

To be good, sometimes leaders need to be a little bad

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Outgoing. Assertive. Calm. Practical. Decisive. These are obvious qualities that one would want in their leaders.

But what about, say, arrogant, hesitant, overly dramatic, inflexible, or being a "yes-man"? A new study has found that when it comes to leading, some of those negative personality traits aren't such a bad thing, either.

The work, by researchers in the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's College of Business Administration, studied the development of leaders over a three-year period. Prior research had established that clearly positive personality qualities – such as extraversion, emotional stability and conscientiousness – had helpful effects on both the performance and the development of leaders.

Little attention has been paid, though, to negative, or "dark side," [personality traits](#) and whether they are really so bad.

"Mae West told us that when she's good, she's good. But when she's bad, she's even better. We chose to investigate so-called subclinical or 'dark side' traits because we really didn't know much about how and to what degree they affected performance or development," said Peter Harms, assistant professor of management at UNL and the study's lead author. "Was it possible that they might be beneficial in some contexts? For some of them, it turns out that the answer was yes."

The study found, for example, that being overly skeptical was uniformly bad for performance and development. But having a very cautious or hesitant nature was associated with both increased performance and developing leadership skills over time.

The study tracked more than 900 officer cadets in their second, third and fourth years at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. It used the Hogan Development Survey, a comprehensive measure of subclinical traits, to predict changes in a variety of leadership areas that were regularly assessed in developmental reviews at the Academy.

Several of the 12 "dark side" traits – such as those associated with narcissism, being overly dramatic, being critical of others and being extremely focused on complying with rules – actually had a positive effect on a number of facets of the cadets' leadership development over time.

"By themselves, these subclinical traits had fairly small effects, but when aggregated, they played a substantial role in determining which cadets developed leadership skills," Harms said.

"Assumptions about how these traits affected performance and development were mistaken ... it appears that even negative characteristics can be adaptive in particular settings or job roles."

That's not to say that large doses of these traits will make someone a great leader. "Dark side" traits have always been considered to be adaptive up to point, Harms said. Even moderate amounts can be dismissed as personality quirks by co-workers and subordinates. But at extremely high levels, the characteristics become pathological and can lead to career derailment, Harms said. [Leaders](#) must be sensitive to their situation to understand when exactly they are going too far.

For example, narcissists perform exceptionally well in job interviews, where self-enhancement and self-confidence is expected, but their tendency to put themselves ahead of others and take too much credit can lead to friction among co-workers.

Workers who are very precise and rule-adhering may be considered noxious in sales or marketing divisions but may be considered normal or even high-functioning in accounting or legal departments.

The authors cautioned that the study's results might be unique to the military context for which the cadets were training. But the findings do prove that it isn't necessarily bad to be "bad," and that more research is needed to fully understand the role of subclinical traits in the workplace.

The findings also could be used to tailor executive training programs and leadership intervention programs to employees' unique, individual needs.

"Organizations should take these 'dark side' traits into account when making decisions concerning training and promotion," Harms said.

More information: The article, which appears in a forthcoming edition of *The Leadership Quarterly*, was authored by UNL's Harms and Seth M. Spain along with Sean T. Hannah of the Center for the Army Profession and Ethic at the United States Military Academy.

Provided by University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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