



UNIVERSIDADE CATÓLICA PORTUGUESA

# The impact of Dark Triad leadership on employee outcomes

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by

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# Resumo

Esta dissertação explora de que forma comportamentos de liderança associados aos traços da Tríade Negra (narcisismo, maquiavelismo e psicopatia) afetam os resultados dos colaboradores no local de trabalho. Em vez de analisar traços de personalidade de forma abstrata e isolada, o estudo foca-se em comportamentos específicos e observáveis (*DTTMBs*), reportados por colaboradores em avaliações públicas disponíveis na plataforma *Glassdoor*. Com base num conjunto de dados que codifica comportamentos de liderança e as respetivas avaliações dos colaboradores quanto à motivação, propósito e direção, foram realizadas análises de regressão no *software Stata* para avaliar a relação entre liderança tóxica e estes resultados psicológicos positivos. Os resultados revelam que comportamentos relacionados com tratar os funcionários de maneira diferente, tomadas de decisões arriscadas e competitividade por parte dos líderes têm um impacto negativo e significativo no envolvimento e clareza dos colaboradores em relação às suas funções. Por outro lado, comportamentos que, à partida, se esperavam mais prejudiciais, como *bullying* ou foco no benefício pessoal, revelaram-se menos consistentemente nocivos nesta amostra. Estes resultados contribuem para a compreensão teórica da liderança tóxica ao demonstrar como expressões comportamentais específicas podem destabilizar fatores-chave da experiência do colaborador, sublinhando a importância de ultrapassar modelos baseados apenas em traços de personalidade, adotando uma abordagem mais centrada nos comportamentos.

Palavras-chave: Tríade Negra; resultados dos colaboradores; comportamentos de liderança; liderança tóxica; comportamento organizacional.

# Abstract

This thesis explores how managerial behaviours associated with the Dark Triad traits (narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy) affect employee outcomes in the workplace. Rather than examining broad personality traits in isolation, the study focuses on specific, observable behaviours (DTTMBs) reported by employees in publicly available workplace reviews on Glassdoor. Drawing on a dataset of coded leader behaviours and corresponding employee ratings of motivation, purpose, and direction, the research employs regression analysis done in Stata to assess the relationship between toxic leadership and these positive psychological outcomes. The findings show that trophy behaviour, risky decision-making and competitiveness, from leaders, have a significant and negative impact on employees' sense of engagement and clarity in their roles, while others, contrary to expected, such as bullying or personal benefit-seeking, appear less consistently harmful in this sample. These results contribute to the theoretical understanding of dark leadership by illustrating how specific behavioural expressions can destabilise key drivers of employee experience and underscore the importance of moving beyond trait-level models toward more behaviourally grounded approaches.

Key words: Dark Triad; employee outcomes; managerial behaviours; toxic leadership; organizational behaviour.

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# Introduction

Organizations have been placing an increasing importance on cultivating positive emotional experiences for employees on the workplace. The daily interactions between leaders and their teams shape not just task execution, but also the emotional climate, relational dynamics, and sense of purpose that individuals derive from their work. Although existing research has explored the effects of motivation in the workplace, as well as the influence of Dark Triad traits (DTTs) on leadership behaviours and their broader negative outcomes (e.g., stress), there is a notable gap in the literature regarding the impact of high DTT scores in leaders on employee motivation, purpose and direction. Most research tends to focus on individual effects in isolation or on broader organizational outcomes, rather than examining the intricate relationships involved and when it comes to organizations' leaders. For instance, C. R. Boddy's (2015) study explores how a psychopathic CEO, compared to his ethical and transformational predecessor, turned an organization "leaderless", leaving its employees without direction. Turnover exceeded 100% in 3 years, due to the toxic environment experienced, with centralized decision-making, silenced dissent, and replaced competent staff with submissive individuals, while simultaneously crafting a polished external image. Moreover, C. R. P. Boddy et al. (2010) raise important questions about the ethics of screening for psychopathy in corporate settings and warns of the broader social risks posed by the unchecked rise of corporate psychopaths. Empirical findings from a sample of 346 white-collar workers suggest that these are more commonly found at higher levels of organizational hierarchies, supporting the idea that individuals with psychopathic traits are disproportionately represented in senior leadership roles.

This study explores the impact of toxic leadership, characterized by traits such as narcissism, Machiavellianism and psychopathy, referred to as the Dark Triad (DT), on employee motivation, purpose and direction. Unlike other general concepts, these are three specific outcomes that reflect both personal and organizational success. Leadership styles play a major role in shaping the experiences on organizations' day-to-day and on how people navigate them, since a leader's behaviour will directly impact the workplace climate.

The decision to focus on these three outcomes and not in indicators of workplace issues, such as stress or anxiety, is because they allow a more comprehensive analysis of how toxic leadership traits disrupt essential positive factors that drive employee engagement. As Kanfer & Chen (2016) argue, motivation is best understood as a context-sensitive psychological process that involves the initiation, direction, intensity, and persistence of work-related behaviour. It is shaped not only by intra-individual factors such as goals, self-regulation, and self-efficacy, but also by social and structural elements like leadership, job design, and organizational climate.

It's crucial to understand how DTTs are characterized and how they manifest themselves in people's behaviours in workplace environments. Narcissistic leaders are typically characterized by their need for constant admiration and validation, a tendency to dominate meetings, an inclination to take credit for others' ideas and an obsessive focus on their own image, often positioning themselves at the centre of attention. Leaders exhibiting Machiavellian traits may initially appear charming, however, their underlying intentions are often highly strategic. They manipulate situations to their advantage, prioritize personal goals above all else and demonstrate a willingness to bend or disregard rules in order to achieve their objectives.

Psychopathic leaders are characterized by a lack of empathy, impulsive behaviour and an immunity to feelings of guilt. Rules are usually disregarded by

them, they exhibit no remorse for their actions and have no hesitation in compromising colleagues to serve their own interests.

This study offers a new perspective on workplace experience by examining real employee reviews to analyse the influence of leaders exhibiting the traits previously mentioned. Employees may not always recognize when they are under the authority of leaders with such characteristics, either due to limited awareness of typical behaviours associated with these traits or, over time, from adapting to the leader's preferences. Occasionally, employees become "yes" people, tailoring feedback to satisfy the leader's ego and managing their daily interactions to align with the leader's personality.

The structure of this thesis is organized to provide a coherent and logical progression from theory to empirical analysis. The first chapter presents a comprehensive literature review, introducing the Dark Triad personality traits and explaining their relevance within organizational contexts, particularly in relation to employee outcomes. Chapter two details the conceptual framework and outlines the research model and hypotheses. Chapter three explains the methodology, including data collection, variable construction, and statistical procedures. Chapter four presents the results of the regression analyses and interprets the key findings. These findings are then contextualized in chapter five, which discusses their theoretical and practical implications. The thesis concludes with a reflection on its limitations, theoretical contributions, and directions for future research.



# Chapter 1

## Literature Review

This theoretical background will focus on the DTTs, the dynamic between leaders that score high on them and employees' motivation, purpose and direction, and how to distinguish affect from emotion.

### 1. Dark Triad

The Dark Triad is a psychological framework introduced by Paulhus & Williams (2002), that encompasses three aversive personality traits: narcissism, Machiavellianism and psychopathy. These three traits will be analyzed more in depth next, but overall, they can be described as having toxic impacts on those who surround them, mainly due to their low empathy and cold-hearted personality. Some argue that there is a higher correlation between Machiavellianism and psychopathy forming a "Dark Dyad", and that narcissism is more distinct, although it is valuable to study all together (Lyons, 2019a). In the workplace, there is a dark and bright side of these traits, that will be analyzed in more detail below, however, individuals who score high on these, are more likely to engage in counterproductive workplace behaviors and to exploit organizational resources (DeShong et al., 2015).

## 1.1 Dark Triad Traits

### 1.1.1 Narcissism

As mentioned before, narcissism is one of the three main traits that composes the Dark Triad. Based on existing research this may be considered the most socially palatable and common trait among the general population within the DT, because milder expressions are widespread and more socially tolerated, not discarding the potential for exploitation and interpersonal difficulties. In comparison, the other two traits, Machiavellianism and psychopathy, represent rarer and more extreme forms of antisocial behavior, less tempered by social desirability or the need of approval, which limits their prevalence in the broader public (Fatfouta, 2023).

The core features that best reflect narcissism are the ones that manifest an inflated sense of superiority, entitlement (manifesting as both a feeling and a behavioral tendency), self-importance and a belief that one deserves special privileges and admiration. These traits shape patterns of behavior and affect, that influence how individuals interact with others and pursue goals (Biolik, 2025; Crowe et al., 2019).

Research tends to position narcissism as a dual-natured trait, that can be both beneficial or detrimental, depending on the context and severity in which is expressed (Campbell et al., 2011). This duality reflects a continuum of narcissistic traits that manifest as adaptive or maladaptive expressions, capable of enhancing or undermining personal and professional outcomes. The dual-faceted trait can manifest as confidence, ambition and leadership, or conversely, as arrogance, exploitation and fragile self-esteem (Biolik, 2025). Gruda et al. (2021) found that leaders who exhibit narcissistic admiration tend to achieve greater fundraising success due to their self-promoting and charismatic behavior, while those driven

by narcissistic rivalry are less successful, likely due to their antagonistic and defensive tendencies.

In this sense, two primary dimensions of narcissism were constructed by Wink (1991), grandiose narcissism and vulnerable narcissism. These two diverge significantly in their behavioral expression, emotional regulation and social engagement. It is a division of the main behaviors of a person who scores high on narcissism, that even though distinct, they are connected.

Grandiose narcissism (GN), the type of narcissism that this research will focus more on, as the name itself suggests, usually presents itself as obvious confidence and dominance and a big necessity for admiration from others (Wink, 1991). Grandiose people tend to have an easiness in thriving in social situations where they can draw attention to their achievements and abilities (Edershile & Wright, 2019). Nonetheless, when in a position of receiving feedback from others, it is common to exclude self-assurance and still expect recognition, even when it may not be warranted. When in contact with someone as described, at first, they may come across as charismatic, but this charm often masks an underlying tendency to manipulate others in order to maintain their elevated self-view (Besser & Priel, 2010; Wirtz & Rigotti, 2020). The same happens with higher levels of impulsivity, driven by one's need for excitement and dominance.

As mentioned before, in terms of organizational and professional settings, such grandiose personality can be polarizing. During times of crisis or uncertainty having a leader that is willing to take significant risks, that shows assertiveness, that can drive innovation, makes decisions that others may shy away from and that is skilled when it comes to impression management, can be beneficial to positively influence stakeholders' confidence and to boost the organization's public image (Wirtz & Rigotti, 2020). However, existing research agrees that they are often most beneficial on short-term and in "emerging zones",

situations where organizations are in startup phases, undergoing transformations or facing market disruptions (Campbell et al., 2011).

Unlike GN which is associated to extraversion, vulnerable narcissism (VN) englobes more ambivalent feelings such as insecurity, self-doubt and a tendency to oscillate between feelings of superiority and inferiority. Although this appearance of social withdraw and shyness, individuals that score high on VN harbor fantasies of grandeur and entitlement (Malesza & Kaczmarek, 2018; Wink, 1991). A significant behavior is emotional exhaustion and, consequently, social isolation, mainly due to one's low self-esteem and neuroticism that leads to maladaptive conduct aimed at self-protection (Schröder-Abé & Fatfouta, 2019; Wirtz & Rigotti, 2020). Contrary to previous studies stating that women tend to exhibit higher levels of VN, it was found that those are more frequent in men, reflecting changing gender roles, with men increasingly acknowledging traits like defensiveness that align with VN (Brailovskaia et al., 2023).

In a workplace context, who works with people with high levels of VN is more likely to experience burnouts and emotional exhaustion, attributed to their sensitivity to criticism and dependency on external validation, which makes them more susceptible to workplace stress. When in a situation where there is interaction between a grandiose narcissistic leader and a vulnerable narcissistic follower, the second may experience worsened emotional exhaustion when working for the first', leading to a harmful cycle in which the leader's demand for admiration and dominance triggers greater insecurity and stress in vulnerable followers (Wirtz & Rigotti, 2020).

### 1.1.2 Machiavellianism

The second trait to be analyzed, Machiavellianism, has more severe implications in workplace and relational contexts than narcissism, because of its

characteristically manifestations of manipulation, exploitation and a cynical view of human nature, often with a focus on personal gain irrespective of ethical considerations (Belschak et al., 2016; Burns et al., 2024). Machiavellians are known for their calculative approach, their favoritism for long-term manipulation and intentional harm, instead of a need for admiration, common in narcissists (DeShong et al., 2017). Machiavellians create a power imbalance when making others more reliant on them and easier to control, by using lighter forms of criticism or sow doubt to diminish their self-assurance (Abell et al., 2016). This type of personality is very strategic minded, especially when it comes to relationships, personal or professional. Research by Gruda et al. (2023) found that people that score high on this trait are more likely to choose majors such as economics, law and business, that tend to hold more power and involve more strategic minds, instead of majors like nursing or education, that are more people oriented. Gender was also assessed, discovering that men report higher levels of Machiavellianism, compared to women. They prioritize outcomes that serve their interests, even if such choices harm others or contravene ethical norms (Kückelhaus et al., 2024; Visser & Campbell, 2018). It's common for women high in Machiavellianism to view friendships through a transactional lens, where guilt induction and emotional exploitation is used to prioritize personal benefit over mutual support. These individuals also perceive the ones surrounding them as equals, meaning, these connections are seen as competition due to their cynical worldview. Navigating through life like this requires high levels of emotional detachment and reduced capacity for genuine empathy, in order to manipulate friends without guilt. Although both women and men exhibit Machiavellian tendencies, existing research suggests that men tend to score slightly higher than women on measures of this trait. While women utilize subtler and relational forms of manipulation, such as social influence, men employ more competitive

strategies particularly in hierarchical environments (Abell et al., 2016; Hodson et al., 2009).

As previously mentioned, the typical selfish behaviors of a Machiavellian also manifest themselves in a professional environment. Their disregard for ethical considerations yields short-term success but jeopardizes long-term stability. The environment in companies where these individuals are inserted are marked by suspicion, low morale and eroded trust, since emotional connections are minimized to avoid vulnerability and end when the purpose is served (Kückelhaus et al., 2024). Two situations can be analyzed, one where non-Machiavellian subordinates work for a leader that scores high on Machiavellianism and another, where both leaders and followers, have high levels of Machiavellianism. In the first context, the leaders extract the maximum value from whom works for them, by taking credit for team achievements or by manipulating group members against each other to maintain control of the dynamic, all to prioritize their own advancement. When employees feel undervalued and on edge, due to an environment filled with a lack of trust and fairness, it can create anxiety, impacting negatively the productivity and creativity (Huang et al., 2023). The study done in China by Ren et al. (2024) where 202 full-time employees underwent MRI scans and completed questionnaires assessing Machiavellianism, concluded that Machiavellians are more likely to engage in behaviors that harm the organization, such as theft or shirking responsibilities led by their cost-benefit analysis and perceived risks and rewards, exacerbated in leadership roles where they feel encouraged. Another research was done concerning the correlation between Machiavellianism, emotional manipulation and Counterproductive Work Behaviors (CWBs). It was assessed from the two samples, one with 159 participants and other with 201 participants from various industries, that Machiavellians use emotional manipulation as a tool to engage in CWBs, accounting for 93% of the total effect

(Burns et al., 2024). The more likely are the subordinates to be exploited, the more anxiety experienced and passed to them by the leaders, due to their promotion goals, as a coping mechanism to mitigate their stress (Huang et al., 2023). When examining the interaction between employees and leaders who share high levels of Machiavellianism, the outcomes are similar to when they don't, challenging the idea that personality congruence always leads to positive results. From the sample of 196 Dutch manager-employee dyads from different industries, Belschak et al. (2016) were capable to conclude that when both are paired, the distrust increases further, and stress is exacerbated. The controlling and manipulative behavior from the leaders reduces employee's autonomy and increases their sense of vulnerability. In this case, CWBs are primarily amplified by employees' own traits and not by the interaction of this "toxic match" (Belschak et al., 2016).

Although there are tools to measure Machiavellianism, for example the MACH-IV, there is a significant overlap with measures of another Dark Triad's trait, psychopathy. The existing ways to measure Machiavellianism inadequately capture its association with high conscientiousness and the ability to delay gratification. Collison et al. (2018) developed the Five Factor Machiavellianism Inventory (FFMI) that integrates expert conceptualizations of Machiavellian traits with the 30 facets of the Five Factor Model (FFM) of personality, to differentiate this trait from psychopathy and refine its measurements. The FFMI, including 52 items, was employed to participants to assess dimensions such as agency, antagonism and planfulness and proved a significant importance to differentiate Machiavellianism from psychopathy and to understand more precisely the role of this trait in the workplace, than existing tools. It bridges gaps between the theoretical and empirical understanding of this DT trait and aligns it with specific FFM facets, namely low agreeableness, high conscientiousness and low altruism (Collison et al., 2018).

### 1.1.3 Psychopathy

The last DT trait to be analyzed is psychopathy. This is the most severe trait out of the three, due to its association with harmful, impulsive and antisocial behaviors and its possible involvement in physical or societal harm, consequent upon its link with criminal behavior (Hodson et al., 2009). Psychopathy affects an estimated 1% of the general population, but its prevalence in incarcerated population is higher, ranging from 16% to 25% in men, and 7% to 17% in women (De Brito et al., 2021). It is common to overlap Antisocial Personality Disorder (ASPD), characterized by repeated deceitfulness, engagement in criminal acts and other manifestations, and psychopathy, in behaviors like impulsivity and chronic rule-breaking, but not all individuals with ASPD meet criteria for the trait in question, because it often lacks profound affective deficits (Berg et al., 2013). The shallow affect, low remorse and difficulty in developing strong emotional bonds are key manifestations of callous-unemotional (CU) people. It is composed by traits that develop a trajectory to psychopathy and must be identified in early stages of life, since they are observable as prematurely as preschool. Children with CU traits are more likely to exhibit severe and persistent conduct problems with goal-directed instrumental aggression, namely lying and stealing, behaviors often seen in adult psychopathy. Studies show that children showing psychopathic tendencies often continue these behaviors into adolescence and adulthood. It is common to see less severe behavioral problems such as lying or oppositional defiance while young, turn into more aggressive manifestations later in life, such as theft. There is a significant genetic predisposition that increases the likelihood of psychopathy in case of low emotional reactivity, beginning from a parental conflict. Traditional interventions to mitigate this, for example parent management, show limited effectiveness in children because

they lack motivation to avoid punishment (Lynam & Gudonis, 2005; Miller & Lynam, 2015).

Similarly to the two traits previously analyzed, this one also tends to degrade organizational health. C. R. Boddy's (2014) study finds that workplaces with corporate psychopaths account for 32,5% of all bullying incidents compared to lower rates in environments without them. Employees working under these individuals reported lower levels of wellbeing, specifically more anger, anxiety and discouragement. Contributing to this are the 59.7 incidents of arguments per year with corporate psychopaths, against 8.9 without. Moreover, C. Boddy et al.'s (2015) study assessed that most individuals that score high on psychopathy occupied senior manager positions, showing their ability to rise through hierarchical structures despite their toxic characteristics. Although on a short-term these individuals may achieve cost-cuts or share price increases, they are typically achieved at the expense of long-term stability including corporate reputation. Gender wise, on a study using data from 1192 Australian employees, women reported higher emotional exhaustion levels due to a likelihood of being directly targeted by toxic behaviors, while men experience it due to pressure to conform to masculine rigid norms (Wechtler et al., 2025).

## 2. Dark Triad leaders and employee motivation, purpose and direction

Existing literature suggests that between 60% to 75% of employees identify their direct supervisor as the most negative aspect of their job (C. R. Boddy, 2015). In many cases, individuals leave organizations not due to dissatisfaction with the company itself, but because of their leaders' behaviors, particularly when those leaders exhibit toxic or unethical traits (C. R. P. Boddy et al., 2010). Over the

years, various studies have concluded that a lot of high management positions are held by psychopaths (Lyons, 2019b).

Inclusive leadership creates space for employees to express their ideas and to demonstrate that their contributions matter, thereby strengthening the connection they feel to the broader organizational purpose (Shafaei & Nejati, 2024).

Grant (2012) discusses how leaders should use direction-giving and empathetic language to foster psychological meaningfulness on employees' tasks. Leaders play a crucial role in shaping psychological conditions, because when employees feel their work aligns with their intrinsic goals and values, they experience a stronger sense of purpose. Conversely, when work lacks meaningfulness, employees can become disengaged, no longer feeling connected to their tasks (Kahn, 1990). Dark Triad leaders defy this ideology.

Leaders that score high on narcissism, due to their need of recognition on their work and to maintain a strong organizational presence, tend to punish those who fall short on the high expectations they create, by having derogatory behaviors or scapegoating, which disengages and exhausts their followers (Szabó et al., 2023; Wirtz & Rigotti, 2020). They prefer to maintain control over their organizations and surrounding them with subordinates less experienced who are more prone to provide flattery (Chatterjee & Pollock, 2016). In more visible or ceremonial settings, they tend to favor interactions with those who boost their status, using tactics like insinuation to maintain an elevated self-image (Chatterjee & Pollock, 2016). Those who are more agreeable and try to avoid conflict, are more likely to be drawn to this kind of leaders, because they are less prone to challenge views of others (Gruda & J. Hanges, 2023).

There is also an attempt to control others' decisions and influence in the organizations at any opportune time, from the part of these DT leaders. Such is the case of the previously mentioned psychopathic CEO, that employees often

noted that this leader demanded full agreement, framing compliance as a non-negotiable part of the workplace dynamic, with statements such as "you have to agree with me because I am the boss" capturing the coercive and hierarchical tone of their leadership style (C. R. Boddy, 2015).

Most of the time, DT leaders act strategically, with a focus on personal benefit and status. They do this by, for example, manipulating resource allocation in ways that benefit their personal image rather than the firm's stability. They may focus on initiatives that increase their public visibility or secure personal financial gains, sometimes at the expense of company performance (Chatterjee & Hambrick, 2007). Schyns et al. (2022) highlight that Machiavellians look at others as "means to their own ends" if they think they will benefit them in any way. Also, the lack of trust that Machiavellian leaders implement on those who surround them contributes to negative outcomes, as they feel manipulated and come to the realization that the leaders are focused on personal gain rather than organizational one (Belschak et al., 2016).

Supervisors with high levels of Machiavellianism tend to see their professional surroundings through a competitive worldview lens, where the "weakest loses", increasing perceived abusive supervision. These leaders are more prone to engage in harmful behaviors toward their subordinates, using competition as a mechanism for control, instead of emphasizing mutual support (Khan et al., 2023). Machiavellian and psychopathic leaders, primarily the latter, engage in manipulative and competitive behaviors to "rise to the top". Their ascension is not built on cooperation, but on dominance and control, ensuring they reach positions of power unchallenged. This calculated behavior reflects a deep need to outperform and eliminate competition, often resulting in internal power struggles where opponents are sidelined or removed (C. R. P. Boddy et al., 2010).

Narcissistic leaders also tend to engage in risky decision-making, mainly due to their overconfidence, such is the case of Adam Neumann's leadership at WeWork, where unchecked expansion and reckless investments were made, reducing its valuation from \$47 billion to \$7 billion. He prioritized personal perks and extravagance, and the consequences negatively impacted everyone in the organization (Choi & Phan, 2022). Turner et al. (2024) also mentions that a narcissist's CEO elevated propensity for risk taking is highly attributed to the necessity of being in the spotlight. This combined with the usual non-empathetic personality and lack of interpersonal skills creates doubts in organization's members regarding one's capacity to keep stakeholders motivated and employee burnout (Makalesi et al., 2020; Turner et al., 2024).

Furthermore, C. R. Boddy (2015) study provides clear evidence of how bullying behaviours can significantly weaken employee outcomes. The psychopathic CEO frequently humiliated employees in public, used intimidation tactics, and fostered a culture of fear, creating an environment where employees became disoriented and uncertain about their roles and the organization's objectives. As a result, workers withdrew from decision-making processes, stopped seeking clarity, and ultimately lost their sense of purpose within the organization.

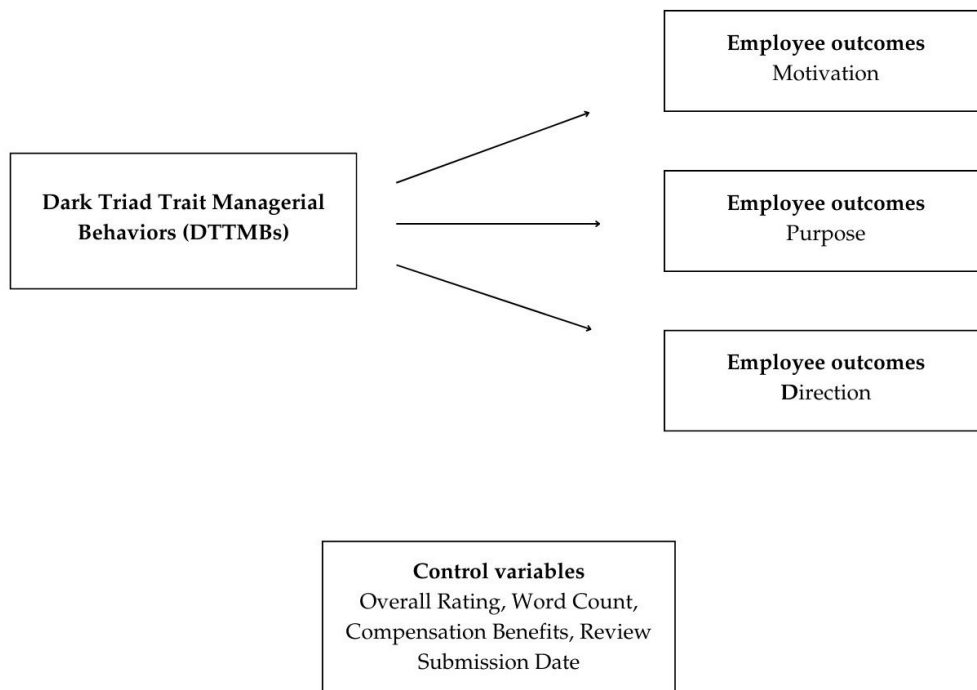
For these reasons, and as supported by the literature, this study focuses on six distinct managerial behaviours that clearly reflect the manifestation of Dark Triad traits in organizational settings: trophy-seeking, controlling others, competitive behaviour, risky decision-making, personal benefit-seeking, and bullying. The selection of these behaviours is grounded in empirical evidence and theoretical frameworks that highlight their relevance, frequency, and consequences in real-world organizational dynamics. These will be analysed more in depth in the next sections.

# Chapter 2

## Conceptual Framework

This study examines how individual DTTMBs affect employee motivation, direction, and sense of purpose in the workplace. The framework is structured around three key components: managerial behaviors (independent variables), employee outcomes (dependent variables), and control variables that account for additional influences, such as overall rating, word count, compensation benefits and the date of the review's submission.

Below is a visual representation of the conceptual framework.



**Figure 1.** Conceptual framework: Dark Triad leadership and employee outcomes

# 1. Research Model

This dissertation analyses the following hypotheses:

**H1:** DTTMBs negatively affect employee motivation.

**H1a:** Leaders who engage in trophy-seeking behavior negatively affect employee motivation.

**H1b:** Leaders who engage in controlling behavior negatively affect employee motivation.

**H1c:** Leaders who seek personal benefit negatively affect employee motivation.

**H1d:** Leaders who display excessive competitiveness negatively affect employee motivation.

**H1e:** Leaders who engage in risky decision-making negatively impact employee motivation.

**H1f:** Leaders who engage in bullying behavior negatively affect employee motivation.

**H2:** DTTMBs negatively affect employee purpose.

**H2a:** Leaders who engage in trophy-seeking behavior negatively affect employee purpose.

**H2b:** Leaders who engage in controlling behavior negatively affect employee purpose.

**H2c:** Leaders who seek personal benefit negatively affect employee purpose.

**H2d:** Leaders who display excessive competitiveness negatively affect employee purpose.

**H2e:** Leaders who engage in risky decision-making negatively impact employee purpose.

**H2f:** Leaders who engage in bullying behavior negatively affect employee purpose.

**H3:** DTTMBs negatively affect employee direction.

**H3a:** Leaders who engage in trophy-seeking behavior negatively affect employee direction.

**H3b:** Leaders who engage in controlling behavior negatively affect employee direction.

**H3c:** Leaders who seek personal benefit negatively affect employee direction.

**H3d:** Leaders who display excessive competitiveness negatively affect employee direction.

**H3e:** Leaders who engage in risky decision-making negatively impact employee direction.

**H3f:** Leaders who engage in bullying behavior negatively affect employee direction.

# Chapter 3

## Methodology

### 1. Research Design

To test the relationships between DTTMBs and employee motivation, purpose and direction, a quantitative research method was used with an emphasis on statistical modeling. This provides an objective and empirical evidence to test hypotheses, which makes it possible to evaluate the effectiveness of different solutions (Fryer et al., 2018).

### 2. Data Sampling and Processing

The data was first collected from Glassdoor, consisting of job reviews from employees across multiple industries, in the span of five years, providing evaluations of their leaders' behaviors and traits. The textual data from employee reviews was then analyzed through the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) tool, useful for personality research. However, linguistic markers alone are limited predictors of personality, being more reliable when combined with raters (Koutsoumpis et al., 2022). It is used to quantify psychological and linguistic constructs by calculating the proportion of specific word categories within a given text. In this case, LIWC was specifically used to assess employee outcomes, by applying relevant dictionaries. This tool operates by counting the frequency of words associated with predefined dictionaries related to emotions. The percentages are then computed relative to the word count of each review, which allows the extraction of meaningful psychological insights from textual

data. As mentioned before, it is important to take in consideration its inability to recognize negations in text. For example, a statement such as *“I was not motivated”* could still be classified as containing motivation-related language, despite the intention being the opposite.

In order to enhance the accuracy of the evaluation, LIWC was complemented with human rating. Each review was rated by multiple people, with raters initially being students and later expanded to working professionals. These raters evaluated the presence of specific DTTMBs, that can be understood as self-serving, manipulative, and ethically questionable behaviors exhibited by individuals with narcissistic, Machiavellian, or psychopathic traits when they hold positions of influence or aspire to leadership roles within organizations (E. Bratsis, 2019). These were selected for this study based on the behavioral patterns outlined in E. Bratsis’s (2019) article, which identified recurring red-flag behaviors associated with narcissistic, Machiavellian, and psychopathic tendencies in the workplace and then, coding them as binary indicators (0 or 1) based on whether the behavior was mentioned. These behaviors were then grouped into broader categories representing narcissistic, Machiavellian and psychopathic leadership traits.

### 3. Data analysis

Following the initial data collection and coding, the dataset was inserted into Stata, a statistical software, where further analyses were conducted, with additional refinement steps to ensure data quality. First, the dataset was collapsed by review ID to focus on leader behaviors and follower outcomes, only retaining reviews with a minimum threshold of three entries per reviewer, with the rest being excluded. Additionally, only reviews with high confidence scores

(i.e., reviews where the reviewer was confirmed to have worked at the company) were kept. After this data refinement process, the final dataset consisted of 2,587 reviews, comprising 1,264 women (48.86%) and 1,323 men (51.14%), although gender was not included in the regression models, as preliminary analyses indicated no statistically significant effect in this dataset.

Because the dependent variables (motivation, purpose and direction) represent percentages, a Multilevel Mixed-Effects Generalized Linear Model (MEGLM) was used. It estimates models that include both fixed and random effects while allowing for various distributions of the dependent variable (StataCorp LLC, 2022). This approach accounts for the hierarchical structure of the data, where employees' reviews are nested within employers. Since the outcomes represent proportions rather than continuous values, the model uses a binomial distribution with a logit link function. This logit function transforms the percentages into log-odds, making it possible to analyze the relationship between leadership behaviors and employee outcomes in a linear way while keeping the predicted values within a valid 0–1 range. This makes the results more accurate and interpretable given the nature of the data.

## 4. Measures

Three types of measures were used in this study: independent variables (DTTMBs), dependent variables (employee outcomes) and control variables.

### 4.1 DTTMBs

The managerial behaviours were selected based on the behavioural patterns described by E. Bratsis (2019), who outlined 15 recurring red-flags behaviours

associated with narcissistic, Machiavellian and psychopathic tendencies in organizational settings. A more narrowed selection was then made, based on existing literature, making a total of six behaviours present in **Table 1** below:

**Note:** Definitions adapted from E. Bratsis (2019).

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
<b>Trophy</b> (Narcissism)	Leaders who prioritize external validation and treat people differently based on their interest.
<b>Control Others</b> (Narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy)	Leaders who try to control their subordinate's influence/ decisions.
<b>Competition</b> (Machiavellianism, psychopathy)	Leaders who foster a highly competitive work environment, emphasizing rivalry, outperforming others, and individual success.
<b>Risky Decision</b> (Narcissism, psychopathy)	Leaders who frequently engage in high-risk, high-reward decision-making without fully considering potential consequences.
<b>Personal Benefit</b> (Narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy)	Leaders who prioritize their own interests, advantages, or career advancement over the well-being and success of their organization.
<b>Bullying</b> (Psychopathy)	Leaders who exhibit aggressive, intimidating, or demeaning behavior toward employees, mainly coercion, threats or humiliation.

**Table 1.** Description of DTTMBs .

## 4.2 Employee Outcomes

As previously explained in the “Data Sampling and Processing” section, motivation, purpose and direction were extracted from the reviews using a dictionary-based approach from LIWC. The percentages obtained from the predefined words associated with these three constructs, relative to the total word count, were then used as outcome variables.

## 4.3 Control Variables

In addition to the mentioned variables, a set of control variables was also included to account for contextual and demographic factors that might have an influence on employee outcomes, aside from leaders’ behaviours. These variables are outlined in **Table 2** with the correspondent explanation.

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
<b>Overall Rating</b>	General satisfaction score given to the employer, reflecting the employee’s overall experience.
<b>Word Count</b>	Total words in the review, used to control verbosity bias.
<b>Compensation Benefits</b>	Evaluation from the employees regarding justice of salary and benefits.
<b>Review Submission Date</b>	Captures the timing of when the review was made, to control for external or organizational changes over time.

**Table 2.** Control Variables.

# Chapter 4

## Results

In this chapter, first, a correlation analysis is done based on table 2 and then, the findings of the study that uses a Multilevel Mixed-Effects Generalized Linear Model to examine the relationships between individual DTTMBs and employee motivation, purpose and direction, are presented. The purpose of the analysis was to validate the main hypothesis H1, H2 and H3 and their respective sub-hypotheses.

The set of managerial behaviours selected for the regressions predicting employee motivation, purpose, and direction remained the same across all three models. This consistency was primarily due to the high intercorrelation between these outcome variables, as demonstrated in the correlation matrix in the previous section.

### 1. Correlation Analysis

**Table 3** presents the correlation coefficients between all the variables used in the models.

The results show strong positive correlations between the three main employee outcomes, especially motivation and purpose with the highest correlation ( $r = 0.977$ ), followed by motivation and direction ( $r = 0.919$ ) and purpose and direction ( $r = 0.900$ ). These high correlations may suggest that employees who report higher levels of motivation, also tend to perceive a stronger sense of purpose and direction in their roles.

Among the DTTMBs, risky decision-making behaviour, although mentioned less frequently ( $M = 0.178$ ,  $SD = 0.230$ ), emerged as the most consistently detrimental. It was significantly and negatively correlated with motivation ( $r = -0.060$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), purpose ( $r = -0.064$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and especially direction ( $r = -0.074$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Competitive behavior ( $M = 0.162$ ,  $SD = 0.212$ ) was also negatively associated with all three outcomes, including significant correlations with motivation ( $r = -0.026$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), purpose ( $r = -0.025$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), and direction ( $r = -0.030$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Trophy-seeking behavior, one of the most frequently mentioned ( $M = 0.234$ ,  $SD = 0.303$ ), was significantly and negatively associated with both motivation ( $r = -0.035$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and direction ( $r = -0.037$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

**Notes:** (e) – employee outcome variable; (l) – leader behavior level; \*\*\* p < 0.001, \*\* p < 0.01, \* p < 0.05; n = 2,587.

Variables	M	SD	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
(1) Motivation (e)	0.032	0.038												
(2) Purpose (e)	0.034	0.039	0.977											
(3) Direction (e)	0.027	0.033	0.919	0.900										
(4) Trophy (l)	0.234	0.303	-0.035*	-0.025	-0.037**									
(5) Control Others (l)	0.219	0.242	-0.017	-0.018	-0.031	0.028								
(6) Personal Benefit (l)	0.248	0.245	-0.010	-0.009	-0.007	-0.017	-0.018							
(7) Competition (l)	0.162	0.212	-0.026*	-0.025	-0.030*	-0.060	0.026	0.115						
(8) Risky Decision (l)	0.178	0.230	-0.060**	-0.064**	-0.074***	-0.101	-0.051	0.095	-0.043					
(9) Bullying (l)	0.093	0.182	-0.022	-0.018	-0.033	0.134	-0.072	-0.040	0.010	0.016				
(10) Overall Rating	2.298	1.136	0.080	0.085	0.067	-0.002	-0.044	-0.066	0.028	-0.131	-0.115			
(11) Word Count	85.721	57.165	-0.092***	-0.095	-0.094*	0.047	0.020	0.052	0.037	0.052	0.037	0.01		
(12) Compensation Benefits	2.752	1.282	0.012	0.006***	0.002***	0.030	0.010	-0.023	0.057	-0.100	-0.026	0.524	-0.013	
(13) Review Submission Date	20749.81	769.122	-0.032	-0.037	-0.035	0.020	0.000	0.026	-0.027	0.021	0.045	-0.106	-0.027	-0.065

**Table 3.** Means, Standard Deviation, and Correlations among Study Variables.

## 2. Motivation

The results indicate a partial support for the all-encompassing hypothesis H1, demonstrating that certain managerial behaviors significantly reduce motivation, while others exhibit no statistically significant effect in this sample. Below is the table of the regression analyses that was conducted, regarding motivation.

**Notes:** (e) – employee outcome variable; (l) – leader behavior level; \*\*\* p < 0.001, \*\* p < 0.01, \* p < 0.05. n = 2,587.

Motivation (f)					
Variables	Coefficient	Standard Error	Z	[95% conf. interval]	
Trophy (l)	-0.49*	0.22	-2.28	-0.91	-0.07
Control Others (l)	-0.33	0.23	-1.41	-0.78	0.13
Personal Benefit (l)	0.06	0.25	0.22	-0.44	0.55
Competition (l)	-0.63*	0.30	-2.14	-1.22	-0.05
Risky Decision (l)	-0.85**	0.29	-2.96	-1.41	-0.29
Bullying (l)	-0.16	0.33	-0.47	-0.80	0.49
Overall Rating (e)	0.08	0.06	1.26	-0.04	0.20
Word Count (e)	-0.04***	0.00	14.03	-0.14	0.05
Compensation Benefits (e)	0.04	0.05	-0.86	0.04	0.06
Review Submission Date (e)	-0.00	0.00	-1.43	-0.00	0.00

**Table 4.** Regression Results for Motivation.

Findings support H1a, which proposed that trophy-seeking leaders negatively affect employee motivation. The coefficient for trophy was  $\beta = -0.49$  ( $p = 0.023$ ), which indicates a statistically significant negative relationship. These findings suggest that leaders who seek personal recognition and prioritize their

achievements over the collective success of their team create a demotivating work environment.

Contrary to what was believed, H1b was not proven in this sample. Its coefficient of  $\beta = -0.33$  ( $p = 0.159$ ) confirms this.

Moreover, hypothesis H1c that stated that personal benefit-seeking leaders negatively affect employee motivation, was not supported, since the coefficient observed was  $\beta = 0.06$  ( $p = 0.824$ ), indicating a non-significant effect, suggesting that in this dataset, there is no direct influence.

The results confirm H1d, that hypothesized that competitive leadership would have a negative impact on employee motivation. The estimated coefficient for competitiveness ( $\beta = -0.63$ ,  $p = 0.033$ ) demonstrates a statistically significant negative association, suggesting that leaders who encourage highly competitive environments may diminish employee motivation.

The same was proved to be true for H1e, stating that leaders who engage in risky decisions negatively impact motivation, with a coefficient of  $\beta = -0.85$  ( $p = 0.003$ ). This suggests that employees who work under leaders who frequently take high-risk decisions may view this as unpredictable, leading to doubts related to role clarity and job security.

Likewise, H1f, that assumed that bullying leaders negatively affect employee motivation, was also not supported. The non-significant effect was proved by the estimated coefficient of  $\beta = -0.16$  ( $p = 0.637$ ).

### 3. Purpose

As presented in the following table, in this dataset, purpose appears to be less influenced by DTTMBs, than motivation.

**Notes:** (e) – employee outcome variable; (l) – leader behavior level; \*\*\* p < 0.001, \*\* p < 0.01, \* p < 0.05.  
n = 2,587.

Purpose (f)					
Variables	Coefficient	Standard Error	Z	[95% conf. interval]	
<b>Trophy (l)</b>	-0.29	0.22	-1.31	-0.73	0.15
<b>Control Others (l)</b>	-0.39	0.24	-1.66	-0.86	0.07
<b>Personal Benefit (l)</b>	0.12	0.26	0.46	-0.39	0.64
<b>Competition (l)</b>	-0.44	0.32	-1.38	-1.06	0.18
<b>Risky Decision (l)</b>	-0.92**	0.29	-3.17	-1.50	-0.35
<b>Bullying (l)</b>	0.14	0.36	0.39	-0.57	0.85
<b>Overall Rating (e)</b>	0.05	0.06	0.74	-0.08	0.17
<b>Word Count (e)</b>	0.04	0.00	13.68	0.04	0.07
<b>Compensation Benefits (e)</b>	-0.04***	0.06	-0.76	-0.15	0.05
<b>Review Submission Date (e)</b>	-0.00*	0.00	-2.04	-0.00	0.00

**Table 5.** Regression Results for Purpose.

The only hypothesis that the findings supported was H2e, with an estimated coefficient of  $\beta = -0.92$  ( $p = 0.002$ ), which demonstrates that risky decision-making leadership negatively impacts employee’s sense of purpose. Employees may feel disconnected from the organization, due to the environment of uncertainty, instead of a workplace that provides clarity.

Hypothesis H2a indicated a non-significant effect in this dataset, which proposed that trophy-seeking leadership negatively affects employee purpose, given that the coefficient was  $\beta = -0.29$  ( $p = 0.190$ ).

Although with a p value closer to 0.05 ( $\beta = -0.39$ ,  $p = 0.097$ ), H2b was also not supported in this dataset, meaning that controlling leaders do not impact employee purpose.

As seen in **Table 5**, hypothesis H2c, contrary to belief, also proved not to be true according to the findings. With an estimated coefficient of  $\beta = 0.12$  ( $p = 0.646$ ), personal benefit-seeking leaders do not affect employee purpose.

The same happens with hypothesis H2d, it was not proven to be true in this specific dataset. The estimated coefficient for competitive leadership was  $\beta = -0.44$  ( $p = 0.168$ ), indicating that it does not affect employee sense of purpose in an organization.

The last hypothesis (H2f) was also not proven in these results. It predicted that bullying leaders would negatively affect employee purpose, which ultimately resulted in an estimated coefficient of  $\beta = 0.14$  ( $p = 0.698$ ).

#### 4. Direction

The findings regarding the impact of DTTMBs on employee direction follow a similar pattern to the results on motivation. As presented in **Table 6**, the same managerial behaviors affect direction and motivation (competition, trophy-seeking and risky decisions), possibly due to the high correlation between the variables, as assessed before in **Table 3**.

**Notes:** (e) – employee outcome variable; (l) – leader behavior level; \*\*\* p < 0.001, \*\* p < 0.01, \* p < 0.05.  
n = 2,587.

Direction (f)					
Variables	Coefficient	Standard Error	Z	[95% conf. interval]	
<b>Trophy (l)</b>	-0.51**	0.19	-2.66	-0.89	-0.13
<b>Control Others (l)</b>	-0.28	0.23	-1.23	-0.73	0.17
<b>Personal Benefit (l)</b>	0.13	0.22	0.61	-0.30	0.56
<b>Competition (l)</b>	-0.55*	0.26	-2.15	-1.05	-0.05
<b>Risky Decision (l)</b>	-0.95***	0.25	-3.79	-1.43	-0.46
<b>Bullying (l)</b>	-0.22	0.30	-0.72	-0.81	0.38
<b>Overall Rating (e)</b>	0.06	0.05	1.11	-0.05	0.16
<b>Word Count (e)</b>	-0.03*	0.00	12.91	0.03	0.04
<b>Compensation Benefits (e)</b>	0.10***	0.05	-1.94	-0.19	0.00
<b>Review Submission Date (e)</b>	-0.00	0.00	-1.30	-0.00	0.00

**Table 6.** Regression Results for Direction.

Accordingly, hypothesis H3a, H3d and H3e were supported in this dataset, demonstrating that trophy-seeking ( $\beta = -0.51$ ,  $p = 0.008$ ), competitive ( $\beta = -0.55$ ,  $p = 0.032$ ), and risky decision-making ( $\beta = -0.95$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) leaders, negatively impact employee's sense of direction. This suggests that when leaders focus primarily on themselves and on treating people differently, emphasize competition over collaboration, or engage in unpredictable and bold decision-making, employees may feel disoriented regarding their roles and the organization's strategic priorities.

In contrast, hypothesis H3b, H3c and H3f, regarding controlling leaders ( $\beta = -0.28$ ,  $p = 0.219$ ), personal-benefit-seeking ( $\beta = 0.13$ ,  $p = 0.545$ ) and bullying ( $\beta = -0.22$ ,  $p = 0.473$ ) leadership were not statistically significant, indicating that these factors do not have a meaningful impact on direction, in the given sample.

# Chapter 5

## Discussion

This chapter interprets and contextualizes the findings presented in the previous section, in order to have a better understanding of how specific DTTMBs impact employee outcomes (motivation, purpose and direction). It assesses the extent to which the initial hypotheses are supported.

The regression analyses provide support for the general hypotheses confirming that DTTMBs negatively influence all three employee outcomes. However, the strength and consistency of these effects vary depending on the specific managerial behavior.

As mentioned before, given the high intercorrelation among the outcome's variables, the regression models were built using a consistent set of leadership behaviors. This methodological choice reflects both the conceptual closeness of the outcomes, and the empirical relationships observed in the data.

Among all DTTMBs analyzed, risky decision-making emerged as the most consistently detrimental behavior. It demonstrated significant and strong negative effects across motivation, purpose, and direction. While some studies acknowledge possible benefits, although on short term and in specific situations, of having a grandiose narcissistic leader that is willing to step up when others aren't, and to make decisions that are considered risky, that may create instability for the company and its employees, on the long-term, it has detrimental effects and generates disengagement internally (Campbell et al., 2011; Wirtz & Rigotti, 2020). Such case is proven in this dataset, and it is consistent with Choi & Phan's (2022) findings, who illustrate how narcissistic leaders' overconfidence and desire for attention often result in high-stakes decisions, in these author's specific case that led to great financial losses, with damaging organizational

consequences. Alongside, Turner et al. (2024) and Makalesi et al. (2020) also identify the risk propensity as a strategic attempt to capture visibility, usually accompanied by poor interpersonal skills, which contribute to these leaders' subordinates to burnout and increase overall turnover rates.

Trophy-seeking behavior, defined by a leader's focus on external validation and preferential treatment of certain employees, was also significantly associated with negative outcomes. It was linked to decreased motivation and direction. Although the association with purpose was negative, it did not reach statistical significance. These results reflect the disruptive impact that leaders who surround themselves by "yes-men" people to provide them validation can have on workplace dynamics. Rather than cultivating inclusive or developmental relationships with employees, narcissistic leaders prefer to focus their attention on individuals who enhance their personal image, those they deem useful for maintaining status or reinforcing their public persona (Wirtz & Rigotti, 2020). This dynamic creates uneven treatment among team members, fostering feelings of alienation, especially among those who are not "favored". Chatterjee & Pollock (2016) note that narcissistic leaders tend to strategically surround themselves with subordinate voices that flatter and support them, often sidelining more experienced or dissenting contributors. These leaders are especially likely to favor interactions in highly visible or ceremonial contexts, where maintaining their image is a priority (Wirtz & Rigotti, 2020). Moreover, employees drawn to these leaders tend to be more agreeable and conflict-avoidant, further reducing critical dialogue and reinforcing the leader's need for validation (Gruda & J. Hanges, 2023).

The last behavior that presented statistical significance in this sample was competitive managerial behavior, marked by the prioritization of individual success and the encouragement of rivalry. This DTTMB significantly erodes both employee motivation and direction. This dynamic is particularly consistent with

the characterization of Machiavellian leaders in Khan et al. (2023), who frame their professional environment as a competitive battlefield. Their tendencies foster a worldview grounded in zero-sum thinking, where only the dominant thrive and others are viewed as expendable. As C. R. P. Boddy et al. (2010) highlight, this form of leadership is often part of a broader strategy of organizational ascent, where leaders compete not to uplift the team, but to sideline others and assert dominance. Rather than being motivated by shared goals, employees may become disengaged and unsure about their roles.

While the behaviors above showed consistent effects, others yielded more ambiguous results. Leaders that tend to control their employees by limiting their influence, who prioritize what benefits them most and who those who bully others, did not demonstrate to be significant.

Perhaps the most surprising was the finding that bullying did not show a statistically significant association with any of the employee outcomes. Its coefficients ranged from slightly negative (motivation and direction) to slightly positive (purpose). These results may be interpreted as underreported or underrecognized in this context, especially when it is embedded in power dynamics or normalized within company culture. It is also possible that the presence of other, more structurally destabilizing behaviors, such as high-risk decision-making, may have overshadowed its perceived impact. Even so, prior research (C. R. Boddy, 2015) cautions that intimidation and threats, over time, can severely diminish employees' psychological security and direction in a company.

Even though previous findings suggest that behaviors aimed at silencing divergent views and enforcing compliance, such as the example of the psychopathic CEO that imposed his beliefs and opinions on his subordinates, can quietly erode engagement and create climates of fear or conformity, in this sample it was not significant (C. R. Boddy, 2015). Leaders that overly control

employees were associated with negative coefficients across motivation, purpose, and direction, yet these relationships were not statistically significant. This may be explained due to, depending on the situation, one's capacity to subtly exercise control upon employees, making it more harder to articulate an evaluation.

A similar pattern emerged for personal benefit-seeking behavior, which despite its alignment with all DTTs, did not appear to meaningfully affect any employee outcome. A possible explanation can be that in high-level positions, ambition and self-interest are often normalized, particularly if leaders still manage to maintain surface-level stability or communicate effectively (Chatterjee & Hambrick, 2007).

# Chapter 6

## Implications

This study addresses a known gap by changing the emphasis away from typically studied negative outcomes and toward positive psychological dimensions. While prior research has proven the negative impact of DTTs, few studies have looked into how such traits may interfere with employees' intrinsic engagement and sense of meaning at work. Even if the current findings show that DTTMBs have an adverse impact on these outcomes, in the given sample, the theoretical contribution is to highlight how dark leadership erodes what makes work meaningful rather than only causing emotional pain.

Second, the study improves theoretical clarity by extending beyond abstract trait-level analyses to provide a behaviourally grounded framework. Rather than interpreting narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy as static personality traits, the thesis breaks them down into particular, observable leader behaviours. This technique improves the conceptual clarity of the dark leadership construct and provides a foundation for future research aimed at operationalising these behaviours in real-world settings. It also allows for more specific evaluations of how individual managerial activities result in various psychological repercussions for employees.

# Chapter 7

## 1. Limitations

Three main limitations were drawn that should be considered when analyzing the results.

The first key challenge lies in the detection of subtle leader behaviors. Some DTTMBs, such as control-oriented tendencies, may not have emerged as statistically significant in the regressions not because they are ineffective, but because they are expressed in more nuanced ways. These behaviors may not be clearly articulated in employee reviews, making them harder to capture through the binary coding method employed. As a result, the lack of significance in these cases might reflect limitations in behavioral detection rather than the true absence of impact.

Another important limitation concerns causality and the influence of confounding variables. While the regressions revealed significant relationships between some DTTMBs and employee outcomes, these findings are correlational. Due to the study's observational design and the use of archival data, it is not possible to make definitive claims about causation. Unobserved variables, such as work-life balance, pay satisfaction, organizational culture, or even the emotional state of the reviewer at the time of writing, may have influenced the responses. Without controlling for these potential confounders, there remains a risk that the observed effects are partially or wholly attributable to factors other than leader behavior.

Lastly, the study was constrained by missing demographic information, particularly regarding leader gender. Although efforts were made to extract this detail from the reviews, most did not specify the gender of the leader, likely due

to employees' fears of identification. This absence limits the analysis of gender-based dynamics, such as whether the effects of DTTMBs differ depending on the gender of the leader or the employee.

### 3. Future Research

As noted in the limitations section, an area that would benefit from future research lies in the absence of demographic information available from the leader's gender. This limited the ability to explore potential moderating effects or subgroup differences, and future studies could benefit from more diverse datasets, enabling a deeper understanding of how DTTMBs operate across varying contexts.

An especially promising avenue for future studies would be the use of quasi-natural experimental designs. For example, by tracking employees who have left one organization and joined another and that wrote reviews of each leader, would isolate the impact of leadership behaviour by controlling for individual-level characteristics. This approach would allow for a stronger inference of causality and provide greater insight into how changes in leadership style affect the same employee over time.

The last suggestion for future studies relies on what was also mentioned earlier, regarding the buffering of negative impacts of dark leadership. Factors such as team cohesion, organizational culture or HR interventions could be identified as moderating variables to support the development of more targeted strategies to promote healthier, more sustainable work environments.



# Conclusion

The primary objective of this thesis was to explore the impact of leaders' DTTMBs on employee outcomes (motivation, purpose, and direction). Considering the correlational nature of the study, it became evident that not all forms of dark leadership are equally destructive, nor are their effects uniformly perceived by those they lead, given this specific sample. In doing so, it challenged the prevailing emphasis on trait-level analysis by grounding dark leadership in concrete, observable behaviors.

Through the regressions conducted, it was possible to have a better understanding of the most negatively impactful behaviors for the 2,587 reviews analyzed. Risky decision-making and competitiveness consistently emerged as the most damaging, strongly associated with declines in all three psychological dimensions. The findings align with already existing research about the concerning amount of people who score high on any of the DTT occupying managerial positions.

Even though the remain behaviors were theoretically grounded, but did not significantly predict negative outcomes in this sample, they were equally informative. It invites to a deeper reflection on how these behaviors may be normalized in certain organizational cultures, or that their effects are less immediate and harder to detect.

Practically, the findings of this study provide potential blind spots in how organizations evaluate leadership. Charismatic or high-performing managers may come across as capable due to their personality and tend to be retained even if they have harmful behaviors.

This study reveals that even in the absence of abuse or failure, leaders can inflict psychological harm by discouraging the foundations of meaningful work.

And it does so by demonstrating that the study of leadership must be as much about what is felt and perceived as it is about what is measured and performed.



# Declaration of AI

## **Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process**

During the preparation of my written thesis, “The impact of Dark Triad leadership on employee outcomes”, ChatGPT and SciSpace were used for the following tasks: guidance on the use of Stata commands in the results, to improve the grammar and academic tone and to search for articles for the Literature Review, with the prompts used listed at the end of the document in the Prompts List section. After using this tool, I reviewed and edited the content as necessary, and I take full responsibility for the content of the work presented.

I also declare that I am aware of and respect the Artificial Intelligence Rules of Conduct of Católica Porto Business School.



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# Prompts List

“What Stata command should I use to check correlations between variables?”

“How do I include control variables in a regression model using Stata?”

“How can I improve the grammar and structure of this section?”

“Does this sentence make sense in academic English?”

“What is the Dark Triad?”

“Does Dark Triad leadership influence motivation?”

