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Subtractive Leadership

K. H. Larwin
Youngstown State University

Eugene M. Thomas
Lowellville Local Schools

David A. Larwin
Kent State University

This paper introduces a new term and concept to the leadership discourse: Subtractive Leadership. As an extension of the distributive leadership model, the notion of subtractive leadership refers to a leadership style that detracts from organizational culture and productivity. Subtractive leadership fails to embrace and balance the characteristics of the distributive leadership styles by instead encouraging collusion, self-interest, and self-promotion. In doing so, subtractive leadership fuels a lack of organizational vision, feeds distrust amongst constituencies, and undermines the commitment of organizational stakeholders. With this introduction of a model of subtractive leadership, practitioners will now be able to clearly understand and identify the characteristics and behaviors associated with subtractive leadership that in effect negate additive and concertive leadership. It seems very likely, that at one point or another, everyone has experienced these deleterious effects of subtractive leadership in their work arena.

Historically, the term “leadership” has been used interchangeably with management (Carroll & Levy, 2007). Recently, leadership and management have evolved into two separate interdependent concepts (Yukl, 2008). Most research focuses primarily on the "effective" characteristics of leadership and management; what successful leaders possess and implement. As a result of this focus, there is a dearth of research that examines the traits that prohibit organizations from moving forward and successfully reaching goals. However, in order for organizational theory and research to provide a clear perspective of the foundational principles of leadership—and how those principles shape the relationships and identities that inhabit the contemporary workplace—a complete, systematic view of leadership and its multi-faceted nature is required (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Sveningsson & Larsson, 2006). To this end, there is certainly a need to closely examine, and embrace, a common conception of healthy leadership; a style of leadership associated with an organizational structure that fosters a realization of Gronn’s (2002)

notion of "additive" and "concertive" forms of distributive leadership. But there is also a need to examine the counterpoint to these healthy patterns; the pathological, dysfunctional, and destructive patterns of leadership. This latter form of examination is necessary to understand and combat the status quo of leadership dysfunction that has penetrated like some Trojan horse into arenas of contemporary organizational culture.

Today, a dualism exists in distributive leadership approaches. Gronn (2002) describes additive models (the hybrid/concertive types in particular) of leadership as models of organizational functioning in which the leadership arranges and facilitates the individual strengths and differences of the membership in an effort to benefit from the group's collective strength. This distributive leadership, according to Gronn, potentially benefits from the collaborative behavior of the organizational members in such a way that the quantity of energy/productivity of this cooperative membership is greater than the sum of each individual's actions or behavior. Macbeath (2009) describes the group's ability as the totality of all the leadership found within the membership. According to Gronn (2002), the result of this leadership is a focused output of the group's cooperation and collaboration towards an established goal/mission for the organization's future prospects. Winston and Patterson (2006) contend that a leader, in an additive/concertive culture of distributive leadership,

> is one or more people who selects, equips, trains, and influences one or more follower(s) who have diverse gifts, abilities, and skills and focuses the follower(s) to the organization's mission and objectives causing the follower(s) to willingly and enthusiastically expend spiritual, emotional, and physical energy in a concerted coordinated effort to achieve the organizational mission and objectives. (p. 7)

The benefits of distributed leadership, especially the hybrid or concertive variety discussed by Gronn (2002), are in its ability to foster success in achieving organizational goals. Distributive leadership may be key in demonstrating a connection between leadership strength and organizational success that is often sought but not found in the research literature (Jerimer & Kerr, 1997). Such may be the story with the multitude of cases that highlight how schools that are subject to changes in leadership when an effective leader departs--yet retain existing staff--continue to demonstrate higher performance on standardized tests, maintain staff and community morale, and perpetuate positive culture and climate. Even when the effective leader leaves in these cases, the effects of healthy leadership persist. A similar persistent effect is found with ineffective leaders; the effects of the dysfunctional leadership persist after the leadership change. (Jones, 2014).

One of the types of distributive leadership discussed by Gronn (2002), in addition to his notion of hybrid or concertive leadership, is the concept of *additive* leadership. This concept of additive leadership refers to a pattern where leadership behaviors and activities are dispersed across multiple members of an organization, but without the degree of a coordinated focus or strategic alignment found in other forms of distributive leadership. The result is an isolated, rather than combined, effect on the attainment of the organization's goals. However, it would seem that additive leadership behaviors, distracted from or devoid of an

organization's vision, could result in a level of organizational deconstruction whose resultant effect is *subtractive* rather than additive. In this *subtractive leadership* model (initially conceptualized by K. H. Larwin, first author of the present study), collusion and intra-organizational conflict and competitiveness can occur that is focused on the immediate, self-serving, self-defined focus or intentions of the leadership; rather than what is best for the whole organization. This subtractive leadership can yield both short term and long term consequences. Subtractive leadership is in effect the additive leadership model gone bad! It is a perversion of additive leadership styles, distorted to serve the dysfunctional leaders' off-mission personal agendas.

It is not enough for leadership models to account for what effective, productive leaders do, and then to say simply that dysfunctional leaders can be understood as failing to do those constructive and beneficial actions and efforts. Dysfunctional leadership, if it is to be fully understood, must be understood as something more than simply the absence of effective, distributive leadership. It represents a pattern of energized action, strategy, and goal-directed efforts that serve goals contrary to those of the larger organization and interfere with the accomplishment of the larger organizational goals, if not sabotage them altogether. Dysfunctional leaders must be understood by the destructive acts they do, not simply what constructive acts they fail to do.

The notion of subtractive leadership provides an important mechanism for the explanation and understanding of what it is that is central to dysfunctional leadership and action. Whereas distributive leadership involves organizing and combining group or team member efforts to work collectively in synergistic fashion to encourage creativity and productivity that reach levels greater than what might be expected to result from a simple summation of individual accomplishments, *subtractive leadership* creates what amounts to a reverse synergy. By dividing group or team members into camps with their own unique self-interests and objectives, often contrary to one another, and by instilling people with a sense of mutual mistrust and suspicion, the dysfunctional leader puppeteers those in his charge to assist him in his bid to prioritize his own goals and agendas above the goals and mission of the larger organization. The internal conflict, infighting, backstabbing, collusion, conniving, game-playing, and hyper-vigilant suspiciousness among group or team members not only undermines any potential for a productive group synergy to emerge, but it actually *subtracts* from the creative and productive work of each group or team member. The focus of effort and energy of the organization is on the internal drama, politics, and game-playing, and not on work essential to move the organization toward its immediate and long-term goals. Each group or team member—with their attention distracted and motivation redirected--ends up contributing *less* to the mission of the organization in this chaotic system than they otherwise would as an individual working independently.

The term subtractive leadership was initially inspired by a disruptive schooling model described by Valenzuela (1999). First, within this case there was an absence of an authentic caring for *all* members of the leadership. There was a failure to appreciate the existing social capital that each member brought to the organization. Finally, there was a subtractive integration in that the existing culture (or structures) was rejected and not valued. Why would such a subtractive model arise? A lack of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1998), a transactional understanding of leadership (Bass, 1985), a lack of maturity to deal with change (Hyatt, Hyatt, & Hyatt, 2007), and a

lack of commitment to the current organizational arena (Crossan, Gandz, & Seijts, 2012) are some of the possible theories. Characteristics associated with some forms of mental disturbance, such as Narcissistic Personality Disorder, also seem as likely culprits here as well. Other scholars have also made this observation (Padilla, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2007).

The concept of subtractive leadership also has the potential to expand our conceptualization and discussion of distributed leadership, in particular, and leadership theory in general. Models developed initially for the purpose of describing and explaining effective leadership can be revisited through the lens of subtractive leadership. For example, Michael Fullan (2001; 2007) suggested five factors that characterize effective leadership in a "culture of change." These five factors include Challenging the Process, Inspiring a Shared Vision, Enabling others to Act, Modeling the Way, and Encouraging the Heart. While on the surface these factors sound constructive and as if they would be positive characteristics of healthy and effective leadership, this may not necessarily be the case. In the hands of participants in a subtractive leadership process, these same factors can create a culture of pathology that serves to sabotage organizational goals. Obviously not any and all efforts at *challenging the process* are constructive and progressive. A leader could work to divide those in his or her charge into competing factions, form alliances with one faction, and work to *inspire a shared vision* for such alliances based on the attainment of self-serving, immediate goals that are achieved at the expense of other group members and the mission of the organization. Such a process of division and collusion may indeed *enable others to act*, but again in ways counterproductive to the attainment of organizational goals and the benefit of all stakeholders. Such self-serving behavior that sows discord and creates relational chaos and dysfunction may also *model the way* for others in the organization to reproduce such patterns, but this would not likely represent a path that objectively characterizes effective leadership. And if the heart metaphor in the last of Fullan's five factors is a reference to encouraging strong passions and powerful motives, clearly not all desire and drama of great emotional intensity is healthy and constructive for individuals and organizations. True, effective leaders capable of guiding organizations though change—operating individually or as part of a distributed leadership culture—may embrace and embody these factors Fullan describes. But these factors, and the models of leadership they define, take on additional meaning, and paint a picture of greater variety, depth, and complexity, when considered as components that apply to the notion of subtractive leadership as well.

Just as models of leadership originally offered to understand healthy, effective leadership may reveal new insights and complexity when examined from the vantage point of subtractive leadership, the same may be the case for other models of dysfunctional leadership as well. Leithwood, Mascall, Strauss, Sacks, Memon, and Yashkina (2009) posit four patterns of distributed leadership, based on the alignment of leaders and units within an organization. These include Planful Alignment, Spontaneous Alignment, Spontaneous Misalignment, and Anarchic Misalignment. It is the latter of these four that Leithwood et al. describe that seems most dysfunctional—demonstrating negative effects on short-term and long-term productivity, and most resistant to the optimal Planful Alignment pattern—and appears to bear the strongest relation to the concept of subtractive leadership introduced

here. This Anarchic Misalignment pattern is described by the authors as characterized by leaders and units that behave independently and actively reject influence from others about what they should be doing in their domain. This Anarchic Misalignment pattern is also characterized by competition with others when it comes to goals and resources, leaders who mistrust the motives and capacities of fellow leaders, and commitment to individual/unit goals and not organizational goals. Competition is valued over cooperation as the best way to promote productivity across the organization.

It is indeed the case that the competitiveness, mistrust, reflexive independence, rejection of organizational goals, and negative effects on organizational productivity that characterize the Anarchic Misalignment pattern discussed by Leithwood et al. (2009) can be characteristic of subtractive leadership as well. However, there are some key differences. Despite some conflict and disagreement about organizational goals that characterize the Anarchic Misalignment pattern, there is at least some value placed on organizational productivity implicit in Leithwood et al.'s description. This is not necessarily the case with subtractive leadership, where the focus is on individual gain and self-interest, often at the expense of others. Organizational or individual productivity are secondary concerns, if they are concerns at all. Leithwood et al. also describe the Anarchic Misalignment pattern as associated with "considerable reflection about one's own position on most matters of concern," and "reflection and dialogue as the basis for good decision-making about one's own work" (p. 227). While the conceptualization of subtractive leadership presented here does not preclude these characteristics, subtractive leadership can, and likely often does, operate in the absence of much self-reflection and constructive dialogue. In fact, self-esteem that is unstable, and its close cousin narcissism—which are likely often associated with subtractive leadership behaviors—are fundamentally characterized by an active avoidance of self-reflective thought or dialogue (Vazire and Funder, 2006; Zeigler-Hill, 2006).

Perhaps the greatest distinction between subtractive leadership and Leithwood et al.'s (2009) notion of Anarchic Misalignment is the *reverse synergy* associated with subtractive leadership, discussed earlier. Subtractive leaders do not simply reject other's influence, value competition, mistrust others, and act independently. Subtractive leaders actively and intentionally create conflict, competition, and collusion to sabotage organizational goals and productivity, in order to promote their own personal goals and agendas. The subtractive leader *amplifies* interpersonal conflicts, suspicion, game-playing, and in-fighting to levels far beyond what might naturally occur in an organization. Subtractive leadership has more in common with *tyranny*, than it does with anarchy.

Whatever the distinctions that exist between Anarchic Leadership (Leithwood et al., 2009) and the concept of subtractive leadership introduced here, it is clear that a complete understanding of leadership, and distributed leadership in particular, must include models of both constructive and destructive leadership patterns and behaviors. There is indeed an existing literature on leadership theory that addresses destructive forms of leadership (Padilla, et al., 2007) and Leithwood et al.'s notion of Anarchic Leadership is one step in extending this line of inquiry and a resultant knowledge base into the domain of distributed leadership. The notion of *subtractive leadership* offers the potential to extend such inquiry and knowledge even further. As presented here, subtractive leadership applies not only to *distributed*

leadership patterns and actions, but other broader, and more traditional, models of leadership as well. It describes a unique and particularly caustic pattern of leadership that is all too common in contemporary organizational culture.

The value of theory and research with respect to constructive leadership patterns and characteristics seems quite obvious; organizations have an inherent interest in such knowledge, and the goal of applying such knowledge to enhance organizational productivity and success. However, while it may seem less obvious, there is value in an understanding of dysfunctional or destructive leadership patterns as well. Dysfunctional leadership patterns like subtractive leadership may exist in latent form within an organization, easily overlooked or underestimated. Without sufficient attention and awareness, they are free to grow and spread and undermine organizational success. Thus, theoretical concepts like subtractive leadership, and empirical investigation to delineate their nature and operation, have the potential to expand our understanding of dysfunctional leadership, and help prevent or remediate its occurrence. In particular, the concept of *subtractive leadership* extends our understanding of dysfunctional leadership patterns by revealing the intentional, conflict-inducing, self-promoting behaviors that often operate in concert with each other to produce an interaction that magnifies their deleterious effect on organizational missions, goals, and productivity, well beyond the simple additive effect of the individual costs of these behaviors. This understanding represents a unique and important contribution to the extant scholarship on leadership patterns and characteristics.

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