success. Living with ambiguity and lack of discipline is hard on all. One person wrote, *“I would take corrective action to reassign or terminate.”* The process was clear. It was important for a good leader to provide *“discipline for employees who require it and rewards for those who deserve it.”*

Define mission, vision, and values. Once more the themes of mission, vision, and values come to the forefront. Clarifying mission and purpose driven by a collective set of shared values is important to achieve goals and create a culture dedicated to the future. Mission definition and employees' engagement will be an ambition for future leaders. Respondents wrote that they would do things like *“make sure all employees know and are on board with the mission”* and *“ensure people know the facts affect the strategy, and the company is evolving and reacting to the facts.”* The leader's ownership of mission was an interesting subconstruct that several respondents identified. An example of ownership is seen in the response that *“through humbleness and professional will I will sell the mission.”*

Motivating employees to spread the mission will be a leadership practice going forward: *“I would utilize them [employees] to help disseminate that message [mission] to the employees they work with or supervise.”* Learning from bad leadership has pointed out that *“fair and consistent treatment at all levels is contagious”* and *“passion and commitment breeds the same.”*

Building and providing a vision and mission as vital for leadership was a recurrent theme expressed by one respondent's vow to *“work with the executives and the management team to create a new business model including a new vision and mission statement.”*

Having values drive behavior is crucial for leadership and respondents who wrote that they will *“take the high road. Try not to take the bad leader role, even if it is the easiest road to take.”* The congruency between performance and mission, visions, and values is clear: *“You cannot achieve your mission without values guiding your performance.”* Having experienced bad leadership, the respondents realize that it is important to *“lead in the spirit of the vision.”*

These responses illustrate that characteristics of bad leadership can lead to proactive measures designed to prevent a perpetuation of bad leadership practices.

Summary of Findings

The value of the study rests in three critical areas: (a) Student leaders in training can vividly and specifically describe what they believe bad leadership is, (b) They can learn and have learned from bad leadership, and (c) They desire to use their learning to become more effective (not bad) leaders in their future leadership roles. Systemically, this ability to observe, learn, and act when dealing with bad models of leadership may be as crucial for turning out effective leaders as learning only from ideal models of leadership.

Identification of Bad Leaders

It is clear from the stories and experiences the MBA students related that bad leaders are those who set a poor example and stifle the opportunity for others to grow and develop. They commonly

identified bad leader traits; those that manifested in bad leadership attitudes and behavior include being rude or aggressive, leading by fear and intimidation, operating with double standards, putting themselves first over employees, being uncaring and demeaning, disciplining employees in front of others, micro-managing, being untrustworthy, and violating the 'Golden Rule'.

Bad leaders are those who only pretend to listen; those who fail to say thank you; or those who allow employees to behave rudely and aggressively, perhaps because they are unaware that they have set the example. The examples of bad leadership experienced include bosses yelling at subordinates, trying to lead through fear and intimidation, treating people differently than they themselves would like to be treated, employing double standards, and treating subordinates unequally.

Leadership Lessons Learned

Students related that leadership is about an attitude and a sense of responsibility for making a difference. Leadership is about setting the right example and making a difference in people's lives. Students believe one does not have to do great things to make these differences and that even small choices and decisions made throughout a day add up to determining the kind of workplace people experience. Students revealed that witnessing bad leadership becomes important learning lessons for employees. Their lessons indicate that leaders must pause, reflect, and consider the message they are sending and the example they are setting.

Students learned mistakes are going to happen, but there is a need to be able to look back and recognize one's mistakes - even when egos are quite sensitive - and instead of focusing on who is to blame or why the mistake happened, there is a greater need to give more attention to correcting the mistake. Students revealed that witnessing and working under bad leadership reinforces character, makes one smarter, and makes one resilient, creating a much healthier attitude to take into the business world.

Going Forward as Leaders

These student leaders in training generally recognize an obligation to make a positive difference in the organization and in the lives of those they lead. Students related they want to go forward and not resemble the bad leaders they have had to suffer. Their ambitions are to have integrity, be worthy of trust, and be honest (even humble), caring, compassionate, respectful, willing to work hard and lead by example, inspiring, uplifting, enthusiastic, positive, patient, and kind to those they lead.

The students also want to be competent, capable, and effective while being forward-looking with a sense of direction and a concern for the future. In addition, students aspire to be good listeners and communicators by being accessible to their people. Finally, being a decisive problem solver is crucial for their leadership effectiveness and is magnified and nurtured through delegating and empowering employees.

The students confirmed that effective leadership consists of a set of positive beliefs coupled with an equally appropriate set of positive actions and behaviors and that without these actions and behaviors, there is no commitment, merely good intentions. They will strive to be effective leaders who will not only say they want to do the right thing but will follow through with appropriate actions - they will 'walk the way they talk'.

Discussion and Implications

This study reveals a leader's systematic and repeated behavior that violates the legitimate interest of the organization and the employees' well-being by undermining and sabotaging the organization's

goals, tasks, resources, and effectiveness and the motivation, well-being, and subordinates' job satisfaction is destructive and a clear misuse of power.

To be clear, the term "bad leadership" does not always include any malicious intent to harm the organization or the employees. Bad leadership may appear through instances of thoughtlessness as well as ignorance, insensitivity, and incompetence. In addition, one must accept that leaders occasionally make poor decisions or are preoccupied with pressing and stressful issues. It is only when this destructive behavior becomes intentional, systematic, and repeated that it can be classified as bad leadership.

In all these cases, as the MBA students described, the bad leader's behavior has the effect of sabotaging and undermining the organization as well as employees' performance and sensitivities, irrespective of the leader's intentions. Although the students' responses do not make clear the intent or motive behind the leader's behavior, it is important not to underestimate the significant part intent and even personality conflicts may play in subjective judgments the students made. Kellerman (2004) placed some responsibility on the followers who empower and enable bad leaders, whereby the harm then is not necessarily deliberate; it can be the result of interpersonal tension, poor judgment, or misinterpretations.

Behaviors violating the legitimate interest of the organization to a certain degree overlap with the related terms of illegal, immoral, or deviant behaviors. These concepts have different connotations. However, according to the students, a leader's behavior will be considered bad when it violates the legitimate interest of the organization, which is the appropriate, fair, and optimal use of financial, material, and human resources.

As the students indicated, bad leadership appears in two primary contexts: behaviors directed towards employees and behaviors directed towards the goals, tasks, and effectiveness of the organization. The study's investigators contend that it cannot be assumed that leaders are incapable of acting destructively on one dimension while behaving constructively on the other. A leader who abuses and harasses employees may still act in accordance with the goals and objectives of the organization, with a strong focus on task completion and effectiveness as opposed to a focus on relationship-building. Likewise, a leader who is intentionally defiant and acts in opposition to the legitimate goals of the organization may still be supportive towards employees. Furthermore, some leaders may act destructively on both dimensions, while others will be constructive on both dimensions showing tangible support. Tangible support consists of training, tools, materials, parts, discipline, direction, procedures, rules, technical advice, documentation, information, planning, among others, and intangible support consists of feelings like confidence, morale, trust, respect, relatedness, inspiration, autonomy, ownership, engagement, and empowerment.

Students' responses revealed a conceptualization of both effective and bad leadership. Effective leadership builds relationships among employees, giving praise and rewards when due, and showing appreciation and respect. Conversely, bad leadership undermines motivation, well-being, and job satisfaction. Additionally, employee participation, idea generation, and potential contributions to the success of the organization were significantly lessened by the demoralizing behaviors of bad leaders such as humiliating, belittling, and manipulating employees in order to meet goals and standards.

Einarsen and Skogstad (1996) posited that leaders who behave destructively towards subordinates may not necessarily be destructive in other interpersonal relationships, be it with customers or business partners or towards peer and upper management, and they may also have strong technical skills. Ma, Karri, and Chittipeddi (2004) called this "the paradox of managerial tyranny," (p. 34) arguing that tyrannical leadership may lead to extraordinary performance, even when employees

suffer. Examples of such destructive methods include creating groups of insiders and outsiders, creating distrust within the group, or harshly using select employees as examples when trying to teach other employees what will happen if they do not follow orders.

McCall and Lombardo (1983) identified 10 causes of leader derailment that students also identified, including specific performance problems with business activities, being unable to adapt to new situations or to develop necessary management skills, and being insensitive to others by displaying an abrasive, intimidating, and bullying style of management. Other causes included being cold, aloof, and arrogant; betraying trusts; failing to delegate tasks and responsibilities; or failing to build teams. In short, the potential liabilities of a leader's management practices may be displayed in his or her poor management of people, networks, and procedures that violate the legitimate interest of the organization, both by undermining or sabotaging the organization's goals, tasks, resources, and effectiveness, and by undermining employees' motivation, well-being, and job satisfaction.

The conviction these student leaders in training hold is that constructive leadership is their ambition and aspired behavior, behaving constructively both towards employees and stakeholders and the organization as a whole. First and foremost, these students want to be leaders who act in accordance with the legitimate interests of the organization, supporting and enhancing the goals, tasks, and strategy of the organization as well as making optimal use of organizational resources, in particular, human resources.

In addition, the students made clear they aspire to lead by enhancing the motivation, well-being, and job satisfaction of their employees by engaging in constructive behaviors such as inviting employees to provide ideas and feedback, and involvement in decision processes. In essence, they aspire to be good leaders who are concerned with the welfare of their employees, while simultaneously being focused on goal attainment and the effective use of resources for the legitimate interests of the organization.

The responses the students shared are important because they are reminders of the destructive leadership behaviors that one would choose to neither learn nor use. Leaders and their followers need to be reminded that they must set the example and be constantly aware that actions send signals about who they are and what they expect of others. Consequently, one of the best ways to learn leadership is from one's bosses by emulating the good ones and doing the opposite of the bad ones.

Stogdill (1974) stated the appointment of a person to a leadership role evokes legitimate expectations among both employees and superiors that left unfulfilled may have consequences that are not in the organization's best interests. A permeating theme throughout the study's findings is that some are given leadership authority by having been bequeathed a position or a role, and with the position, of course, comes the organization's and employees' expectations. However, position alone will not suffice; bad leadership will result if destructive behaviors are embraced and systematically and repetitively practiced. However, there is constructive learning that can be abstracted if aspiring leaders recognize bad leadership when they see it and seek to do the opposite.

In the end, it is quite clear that the individual who holds the power and makes the final decisions determines the success or failure of the institution and those who work for it. The reality is that leaders who respect and value those who work under them help create a nurturing environment and a culture for success, while bad leaders who make bad decisions negatively affect the employees and the organization. These are the crucial lessons that students must learn.

Recommendations for Further Study

This study found that the MBA students surveyed shared a common view of defining bad leadership and responded with a variety of views regarding their learning from bad leadership and what they would do differently as a leader as a result. To further enhance learning from bad leadership, the following should be considered for further research to advance knowledge in the field:

1. Survey MBA alumni to find their views of bad leadership. Their insight might add a dimension to designing leadership educational programs and courses.
2. Research perceptions from business leaders and business teachers regarding how bad leadership has a negative effect on organizational performance. Educational design for leadership skills may benefit from this knowledge.
3. Research business and business education to discover which leadership skills are emerging as the most critical skills business organizations or specific organizational members must possess and what adverse leadership traits and behaviors cannot be tolerated. Results may benefit adaptation to the changing leadership skill needs of business and the development of business education that addresses the changing needs and priorities.
4. Research college business curriculum and course syllabuses for the types and degree of leadership skill education incorporated into the various business courses and programs. Results may indicate the actual importance colleges and business instructors place on leadership skills in curriculum and course design and delivery.

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