Leader Effects on Follower Toxic Behavior

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Abstract

Toxic behavior is a threat to mission readiness. The authors described and tested a psychological process in which ethical leadership influences subordinate toxic behavior indirectly through coworker toxic behavior. In a study of 235 active duty military personnel, they found evidence of a conditional, indirect model. The results revealed a complex picture of how individual differences in conscientiousness affect responses to ethical leadership and coworker toxic behavior. At stage one of the mediation, the relationship of ethical leadership with coworker toxic behavior was stronger among personnel high rather than low in conscientiousness. At stage two of the mediation, the relationship of coworker toxic behavior with individual toxic behavior was stronger among personnel low rather than high in conscientiousness. However, the impact of conscientiousness on the overall indirect effect of ethical leadership on individual toxic behavior through coworker toxic behavior was such that the relationship was greater among personnel high rather than low in conscientiousness. These results reinforce the importance of commanders making explicit efforts to embrace and model ethical leadership.

Leader Effects on Follower Toxic Behavior

Toxic behavior (i.e., abusing others) is a form of person-focused counterproductive work behavior. Spector, Fox, Penney, Bruursema, Goh, and Kessler (2006) defined it as "harmful behaviors directed toward coworkers and others that harm either physically or psychologically through making threats, nasty comments, ignoring the person, or undermining the person's ability to work effectively" (p. 448). Whereas much of the focus has been on toxic behavior directed at subordinates (i.e., toxic leadership; Whitlock, 2014), some scholars have examined various forms of toxic behavior among coworkers, such as social undermining (Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002), bullying (Leymann, 1990; Zapf, Knorz, & Kulla, 1996), and abuse (Keashly, Trott, & MacLean, 1994). The current study focused on coworker toxic behaviors toward one another in terms of personal abuse.

The occurrence of toxic behavior is on the rise (Kisamore, Jawahar, Liguori, Mharapara, & Stone, 2010; Lutgen-Sandvik, Tracy, & Alberts, 2007), and the costs associated with toxicity are not minor at both the individual- and organizational-level. Toxic behaviors predict poor psychological and physical health (Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langout, 2004; Einarsen & Mikkelsen, 2003; Rogers & Kelloway, 1997; Schat & Kelloway, 2000), high absenteeism, high turnover, and low productivity (Budd, Arvey, & Lawless, 1996; Schat & Kelloway, 2000; Tepper, 2000).

Emerging literature has identified antecedents of toxic behavior (cf. Aryee, Chen, Sun, & Debra, 2007; Glomb & Liao, 2003). These studies primarily apply stress (Spector & Fox, 2005) or social exchange paradigms (Adams, 1965). That is, toxic behavior is described in terms of working conditions-induced strain (Burton, Hoobler, & Scheuer, 2012) or retaliation for poor interpersonal treatment (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). However, toxicity can also be understood in terms of

unethical behavior. As noted by Kapstein (2008), unethical behavior involves what people "should not do" (p. 980). Folger and Skarlicki (1998) pointed to the notion of a universal "human covenant"—respecting human dignity in all interactions. From this perspective, toxic behaviors, such as threatening or demeaning others, violate the universal moral code. Hence, they constitute a breach of ethics.

Behavioral ethics scholars emphasize the cognitive processes that yield unethical and ethical decision-making (Trevino, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006). Both individual-level variables, such as moral reasoning, and contextual-level variables, such as ethical climate (Avey, Palanski, & Walumbwa, 2011; Bartels et al., 1998; Martin & Cullen, 2006; Mayer et al., 2011; Peterson, 2002; Schaubroeck et al., 2012; Vardi, 2001; Wimbush et al., 1997), are antecedents. Schaubroeck et al. (2012) reported that the ethical culture of the unit trickles down from one level of leadership to another and eventually influences individual ethical behavior. Applying social learning theory, Mawritz et al. (2012) found that the toxic actions of managers trickle down the organizational ladder by affecting toxic behavior by supervisors, which in turn, affects the level of interpersonal deviance in work groups. Thus, an important driver of the organizational context that affects individuals' decisions to engage in unethical behavior is the behavior of the immediate supervisor.

Leaders at all levels play a role in creating and maintaining ethical norms and in reinforcing "doing the right thing" through modeling appropriate behavior (Bandura, 1986; Schaubroeck et al., 2012) and refraining from inappropriate behavior. Mayer et al. (2011) demonstrated that ethical leadership was negatively related to follower misconduct and that ethical climate mediated this relationship. In other words, ethical leadership influences wrongdoing by creating and maintaining a work environment in which ethical action is valued. Other scholars have also found that ethical leadership predicts unethical subordinate behavior (Mayer, Aquino, Greenbaum, &

Kuenzi, 2012; Mayer, Kuenzi, & Greenbaum, 2010; Schaubroeck et al., 2012).

However, as noted by Spector et al. (2006), different types of counterproductive work behavior have different causes. For example, they found that abuse against others predicted negative emotions, whereas sabotage and theft—forms of counterproductive work behavior that might also be considered unethical behavior—were unrelated to negative emotions and only modestly predicted conflict. Reporting results of a meta-analysis, Herschovis et al. (2007) concluded that because the antecedents of workplace aggression, of which counterproductive work behavior is a type (Neuman & Baron, 2006), are target-dependent, "combined measures may provide ambiguous if not misleading information about the strength of predictive relationships" (p. 234). Hence, we conclude that linking ethical leadership to a broad class of unethical behavior and bad behavior does not accurately reflect the relationship between ethical leadership and toxicity, per se. Accordingly, we argue that an examination of the ethical leadership-toxic behavior relationship is needed.

In line with Mayer et al., (2011) findings and social learning theory (Bandura, 1986, 1991), we anticipated that the effect of ethical leadership on toxic behavior is indirect through its effects on the work climate. Specifically, we identify the perceived toxicity of coworkers as the mediator between ethical leadership and individual toxic behavior. Perceptions of coworker toxic behavior reflect not only how others interpret the values demonstrated by an ethical leader but also behavioral examples to imitate.

Avey et al. (2011) reported that self-esteem moderated the ethical leadership-subordinate deviance relationship. Moreover, scholars have well demonstrated the role of personal-situation interactions predicting counterproductive work behavior (Bowling & Eschelman, 2010; Colbert, Mount, Harter, Witt, & Barrick, 2004; Mount, Ilies, & Johnson, 2006; Penney & Spector, 2005).

Conscientiousness appears to constrain responses to unfavorable circumstances. As high-conscientiousness individuals maintain a sense of duty and follow rules and ethical guidelines (Colquitt, Scott, Judge, & Shaw, 2006), we suggest that conscientiousness influences how personnel respond to coworker toxic behavior. High-conscientiousness personnel are unlikely to manifest toxic behavior even in units where their coworkers are doing so. Thus, with the present study, we sought to inform theory and command practice by proposing and testing a psychological process in which ethical leadership has indirect effects on subordinate toxic behavior through coworker toxic behavior. Specifically, we aimed to (a) establish the link between ethical leadership and subordinate toxic behavior, (b) investigate coworker toxic behavior as a mediator of that relationship, and (c) ascertain the extent to which the indirect effects of ethical leadership on subordinate toxic behavior are moderated by conscientiousness. We present our overall conceptual model in Figure 1.

Ethical Leadership and Toxic Behavior

Admiral James B. Stockdale (Taylor & Rosenbach, 1984) emphasized the criticality of the ethical leadership of commanders. Of course, ethical leadership is crucial in both military and civilian settings (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005; Schaubroeck et al., 2012; Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009). A growing body of literature suggests that ethical leadership has profound effects on subordinates (Den Hartog & Belschak, 2012; Kalshoven & Boon, 2012; Zhang, Walumbwa, Aryee, & Chen, 2012). Ethical leadership is "the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement and decision-making"

(Brown, Trevino, & Harrison, 2005, p. 120). Ethical leaders exhibit honesty, integrity, credibility, and fair-mindedness (Trevino, Brown, & Hartman, 2003).

Ethical leadership encourages favorable subordinate behavior and discourages unfavorable subordinate behavior. Subordinates of ethical leaders typically have low levels of withdrawal and counterproductive behaviors (Avey et al., 2011; Mayer, Kuenzi, Greenbaum, Bardes, & Salvador, 2009; Schaubroeck et al., 2012; Stouten et al., 2010) and high levels of organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and citizenship behaviors (Ruiz et al., 2011). These effects can be understood in terms of both social learning and social information processing theories (Bandura, 1977, 1986; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). Advocates of these theories argue that environmental cues define appropriate and expected behaviors. Efforts to understand the psychological processes underlying moral behavior have described morality in terms of a process of information integration (Bandura, 1991). That is, persons observe and model others' behaviors while trying to understand the consequences of the behavior (Bandura, 1971). As noted by Crick and Dodge (1994), environmental cues help people to understand events, identify norms, and make decisions appropriate for the environment. Hence, the environment yields socially constructed realities that identify what behaviors are acceptable and expected.

If perceptions of ethical leadership are contextual cues, how do they influence toxic behavior? Advocates of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) argue that environmental cues affect social/moral behavior in three ways: (a) They establish the standards for conduct; (b) they signify the collective support in the social milieu for compliance with the standards; and (c) they promote selective activation and disengagement of moral self-regulation. In other words, strong environmental cues overcome personal standards of moral conduct, enabling "otherwise considerate people to perform self-serving activities that have detrimental social effects"

(Bandura, 1991, p. 280). Perceptions of ethical leadership likely inform personnel that the norm for interpersonal treatment is one of integrity and respect. Power and status influence the extent to which a role model has influence (Bandura, 1986).

Schein (2010) argued that ethical leadership is transmitted through embedding mechanisms, which are "what leaders pay attention to, measure, and control" (p. 237) and includes how they address ethical infractions. I propose that personnel reporting to ethical leaders see role models, cues, and embedding mechanisms indicating that positive interpersonal conduct is both valued and expected. Thus, they believe that toxic behavior is inappropriate and would be punished. Accordingly, they refrain from inappropriate behavior.

As ethical leadership creates norms for ethical behavior, we anticipated that ethical leadership is negatively associated with follower toxic behavior. Moreover, as coworkers in an ethical leader's unit are likely influenced by the norms influenced by ethical leaders, we also expected that ethical leadership affects the toxicity that personnel see among coworkers. Accordingly, we proposed the following:

Hypothesis 1: Ethical leadership is negatively related to individual toxic behavior.

Hypothesis 2: Ethical leadership is negatively related to perceptions of toxic behavior among coworkers.

Coworker Toxic Behavior and Individual Toxic Behavior

Ethical leaders do not constitute the only environmental cue establishing moral standards. Coworkers constitute another (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978), which can be understood in terms of contagion—"the spread of affect or behavior from one crowd participant to another; one person serves as the stimulus for the imitative actions of another" (Lindzey & Aronson, p. 550). Empirical evidence indicates that coworker antisocial behavior predicts individual antisocial behavior

(Appelbaum, Deguire, & Lay, 2005; Robinson & O'Leary-Kelly, 1998), and coworker absenteeism predicts individual absenteeism (Bamberger & Baron, 2007). Hence, in line with information processing and social contagion theories, we suggest that personnel who view coworkers engaging in toxic behavior are likely to mimic them and manifest toxic behavior.

Another influence on individual toxicity is retaliation in response to toxicity on the part of coworkers (i.e., social exchange; Adams, 1965). Indeed, recipients of coworker aggression sometimes respond in kind (Glomb & Liao, 2003). Consistent with work in social learning, retaliation, and contagion, we proposed the following:

> Hypothesis 3: Follower perceptions of coworker toxic behavior are positively related to follower reports of their own toxic behaviors (i.e., individual toxic behavior).

Effects of Ethical Leadership on Individual Toxic Behavior

In attempting to establish a case for the first hypothesis, we applied social learning theory (Crick & Dodge, 1994) to argue that ethical leadership acts as a contextual cue that constrains toxic behavior by articulating values and modeling behaviors that are inconsistent with toxicity. As noted previously, empirical evidence suggests that ethical leadership has indirect effects on follower behavior (e.g., ethical misconduct; Mayer et al., 2011). Hence, we suspected that ethical leadership has indirect effects on individual toxic behavior through coworker toxic behavior. Some of how personnel interpret the ethics-related behaviors of the leader is likely to come from observing how coworkers respond to those leader behaviors. Personnel reporting to ethical leaders likely see low levels of coworker toxicity because of the policies and behaviors of the leader, while those reporting to unethical leaders likely see high levels of coworker toxicity. That is, the level of toxicity among coworkers reflects how salient others in the unit interpret the values of the leader to

be and therefore provides individuals with role models to mimic. Hence, we suggest that ethical leadership affects individual toxic behavior through its influence on the ambient level of coworker toxic behavior. Accordingly, we proposed:

Hypothesis 4: The effect of ethical leadership on individual toxic behavior is indirect through coworker toxic behavior.

The Moderating Effect of Conscientiousness

Bandura (1977, 1991) suggested that individual differences in self-regulation affect how people respond to contextual cues. For example, as we noted previously, self-esteem moderates the relationship between ethical leadership and counterproductive work behavior (Avey et al., 2011), so persons low in self-esteem are more influenced by low levels of ethical leadership, while those high in self-esteem are less influenced by it. Spector and Fox (2005) noted that meta-analyses indicate that the personality trait of conscientiousness is the best individual differences predictor of counterproductive work behavior.

Workers high in conscientiousness (vs. those low in conscientiousness) tend to be more effective on the job (Barrick & Mount, 1991) and engage in lower levels of counterproductive work behavior (Berry, Ones, & Sackett, 2007; Yang & Diefendorff, 2009) because they are more organized, careful, perseverant, self-controlled, honest, planful, reliable, and dependable (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Lodi-Smith & Roberts, 2007; Roberts & Hogan, 2001; Salgado, 2002).

Following Cullen and Sackett (2003) and Saks and Ashforth (2000), we argue that examining the joint effects of situational and personality variables is an appropriate approach for understanding counterproductive work behavior. With the present paper, we apply trait activation theory (Haaland & Christiansen, 2002; Tett & Burnett, 2003; Tett & Guterman, 2000) to examine the joint effects on individual toxic behavior of the situation in terms of ethical leadership and

coworker toxic behavior and of personality in terms of conscientiousness. People act consistent with their traits when they observe trait-relevant cues in the situation (Tett & Burnett, 2003). Whereas personnel high in conscientiousness prefer to follow rules and act consistent with ethical values, those low in conscientiousness prefer the opposite (Colquitt, Scott, Judge, & Shaw, 2006). Hence, for the low-conscientiousness personnel, coworker toxicity is a cue that inactivates constraints against behaving inappropriately. However, because they tend to behave appropriately most of the time, coworker toxicity is less of a salient cue among high-conscientiousness personnel. We expected conscientiousness to moderate the relationship between perceived coworker toxic behavior and individual toxicity. That is, at path *b*, we anticipated that relationship is stronger among low-conscientiousness personnel than it is among high-conscientiousness personnel. Therefore, we proposed the following:

> Hypothesis 5: The indirect effect of ethical leadership on individual toxic behavior is moderated by conscientiousness. The relationship between perceived coworker toxic behavior and individual reports of toxicity (the second stage of the mediation, illustrated as path *b* in Figure 1) is stronger among individuals low rather than high in conscientiousness.

Control Variables

Individual differences influence counterproductive work behavior (Berry, Ones, & Sackett, 2007; Salgado, 2000; Spector, 2011). Accordingly, we measured and used as covariates in the analyses emotional stability, age, hierarchical rank, minority status, and gender.

Method

Participants and Procedure

A total of 235 active duty U.S. military personnel completed the DEOCS in response to a request from their respective commanders. Of the 235, 6.4% were female, 25.1% were minorities, two-thirds were mid-level enlisted, 69% were in the Army, and about three-fourths were between 20 and 30 years of age.

Ethical leadership. We adapted five items from the 10-item Brown, Trevino, and Harrison (2005) ethical leadership scale (e.g., "My immediate supervisor sets an example of how to do things the right way in terms of ethics"). The items were presented on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). High scores reflect high levels of ethical leadership.

Individual toxic behavior. Three items (e.g., "I verbally abused another member of the unit") of the abuse scale of the Counterproductive Work Behavior Checklist (counterproductive work behavior-C; Spector et al., 2006) assessed individual toxic behavior. The items were presented on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). High scores reflect high levels of individual toxic behavior.

Coworker toxic behavior. We used the three items of the abuse subscale of Spector et al.'s (2006) counterproductive work behavior-C scale to measure perceived coworker toxic behavior (e.g., "Other members of the unit verbally abused other members of the unit"). The items were presented on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). High scores reflect high levels of perceived coworker toxicity.

Personality. The Big Five factor markers in the International Personality Item Pool (Goldberg, 1999) assessed personality. Three items measured conscientiousness (e.g., "I pay attention to details"), and three items measured emotional stability (e.g., "I get stressed out easily;"

reverse-coded). The items were presented on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). High scores reflect high levels of conscientiousness and emotional stability, respectively.

Results

We present descriptive statistics, reliability estimates, and the intercorrelation matrix in Table 1. As predicted with Hypotheses 1 and 2, ethical leadership predicted both individual toxic behavior (r = -.34, p < .01) and coworker toxic behavior (r = -.42, p < .01). As predicted with Hypothesis 3, coworker and individual toxic behavior were positively related (r = .68, p < .01).

Before testing the additional hypotheses, we ascertained the level of between-group variance in coworker toxic behavior in order to determine whether we needed to conduct multilevel modeling. Specifically, we estimated a null random intercept model for coworker toxic behavior. This is equivalent to a one-way ANOVA and yields estimates of between-group and within-group variance (Bliese, 2000). As we did not find a unit-level effect for coworker toxic behavior (τ^2 = .00, SE = .00, p= *ns*), we did not run multilevel modeling.

We illustrate our structural model in Figure 2. We employed procedures described by Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes (2007) and Edwards and Lambert (2007) to test Hypotheses 4 and 5. Edward and Lambert advocated that moderation for each path be tested. Hence, we used the "PROCESS" SPSS macro (Hayes, 2012) to run a total effects moderation model—conscientiousness being tested as a moderator of paths *a*, *b*, and *c*. This approach utilizes the two regression models in order to calculate the full structural model. The first model calculated path *a* (Figure 1); coworker toxic behavior was the criterion variable. We present the results in Table 2. The second model calculated path *b*; individual toxic behavior was the criterion variable. We present the results in Table 3. We generated 10,000 bootstrap sample means and estimated the

conditional indirect effect (*a* x *b*) at low and high levels of conscientiousness. We present the results in Table 4. Baron and Kenny (1986) described three indicators of a mediation effect. First, the predictor and mediator variables have to be related (path *a*). Second, the mediator and criterion variables have to be related (path b). Third, the entry of the mediator into the model reduces (partial mediation) or eliminates (full mediation) the relationship between the predictor and criterion variables. Preacher and Hayes (2008) called for the use of bootstrapping procedures to estimate the total and indirect effects because the effects contain interaction terms and are non-normally distributed. The indirect effect in our model is represented by path *ab*, the product of the effect of ethical leadership on coworker toxic behavior and the effect of coworker toxic behavior on individual toxicity controlling for ethical leadership. As shown in Table 2 and described with Hypothesis 2, ethical leadership predicted coworker toxic behavior (β = -.59, p < .01). As shown in Table 3 and described with Hypothesis 3, coworker toxicity predicted individual toxic behavior (β = -.58, p < .01). When we included the mediator, the predictor and criterion variables were no longer related (β= .04, *ns*). Moreover, as shown in Table 4, we found an indirect effect (-.37, 95%CI [-.52, -.24]) but no direct effect (.10, *ns*). Therefore, we conclude that we found full mediation.

If one, either, or both of the interaction terms from the first model (conscientiousness x ethical leadership) and second model (conscientiousness x coworker toxic behavior) are significant, and the confidence intervals of the indirect effect do not include zero, moderated mediation exists (Preacher et al., 2007). We found significant (a) conscientiousness x ethical leadership (path *a; B* = -.31, p < .01) and conscientiousness x coworker toxic behavior (path *b; B* = -.11, p < .05) interaction terms, (b) that the confidence intervals reflecting the indirect effects did not contain zero across the levels of conscientiousness, and (c) that the effect size was largest at

high levels of conscientiousness. Consistent with Hypothesis 5, the findings indicate that the indirect effects of ethical leadership on individual toxic behavior through coworker toxic behavior were moderated by conscientiousness.

We plotted both predictors at low (one standard deviation below the mean) and high (one standard deviation above the mean) levels of conscientiousness: (a) path *a*: coworker toxic behavior regressed on ethical leadership in Figure 3, (b) path *b*: individual toxic behavior regressed on coworker toxic behavior in Figure 4, and (c) path *ab*: the conditional indirect effect of ethical leadership on toxic behavior through coworker toxic behavior in Figure 5. As shown in Figures 3 and 5, the relationships of ethical leadership with coworker toxic behavior (path *a*) and individual toxic behavior through coworker toxic behavior (path *ab*) were greater among personnel high rather than low in conscientiousness. As described with Hypothesis 5, the relationship of coworker toxic behavior with individual toxic behavior (path *b*) was stronger among personnel low rather than high in conscientiousness. Results of tests of the simple slopes revealed that (a) the high-conscientiousness slope was significant (*gradient* = -.90, t = -7.02, $p < .01$), but the low-conscientiousness slope was not (*gradient* = -.27, t = -1.81, *ns*) at path *a*; and (b) high-conscientiousness and the low-conscientiousness (*gradient* = .68, t = 10.19, $p < .01$) slopes were both significant (*gradient* = .45, t = 7.22, $p < .01$) at path *b*. These results respectively suggest that (a) ethical leadership affects perceptions of coworker toxicity more among personnel high rather than low in conscientiousness, and (b) perceived coworker toxicity affects individual toxicity among personnel at both high and low levels of conscientiousness. Not surprisingly, the combination of high coworker toxicity and low conscientiousness yielded the greatest levels of individual toxicity. We emphasize that among personnel reporting low levels of coworker toxicity, individual toxicity levels were low regardless of conscientiousness.

Discussion

We described a process in which ethical leadership influences individual follower toxic behavior through its effect on follower perceptions of toxicity among coworkers. We also argued how individual differences in conscientiousness affect this process. As hypothesized, the results revealed that the effect of ethical leadership on individual toxic behavior is mediated by follower perceptions of coworker toxic behavior. In other words, ethical leadership reduces follower toxicity by reducing follower perceptions of toxicity by coworkers. Hence, we suggest that our findings extend previous work by demonstrating that ethical leadership also influences follower behavior, in this case toxic behavior, by affecting what coworkers do.

Further, our investigation of a moderated mediation model revealed that the effect of ethical leadership on individual toxic behavior through perceived coworker toxic behavior (Figure 5) is stronger among personnel high rather than low in conscientiousness. Overall, highly conscientious individuals were more likely to follow ethical leaders and refrain from toxic behavior. However, the influence of conscientiousness in this psychological process is more complicated than expected. Surprisingly, we discovered that conscientiousness moderated the first stage of the mediation (path *a*); the ethical leadership-coworker toxic behavior relationship was stronger among personnel high rather than low in conscientiousness. Alternatively stated, when high-conscientiousness personnel perceived high levels of ethical leadership, they were more likely to perceive lower levels of coworker toxicity. The ethical leadership-coworker toxic behavior relationship did not hold among personnel low in conscientiousness. Applying trait activation theory, we offer an explanation. As high-conscientiousness personnel are effective at self-regulation and are motivated to achieve, the ethical actions of leaders and toxic behavior of coworkers serve as trait activating cues that constrain toxic behavior. Therefore, perhaps because

high-conscientiousness personnel are more sensitive to the moral actions of others, they may also observe consistency in terms of the ethical behaviors of both leaders and coworkers. In contrast, low-conscientiousness personnel are less interested in moral actions and hence can be somewhat insensitive to such consistencies. Another possibility is that they are unlikely to engage in toxic behavior around their highly conscientious coworkers, particularly when the leader manifests high levels of ethical behavior.

As expected, the coworker toxic behavior-individual toxicity relationship was weaker among high-conscientiousness rather than low-conscientiousness personnel. Perhaps because of their interest in moral standards, highly conscientious personnel are unlikely to mimic the toxic behaviors of their coworkers. In contrast, low-conscientiousness personnel likely do not have such concerns.

Limitations

We emphasize three limitations. First, the sample was primarily comprised of men and Army personnel. Hence, generalizability might be problematic. Second, as the data came from a cross-sectional design, we cannot rule out the prospect of reverse directionality, as toxicity among coworkers might elicit low levels of ethical behavior from leaders. Third, the data were collected from self-report, and same-source method bias may have had some influence on the results.

Future Directions

We offer three directions for future research. First, the participants were active duty personnel, who may be more attuned to appropriate ethical conduct than civilians. Replicating this study in non-Department of Defense (DOD) agencies may be of utility. Second, the participants were almost all males. As there are gender differences in ethical sensitivity (Khazanchi, 1995), it might be helpful to investigate whether gender affects susceptibility to the influences of unethical

behavior. Third, the moderating effects of conscientiousness point to possible person-situation effects regarding susceptibility to leader ethical behavior and coworker toxicity.

In sum, our findings suggest that personnel are influenced not only by the leader's behavior but also by what coworkers do, particularly among personnel high in conscientiousness.

Potential Contributions to the Literature

With the present study, we offer two potential contributions. First, we join together the ethical counterproductive work behavior and leadership literatures by showing that ethical leaders influence individual toxic behavior by constraining coworker toxic behavior. Hence, by demonstrating that norms and contagion stemming from perceptions of the leaders and coworkers predict toxic behavior, we complement the leading theoretical approaches among counterproductive work behavior scholars, who have chiefly considered counterproductive work behavior as the result of aversive work conditions and the negative affect that goes along with them.

Second, by showing that conscientiousness affects how personnel respond to ethical leaders, we add to the emerging work employing an interactionist approach to counterproductive work behavior. We found that the role modeling of ethical leaders was followed primarily by high-conscientiousness personnel, who manifested lower levels of toxic behavior when they perceived ethical leadership. The ethics-related behavior of leaders likely acts as a trait activating cue for personnel high in conscientiousness, who avoided toxic behavior even when their coworkers did not. The low-conscientiousness personnel apparently mimicked the toxicity of their coworkers, perhaps because they have issues with self-control and are relatively uninterested in the ethical behavior of the leader.

Implications for Commanders

Our findings indicate that (a) ethical leaders affect individual toxic behaviors at least in part by establishing a standard for what is acceptable behavior, and (b) personnel construe the leader's values by observing the behavior of coworkers. The absence of highly ethical leaders might convey weak-to-no constraints against toxic behavior. Moreover, personnel who are low in conscientiousness may be vulnerable to unethical leadership and coworker toxicity. Perceived coworker toxicity yielded individual toxicity among personnel both low and high in conscientiousness. This suggests that enforcing policies about treating others with respect is likely to have utility.

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Table 1

Descriptive Statistics, Reliability Estimates, and Intercorrelation Matrix[a]

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Individual toxic behavior	1.91	1.14	(.86)							
2. Ethical leadership	3.53	.83	-.34**	(.81)						
3. Coworker toxic behavior	2.41	1.32	.68**	-.42**	(.84)					
4. Conscientiousness	3.81	.86	-.32**	.51**	-.16*	(.78)				
5. Emotional stability	3.32	.76	-.30**	.33**	-.26**	.42**	(.52)			
6. Military rank	2.30	1.20	-.17**	.19**	-.21**	.11	.17	---		
7. Minority Status	1.25	.43	.01	-.04	-.01	-.01	.01	-.01	---	
8. Gender	1.06	.24	-.04	-.03	-.08	-.00	.01	-.09	.17**	---
9. Age	2.12	.83	-.15*	.10	-.10	.16*	.12	.48**	.02	.02

[a] N = 235. Reliability estimates are presented in the diagonal.

*p <.05

**p <.01

Table 2

Mediator Variable Model: Coworker Toxic Behavior Regressed on the Predictors[a]

Predictor	*β*	SE	t
Constant	1.62**	.55	2.96
Ethical leadership	-.59**	.11	-5.38
Conscientiousness	.01	.12	.06
Ethical leadership x Conscientiousness	-.31**	.09	-3.55
Emotional stability	-.15	.12	-1.33
Military rank	-.16*	.07	-2.12
Minority status	-.03	.18	-.19
Gender	-.59	.32	-1.88
Age	.02	.11	.19

[a] $R2 = .27$, F (8/226) = 10.29.

*$p < .05$

**$p < .01$

Table 3

Dependent Variable Model: Individual Abuse Regressed on the Predictors[a]

Predictor	β	SE	t
Constant	2.22**	.39	5.70
Coworker toxic behavior	.58**	.05	12.42
Ethical leadership	.04	.09	.41
Coworker toxic behavior x Conscientiousness	-.11*	.05	-2.10
Conscientiousness	-.24**	.09	-2.79
Ethical leadership x Conscientiousness	.05	.06	.77
Emotional stability	-.10	.08	-1.17
Military rank	.02	.05	.35
Minority status	.00	.12	.03
Gender	.07	.22	.33
Age	-.07	.07	-.99

[a] $R^2 = .53$, F (10/224) = 25.02.

*$p < .05$

**$p < .01$

Table 4

Analysis of Direct and Indirect Effects of Ethical Leadership on Individual Toxic Behavior Through Coworker Toxic Behavior[a]

	Direct Effect	SE of Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Indirect Effect LLCI	Indirect Effect ULCI
Simple Mediation Model	.10	.08	-.37*	-.52	-.24
Conditional Model					
Low Conscientiousness	-.01	.11	-.21*	-.42	-.03
Mean Conscientiousness	.04	.09	-.34*	-.48	-.20
High Conscientiousness	.01	.10	-.41*	-.60	-.27

[a] N=235. LLCI=lower limit of 95% bootstrapped confidence interval; ULCI= upper limit of 95% bootstrapped confidence interval.

*p <.05

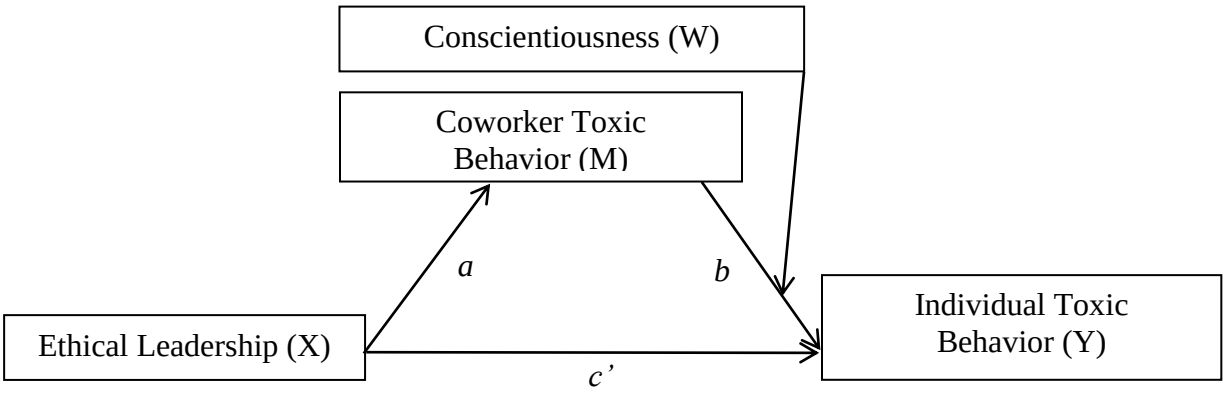

Figure 1. Proposed conceptual model.

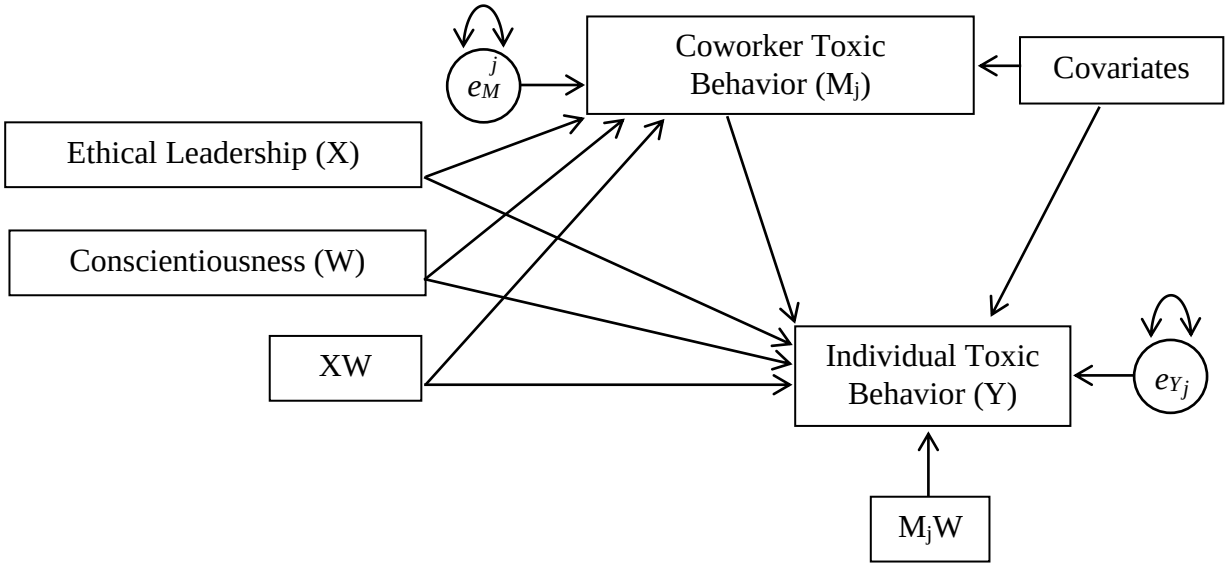

Figure 2. Proposed structural model.[a]

[a] Covariates = Gender, age, Military rank, emotional stability, and minority status.

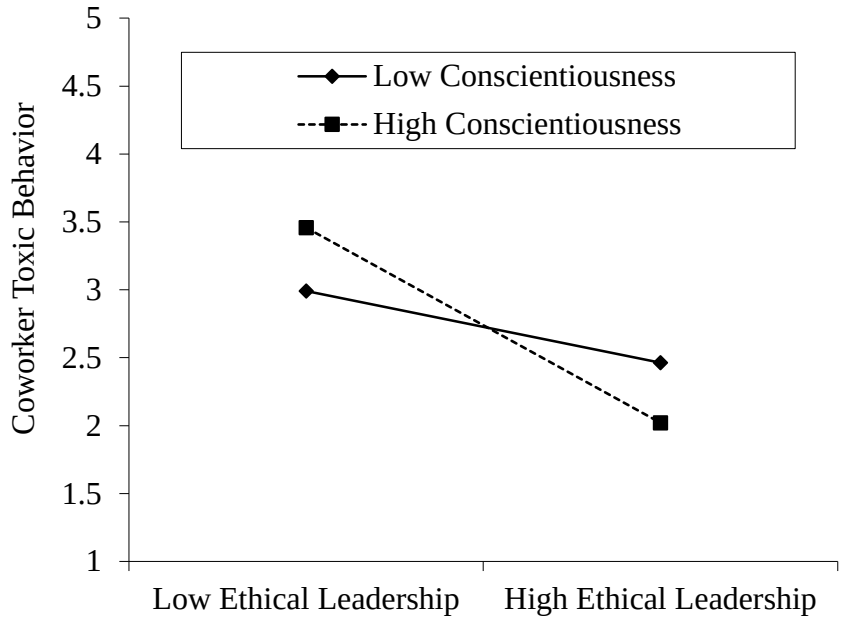

Figure 3. Path *a*.

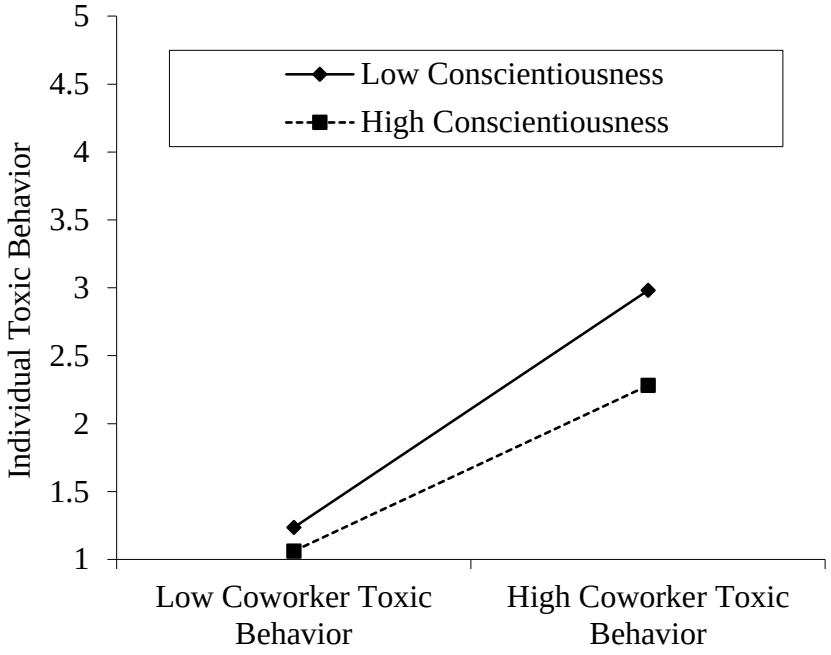

Figure 4. Path *b*.

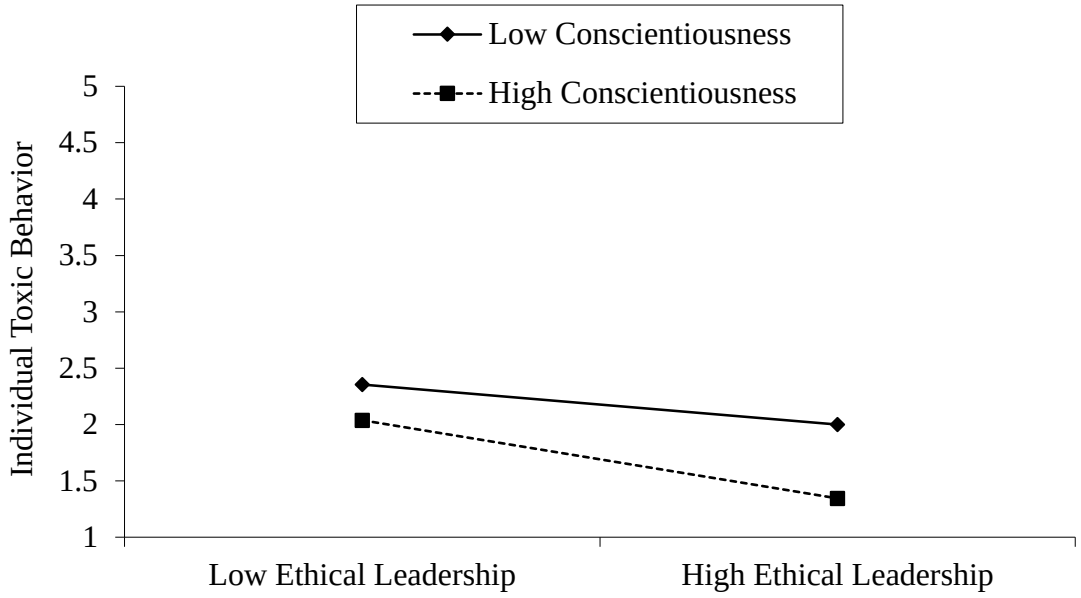

Figure 5. Path *ab*: Conditional indirect effect of ethical leadership on individual toxic behavior.