

1 Time to actually take the blinkers off? A
2 response to Cruickshank and Collins.

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8 **Abstract.** Cruickshank and Collins [2] ‘Advancing Leadership in Sport: Time to
Take Off the Blinkers?’ has created something of a furore around the effective-
ness and suitability of dark leadership traits and behaviours. This paper attempts to
clarify some of the conceptual issues discussed within their paper, while also re-
dressing a number of literary misrepresentations. Finally, the potential limitations
of Cruickshank and Collins’ research are discussed, as well as the wider context of
research that arguably may promote use of dark leadership behaviours in coaching.

9 **Keywords.** Transformational Leadership, Sports Leadership, Pseudo-transformational
Leadership, Dark Leadership

10 Discussions around the bright (i.e., socially desirable) and dark (i.e., socially unde-
11 sirable) sides of sports leadership have resurfaced recently (see [1,2,3]). While discussing
12 both the bright and dark side of leadership has its merits, it is important not to glorify
13 behaviours and traits that can potentially be harmful. As such, the present article aims
14 to clarify a range of theoretical misconceptions of both dark and transformational lead-
15 ership, as discussed within Cruickshank and Collins [1,2]. Specific attention is paid to
16 the following arguments. First, Cruickshank and Collins [2] (p.4) argue that leaders are
17 not necessarily more effective should they “have a more complete, brighter, or stronger
18 set of ‘gold standard’ behaviours”. Suggesting that both bright and dark traits can work
19 in tandem. Second, they suggest that the findings from their recent research encourages
20 an ‘it depends’ approach to the study of leadership. Rather than behaving in an authentic
21 manner, Cruickshank and Collins [2] (p.4) appear to suggest that those who can manage
22 the impressions of others and present the impression of multiple competencies will ulti-
23 mately achieve greater success: “...it is those who can use a host of different methods in
24 a host of different ways for a host of different purposes in an optimum fashion who will
25 achieve expertise and outperform others”. Finally, Cruickshank and Collins’ [2] criticise
26 transformational leadership; particularly focusing on the attribution of labels and values.

27 While Cruickshank and Collins [2] fail to define the specific traits they are referring
28 to when discussing dark leadership, given their previous work [4,1] it is likely that nar-
29 cissism, Machiavelianism, hubris, and social dominance will be the focus [5]. Given that
30 these terms are relatively uncommon, it is worth outlining their meaning. First, narcis-
31 sism can be characterised, within non-clinical settings, as arrogance, self-absorption, en-
32 titlement, and hostility [6]. Individuals high in narcissistic tendencies exhibit a grandiose
33 view of self, often perceiving themselves are unique and worthy of admiration [5]. They

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34 are often viewed as self-confident (i.e., hubris), which helps them to rise to positions of
35 power. However, these same traits may result in their eventual downfall [6]. Ong et al.
36 [7] (p.1) provide an amusing analogy of the process of following a leader that possesses
37 highly narcissistic traits:

38 Relationships with narcissistic leaders can be a paradoxical experience, much like
39 eating chocolate cake. The first bite is usually rich in flavor and texture, and ex-
40 tremely gratifying. After a while, however, the richness of this flavour makes one feel
41 increasingly nauseous. Being led by a narcissist could be a similar experience.

42 Consistent with the deleterious aspects of narcissistic leadership alluded to in this anal-
43 ogy, recent research has linked coach narcissism with increased dominance, reduced em-
44 pathy, increased frequency of controlling coach behaviours and reduced frequency of
45 autonomy-supportive coach behaviours [8]. If Cruickshank and Collins [2] were indeed
46 including narcissism within their categorisation of dark leadership, the outcomes associ-
47 ated with more narcissistic coaches in the work of Matosic and colleagues are not ones
48 we would consider to be representative of advanced leadership.

49 Second, Machiavellianism is characterised as the manipulation and exploitation of
50 others. Those who present Machavellian tendencies are considered cunning and possess
51 a willingness to deceive for their own gains. Leaders described as Machiavellian seek
52 control over followers and are driven by a need for power [9]. They tactically self-present
53 and use their skill in impression management to coerce others into behaving as they de-
54 sire [10]. Third, hubris is categorised as excessive pride and an inflated sense of self-
55 confidence [5]. Leaders high in hubristic tendencies over value their own contributions
56 and downplay the achievements of others. Likewise, because hubristic leaders have a
57 distorted view of their self-worth, they tend to discount information that conflicts with
58 this self-perception [11]. Lastly, social dominance, is categorised as an individual's pref-
59 erence for stable hierarchical systems [12]. Leaders high in social dominance tend to
60 have high demands of others, which often results in the leader creating a pressurised,
61 unsupportive, inconsiderate, and unfair environment [5].

62 While Cruickshank and Collins [1,2] assert that supposed dark traits such as Machi-
63 avellianism, narcissism, hubris and dominance may be effective, there is little empirical
64 evidence to support such a claim. Further and like many before them, they fail to define
65 what they mean by 'effective'. While effectiveness is often gleaned by a leader's perfor-
66 mance, this alone is prone to a range of extraneous influences and takes a narrow view
67 of the processes involved [5]. Further, as much of the dark leadership literature is either
68 qualitative self-reports from leaders or cross-sectional surveys of followers. Given the
69 socially sensitive nature of the topic, self-reports may be fallible to recall error and in par-
70 ticular, social desirability bias [31]. Furthermore, given the lack of longitudinal research
71 [7], the cross-sectional data may be skewed towards short-term snapshots of a present,
72 before the influence of dark leadership traits and behaviours can become apparent.

73 As Dasborough and Ashkanasey [13] suggest, the relationship between leader and
74 follower is likely to suffer if the follower perceives their leader to be demonstrating char-
75 acteristics associated with dark leadership. Once the followers realise that their leader
76 has been manipulative, controlling, and egoistic it is likely that their satisfaction with the
77 leader will suffer [14,15,16,13,17]. Within sport, such an approach is unlikely to produce
78 long-term relationships. Athletes may tolerate such selfish, manipulative, and dominant

79 coaches in the short-term pursuit of their goals, but once results suffer, as they inevitably
80 will, it is unlikely that the relationship will endure [21,22].

81 For contemporary sport leadership scholars such as Arthur et al. [29] and Ong et
82 al. [7] the issue is less around the traits possessed by leaders and more about examining
83 the outcomes associated with the characteristic. Using narcissism² as an example, Ong
84 et al. [7] examined whether individuals higher in narcissism have leader emergent ten-
85 dencies and also whether perceptions of such leadership qualities are stable over time.
86 Based on two samples (i.e., $N = 112$ and $N = 152$), Ong et al. [7] reported narcissism
87 was positively associated with peer-rated leadership during initial group formation, but
88 that these perceptions were not stable over time. While Cruickshank and Collins [2] (p.
89 3) acknowledge that identifying the outcomes of such behaviours has done much to ad-
90 vance the literature, they argue that little has been done to examine how and when these
91 behaviours should be selected and utilised:

92 behaviour-focused work has done much to identify possible leadership ‘tools’ (i.e.,
93 behaviours) but little for how and why they may be successfully selected, combined
94 and deployed; issues which lie at the true heart of leader effectiveness in applied
95 settings.

96 Like Cruickshank and Collins [2] (p.3), we agree that leadership scholars could broaden
97 their horizons beyond behavioural outcomes alone. We disagree, however, that the fo-
98 cus should now turn to how behaviours can be “successfully selected, combined and
99 deployed”. Rather than encouraging spurious behaviours and self-presentation, scholars
100 should attempt to find ways of examining the antecedent motives behind the behaviour
101 and examine the prior mental representations, which form the character. While followers
102 may not initially see through false idols using scripted behaviours, when they do, trust
103 is inevitably damaged [16]. Should followers be manipulated to work for the leader’s
104 self-interest, once the motive for the manipulation becomes apparent, it is likely that the
105 relationship will be annulled [16]. The authors would like to propose that, rather than ex-
106 amining the outcomes of behaviour and leadership training, scholarly attention should be
107 directed at examining the effect of value congruence and group dynamics. Like Cruick-
108 shank and Collins [2] we agree that context is key in the perceived effectiveness of the
109 leader, but argue that the notion of a proverbial toolbox of disingenuous behaviours is
110 flawed. Until we have a greater empirical understanding of the mechanisms involved
111 within the leader-follower dynamic, it is unlikely that meaningful change will be achiev-
112 able.

113 We also believe there are some misinterpretations of the transformational leadership
114 literature present in Cruickshank and Collins [2]. First, Cruickshank and Collins [2] (p.4)
115 argue that it is unhelpful and arguably pointless for Bass and Steidlmeier [17] to “try and
116 classify leaders with general labels”. While the point Cruickshank and Collins [2] make
117 regarding labelling leaders is arguably valid, Bass and Steidlmeier [17] do not do this.
118 We believe the inherent suggestion that an archetypal transformational leader exists rep-
119 represents a common misinterpretation of transformational leadership theory. A more crit-
120 ical examination of relevant theory reveals there is no such thing as a transformational
121 leader, merely those who display transformational qualities (see [30]). Our issue with
122 this particular assertion of Cruickshank and Collins ([2]) is further highlighted by the

²Narcissism, in this instance, refers to extreme selfishness, a grandiose view of one’s own ability and a craving for admiration [6].

123 fact there is currently no universally accepted definition for the number of qualities or
124 behaviours that need to be demonstrated by a leader in order to be classified as transfor-
125 mational. As such, Bass and Steidlmeier [17] are no different to Cruickshank and Collins
126 in using overarching terms to discuss behaviours and traits.

127 Next, Cruickshank and Collins [2] (p.4) state that Bass and Steidlmeier [17] (p. 186)
128 contradict themselves when stating “authentic transformational leaders may have to be
129 manipulative at times for what they judge to be the common good, but [this] manipula-
130 tion is ... an infrequent practice”. We believe this represents another common misconcep-
131 tion within the transformational leadership literature. While the name, authentic trans-
132 formational leadership, implies authenticity (i.e., genuine), it actually means true (see
133 [13]). Although authentic or ‘true’ transformational leadership qualities are proposed to
134 include integrity, moral and ethical principles and authenticity [18,19,23], doing so is not
135 a requirement of transformational leadership [17]. While leaders may have to, at times,
136 be manipulative, according to Bass and Steidlmeier [17] if the manipulation is not for the
137 common good, the behaviour can no longer be considered truly transformational. Alas,
138 this is not a contradiction. It would only be contradictory were Bass and Steidlmeier
139 [17] to state that manipulation for selfish gains were acceptable for those displaying truly
140 transformational qualities.

141 As Cruickshank and Collins [2] allude, there were some initial disagreements around
142 whether leaders using supposed dark behaviours could be transformational. Burns [24]
143 and Bass [25] disagreed over whether immoral leaders could induce positive outcomes
144 in followers while demonstrating the behaviours and qualities associated with transfor-
145 mational leadership. Burns [24] proposed, broadly, that only leaders of moral virtue
146 could advance followers towards self-sacrifice for the greater good. For Burns [24] (p.36)
147 “leadership is a process of morality to the degree that leaders engage with followers on
148 the basis of shared motives and values and goals”. In contrast, Bass [25] argued that lead-
149 ers should not be distinguished based on the behaviours they present, but rather on their
150 intentions. Cruickshank and Collins [2] attempt to use this ambiguity around the use of
151 manipulation within transformational leadership to support their argument:

152 Herein lies the crux of the problem, traits and behaviours are, in the main, value neu-
153 tral [17]. As such, labelling them without context is futile. The characteristic and subse-
154 quent behaviour are arguably unimportant. What is important, however, is the individual
155 and the motive behind the presentation of the behaviour. Should leaders present supposed
156 dark traits or behaviours in the interest of the group, as Cruickshank and Collins [2] sug-
157 gest, then arguably, they are no longer dark. For example, while manipulation is gener-
158 ally considered a dark behaviour, should the manipulation be for the greater good and
159 not in the self-interest of the leader, then the behaviour should not be considered dark.
160 Leaders do not use these behaviours in silos and are rarely all ‘dark’ or all ‘bright’. As
161 discussed within the transformational leadership literature, leaders use both bright and
162 dark behaviours and are often two sides of the same coin [13]. What differentiates the
163 leader is not the behaviour itself, but rather whether the behaviour is adopted for egois-
164 tic or altruistic reasons. Like Cruickshank and Collins [2], the authors agree that greater
165 focus on leader cognition would be beneficial to the field. However, given the socially
166 undesirable nature of dark leadership traits, a greater emphasis on implicit³ measures

³Note that there is some linguistic ambiguity within the literature regarding the term *implicit*. For the pur-
poses of this review the term implicit refers to an indirect measure of assessment (see [26])

167 and automatic attitudes is likely to bear greater fruit than explicit measures of deliberate
168 attitudes alone.

169 Without wishing to criticise, it seems that there may be an element of confirmation
170 bias, either implicitly or explicitly, within Cruickshank and Collins' [1,2] work. Evidence
171 that supports their position appears to be favoured, methodologies selectively used, and
172 participants purposely sampled (i.e., qualitative interviews with suspected leaders who
173 display dark leadership behaviours). Further, 25% of the total references within their [2]
174 article were self-citations (i.e., 14/56). That said, the authors of this response appreciate
175 that there are few sport-based manuscripts examining the issues discussed within this
176 article. We should not, however, jump to conclusions based on a few pieces of primarily
177 qualitative research.

178 It is also worth noting that the basis for the assertions within Cruickshank and
179 Collins [1,2] also appear fundamentally flawed. According to Cruickshank and Collins
180 [2] (p. 3):

181 ...leaders of British Olympic and professional sports teams selectively used Machi-
182 avellian, ruthless, dominant and sceptical behaviours as defined by Hogan and Hogan
183 (2001) and Judge, Piccolo, and Kosalka [5] to further their own agendas and/or shape,
184 block or derail the agendas of others. Significantly, these behaviours were also felt
185 to be effective parts of their approach [1], with some reporting that they would have
186 been more successful if they had used these behaviours more often in relevant sce-
187 narios.

188 However, such misguided beliefs are not uncommon within self-report research. Many
189 perpetrators of immoral acts throughout history have justified, sanitised and cognitively
190 reduced the effects of their actions [27]. However, rationalising behaviours based upon
191 purportedly desirable outcomes, does not make them any less harmful. For us, arguing
192 that 'the end justifies the means' is a potentially dangerous rhetoric, especially when
193 it is largely supported by qualitative evidence from people who appear to already hold
194 such beliefs. While this may appeal to those who hold similar beliefs, it may be the case
195 that they are looking for evidence that supports their own distorted position, rather than
196 considering the impact their actions have on those whom follow.

197 In sum, like Cruickshank and Collins [2], we agree that leadership scholars could
198 broaden their horizons beyond behavioural outcomes alone. However, rather than focus-
199 ing on explicit cognitive processes (i.e., decision making) or behaviours, we suggest a
200 third way where implicit and explicit attitudes are collected in tandem with their be-
201 havioural outcomes. We do not, however, suggest a 'toolbox' based approach, whereby
202 behaviours are selected based on their perceived effectiveness. Like Gardner and Avolio
203 [10], Luthans and Avolio [19], and Banks et al. [20] we believe authenticity to be an im-
204 portant characteristic of leadership and would discourage the use of tactical impression
205 management. Furthermore, would we also discourage an 'if the ends justify the means'
206 attitude. While the participants within Cruickshank and Collins [1,2] may have justified
207 their use of darker behaviours in the name of effectiveness, such an approach only tells
208 one side of the story. In fairness, Cruickshank and Collins [1] acknowledge this as a limi-
209 tation of their research and one hopes that this will be addressed in future studies. Future
210 research should, therefore, at a minimum, include athlete perceptions and preferably, be
211 conducted over multiple time points. While we do not in anyway discredit qualitative
212 leadership research (the authors of this manuscript have conducted similar research Mills

213 and Boardley [28]), we urge caution when drawing assumptions from skewed (i.e., all
214 middle aged male) samples offering self-reported data. Finally, the authors hope that this
215 response is accepted with the spirit of collegiality that is intended. While we may adopt a
216 different scholarly position on many of the concepts discussed, we implore Cruickshank
217 and Collins' attempts to raise the standard of sport leadership research and look forward
218 to continuing this academic debate into the future.

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