

CONSTRUCTIVE AND POTENTIALLY TOXIC MANAGERIAL ORIENTATIONS IN HYPOTHETICAL ORGANIZATIONAL SITUATIONS

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Received 30 06 2026; Accepted 15 07 2026

Abstract

The aim of the research is to identify declared constructive and potentially toxic managerial orientations in hypothetical organizational situations and to determine their significance for sustainable human resource management. The study was quantitative, cross-sectional, and exploratory-diagnostic in nature.

A scenario-based electronic questionnaire was used. The analysis covered the responses of 300 respondents to 18 situations related, among others, to communication, delegation, time pressure, stress, conflicts, information flow, employee development, and work-life balance. The results indicate a predominance of constructive orientations. However, greater ambivalence and more frequent selection of risky behaviours were recorded under conditions of time pressure, stress, limited information flow, and communication problems. No significant differences in the overall score were found by gender. The results suggest that the risk of potentially toxic behaviours may be situational, which justifies combining the development of managerial competences with the design of working conditions that support dialogue, psychological safety, and responsible people management.

Keywords: *Constructive Leadership, Managerial Behaviour, Managerial Orientations, Sustainable HRM, Toxic Leadership.*

JEL Code: *M12, M54, J28.*

Introduction

Contemporary approaches to leadership emphasize the importance of open communication, participation, supporting autonomy, employee development, and respect for work-life balance. Such behaviours foster trust and psychological safety, which facilitate expressing opinions, reporting problems, and learning from mistakes (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023). At the same time, destructive behaviours may weaken employees' motivation, wellbeing, job satisfaction, and engagement (Einarsen et al., 2007; Tepper, 2007). Their occurrence does not have to result solely from stable characteristics of the leader. They may also be reinforced by organizational conditions, including time pressure, overload, conflicts, and limited access to resources (Bakker et al., 2023; Padilla et al., 2007).

This issue is important for sustainable HRM, which combines the long-term goals of the organization with concern for employee development, wellbeing, participation, and fair treatment (Macke

& Genari, 2019; Stankevičiūtė & Savanevičienė, 2018). However, even well-designed solutions in the areas of wellbeing, development, or work flexibility may lose their importance if relations with the supervisor are based on pressure, lack of transparency, and limited readiness for dialogue.

Previous studies have focused primarily on the effects of destructive leadership experienced by employees. Relatively less attention has been paid to the declared reactions of people who may hold managerial positions in the future and to whether constructive orientations remain stable across different organizational situations. The aim of the study is to identify declared constructive and potentially toxic managerial orientations in hypothetical organizational situations and to determine the areas in which the risk of selecting behaviours inconsistent with the assumptions of sustainable HRM increases.

The research problem concerns whether declared constructive managerial orientations remain stable across different hypothetical organizational situations, especially under conditions of time pressure, stress, conflict, limited information flow and communication difficulties.

Literature Review

Constructive managerial behaviours include, among others, open communication, employee participation in decision-making, supporting employees' autonomy and development, and respect for work-life balance. These behaviours foster psychological safety, understood as reducing the interpersonal risk associated, for example, with expressing opinions, reporting mistakes, and questioning adopted solutions (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023).

The opposite of constructive leadership is destructive behaviour. Einarsen et al. (2007) associate destructive leadership with repeated leader behaviours that harm the organization or negatively affect employees' motivation, wellbeing and job satisfaction. Tepper's (2007) concept of abusive supervision concerns employees' perception of persistent hostile verbal and non-verbal conduct by a supervisor, excluding physical violence.

This study does not diagnose such persistent patterns. Potentially toxic orientations refer to the declared choice of reactions that could limit employees' agency, increase pressure, weaken communication, or deteriorate the quality of relationships within a team.

Destructive leadership behaviours should not be explained solely by the individual characteristics of the leader. The toxic triangle model indicates that they result from the interaction of destructive leaders, susceptible followers, and a conducive organizational context (Padilla et al., 2007).

The importance of context is also explained by job demands-resources theory. Excessive demands, such as time pressure, emotional load, conflicts, and role ambiguity, may lead to exhaustion, especially when they are not balanced by organizational, social, and individual resources (Bakker et al., 2023). It may therefore be expected that declared managerial orientations will be less constructive in situations of stress, pressure, or limited access to information.

In research on declared reactions, the use of hypothetical situations makes it possible to analyse intentions, attitudes, and potential behaviours under standardized conditions. However, declarations are not equivalent to actual behaviour in an organization, especially under conditions of responsibility, pressure, and conflict of interests (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014).

Sustainable HRM means long-term and responsible people management, including care for employees, participation and dialogue, professional development, flexibility, cooperation, fairness, and equal treatment (Stankevičiūtė & Savanevičienė, 2018). The importance of aligning managerial and employee perspectives is also visible in studies on reward management, where work-life balance has been identified as one of the highly valued factors from the employees' standpoint (Mirhosseini Vakili et al., 2022). Unlike approaches focused primarily on short-term effectiveness, sustainable HRM considers the long-term effects of HR practices on employees, the organization, and its environment (Macke & Genari, 2019).

The quality of direct supervisors' behaviours conditions the actual implementation of these principles. Reducing the risk of potentially toxic behaviours therefore requires both the development of managerial competences and the creation of organizational conditions that enable constructive behaviours to be maintained in demanding situations.

Research Methodology

The study was quantitative, cross-sectional, and exploratory-diagnostic in nature. A diagnostic survey method was applied, and data were collected using an electronic questionnaire. The following research questions were formulated: RQ1. What managerial orientations dominate in respondents' declared reactions? RQ2. In which situations do constructive orientations most often appear, and in which do ambivalent or potentially toxic orientations emerge? RQ3. Does the overall score differ by gender? RQ4. What implications do the results have for sustainable HRM?

The questionnaire was developed on the basis of an online self-assessment tool for managerial behaviours (Chmielewski, 2025). The source tool

does not have the status of a standardized psychological test or a validated measurement scale. Its items were therefore treated as source material for constructing research scenarios referring to situations occurring in team management. The results were not interpreted as a diagnosis of respondents' personality traits or as a measurement of the actual level of toxic leadership. The substantive part of the questionnaire included 18 hypothetical organizational situations concerning, among others, communication and information flow, participation and delegation, employee support, work-life balance (WLB), and reactions to pressure, mistakes, and conflicts.

In each situation, the respondent selected one of four behavioural options (A-D). For the purposes of analysis, the response options were arranged on a four-point continuum on the basis of their content and consistency with the adopted understanding of constructive and potentially toxic managerial behaviours. Values from 1 to 4 were assigned to the responses: 1 denoted a constructive and supportive orientation; 2 denoted an orientation that was generally constructive but situational or not fully consistent; 3 denoted a risky or controlling orientation, or one limiting employee agency; and 4 denoted a clearly destructive or potentially toxic orientation. A lower score therefore indicated a predominance of constructive orientations. Responses assigned the value of 2 were treated as an area of situational ambivalence.

The sample was purposive. Due to the clear predominance of the youngest age group, no comparisons were made by age. Participation in the study was voluntary, and the survey was anonymous. Data analysis included response distributions, measures of central tendency and dispersion, and the mean score from 18 items, treated as an exploratory index of managerial orientations. The index was used only as a synthetic measure of the direction of declared orientations. Internal consistency of the item set was assessed using

Cronbach's alpha (Cronbach, 1951). Differences between women and men in the overall index score were analysed using the non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test (Mann & Whitney, 1947), appropriate for two independent groups. Gender-difference analyses were exploratory in nature.

Research Results

The study included 300 respondents, including 171 men and 129 women. Age information was provided by 276 respondents. The vast majority of this group were respondents under 25 years of age ($n = 264$). All respondents provided complete answers to the 18 substantive questions. Internal consistency of the item set was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. The obtained value of $\alpha = 0.837$ indicates good internal reliability of the tool and allows the total score to be used as an exploratory measure of managerial orientations. However, this result is not equivalent to full validation of the questionnaire used.

A total of 5,400 partial responses were analysed. Response A was selected in 2736 cases, which accounted for 50.7% of all indications. Response B accounted for 40.8% of responses. Options C and D were selected in 7.7% and 0.8% of cases, respectively (Table 1). Thus, declared constructive orientations clearly predominated in the study group, while there was also a large share of orientations in which the course of action depended on circumstances, time pressure, or available possibilities.

The mean value of the exploratory index of managerial orientations was $M = 1.59$, with a standard deviation of $SD = 0.34$. The median was $Me = 1.50$, while individual values ranged from 1.00 to 2.67. The first and third quartiles were 1.33 and 1.79, respectively. The concentration of results in the lower part of the four-point scale confirms the predominance of constructive orientations.

Table 1. Distribution of Responses and Mean Scores in Individual Organizational Situations

Organizational situation	A (%)	B (%)	C (%)	D (%)	M
Reaction to criticism and suggestions	67	28	5	0	1.38
Communicating expectations	64	32	3	1	1.41
Decision-making	58	38	4	0	1.46
Delegating tasks	55	42	3	0	1.48
Reaction to an employee's intention to leave	65	22	13	0	1.48
Reaction to an employee mistake	54	42	2	2	1.52
Respect for private life	52	43	5	0	1.53
Employee ideas and initiatives	53	39	8	0	1.55
Reaction to requests for a pay rise or promotion	48	48	4	0	1.56
Supporting professional development	45	48	7	0	1.62
Reaction to supervisors' mistakes	50	39	8	3	1.64
Behaviour in stressful situations	51	35	13	1	1.64
Work flexibility	43	51	5	1	1.64
Reaction to conflicts	48	41	9	2	1.65
Praising employees	43	49	7	1	1.66
Information management	40	47	12	1	1.74
Organizing team meetings	44	35	20	1	1.78
Time and deadline management	32	55	11	2	1.83

Notes: A - constructive orientation; B - generally constructive but situational orientation; C - risky or controlling orientation; D - potentially toxic orientation. A lower mean indicates a stronger predominance of constructive orientations.

**Source: own research.*

The most constructive responses concerned reactions to criticism and employee suggestions ($M = 1.38$). Response A, indicating careful listening to the employee and appreciating feedback, was selected by 67% of respondents. A further 28% selected response B, and only 5% chose the risky option. The result indicates the declared openness of most respondents to two-way communication.

Constructive orientations also dominated in communicating expectations ($M = 1.41$), decision-making concerning the team ($M = 1.46$), and delegating tasks ($M = 1.48$). Thus, the prevailing approach involved clearly defining goals, leaving employees autonomy, or combining independence with monitoring progress.

A relatively low mean was also recorded for reactions to an employee's intention to leave ($M = 1.48$). The response indicating a conversation about the reasons for the decision was selected by 65% of respondents. At the same time, 13% declared that they would accept the employee's decision without an in-depth analysis of its causes, which indicates that this situation remains an area of partially diversified orientations.

The highest mean value was recorded for time and deadline management ($M = 1.83$). Only

32% of respondents chose the fully constructive option, while 55% selected response B. In addition, 13% chose option C or D. This means that deadline pressure was the situation in which respondents most often moved away from an unambiguously supportive way of managing (Fig. 1).

A high score was also obtained for organizing team meetings ($M = 1.78$). In this case, responses C and D accounted for 21% of indications, the highest share of risky and potentially toxic options among all the situations studied. This result may indicate a limited readiness of some respondents to create a regular space for information exchange and team consultation.

Another area of increased risk was information management ($M = 1.74$). Responses C and D were indicated by 13% of respondents. At the same time, only 40% selected the option corresponding to full information transparency, while 47% made the scope of information shared dependent on the situation.

In stressful situations, responses C and D accounted for 14% of indications. Although 51% of respondents declared that they would remain calm and support the team, more than one third chose a situational response, and some accepted increasing

pressure on employees. A similar pattern was observed in relation to team conflicts.

The results indicate that potentially problematic orientations were not concentrated on openly

aggressive behaviours. They were much more often manifested as situational inconsistency, limiting communication, increasing control, or transferring organizational pressure to employees.

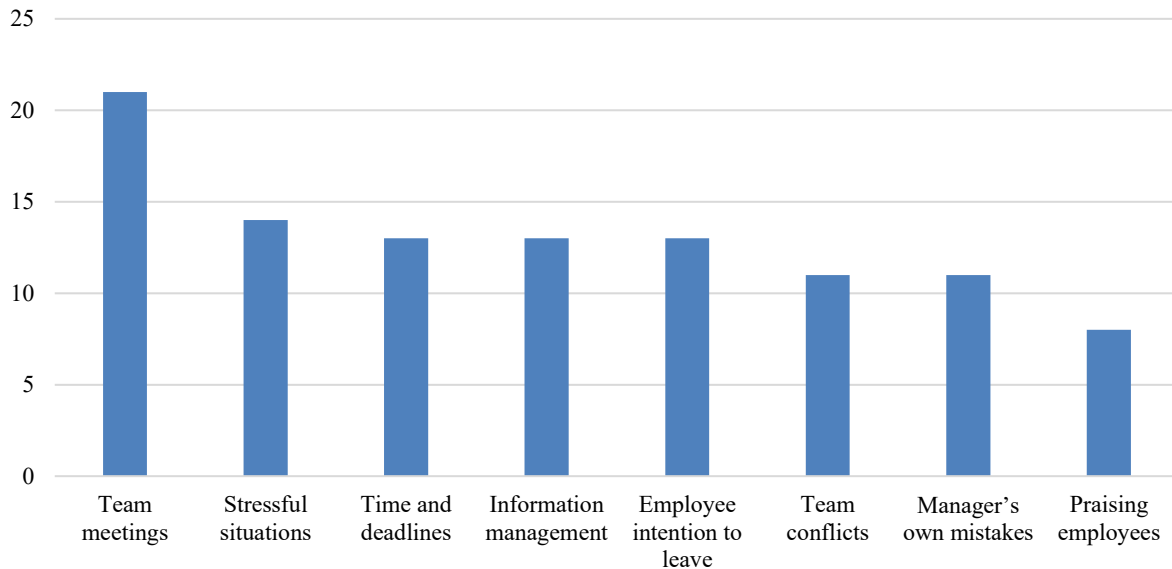


Figure 1. Organizational situations with the highest share of risky and potentially toxic responses

Note: The chart presents the combined share of responses C and D, interpreted as risky, controlling or potentially toxic managerial orientations.

*Source: own research.

The mean value of the exploratory index of managerial orientations was slightly higher among men ($M = 1.64$; $SD = 0.34$) than among women ($M = 1.52$; $SD = 0.34$). However, the Mann-Whitney U test did not indicate a statistically significant difference between the groups: $U = 1499.50$; $p = 0.056$. The rank-biserial correlation coefficient was $r = 0.224$, indicating a small directional difference. The result does not provide grounds for assuming that gender significantly differentiated the overall level of declared managerial orientations in the study sample.

Discussion

The predominance of constructive responses indicates that respondents generally recognize contemporary norms of supportive leadership. Due to the scenario-based and declarative nature of the study, the results cannot, however, be equated with actual managerial competences. The large share of situational responses confirms that orientations do

not form a simple division into constructive and toxic ones but may change under the influence of organizational conditions. This is consistent with approaches emphasizing the role of context in the development of destructive leadership (Padilla et al., 2007).

The greatest ambivalence concerned time pressure, communication, stress, and conflicts. The results are consistent with job demands-resources theory (Bakker et al., 2023), which suggests that demanding conditions may increase the risk of more controlling, defensive, or relationally unfavourable managerial reactions. The results concerning communication are particularly important. On the one hand, respondents declared strong openness to criticism and the need to communicate expectations clearly. On the other hand, less unambiguous orientations appeared with regard to regular meetings and the scope of information shared.

This may indicate a discrepancy between general acceptance of open communication and readiness to

implement it systematically in management practice. Limited information flow and the absence of space for reporting problems may weaken psychological safety, which is an important mechanism linking leader behaviours with wellbeing and employees' willingness to express opinions and concerns (Clarke et al., 2025). From an organizational perspective, therefore, it is important not only to declare openness but also to create stable procedures for communication and feedback.

The relatively positive results concerning delegation, participation, respect for private life, and support for employee development are consistent with the assumptions of sustainable HRM. The results indicate that respondents largely recognize the importance of these practices. This does not mean, however, that constructive behaviours will be automatically maintained under conditions of overload, conflict, or uncertainty.

The results therefore support a broader understanding of the responsibility of sustainable HRM. Reducing the risk of potentially toxic behaviours should not be based solely on the selection of people with desired traits or on training related to the appropriate leadership style. It is also necessary to design working conditions that enable managers to maintain constructive behaviours in demanding situations. This applies in particular to realistic deadline planning, ensuring access to information, clear division of responsibilities, support in conflict resolution, and creating space for regular team communication. Sustainable HRM should therefore combine the development of individual managerial competences with limiting organizational sources of pressure and relationally destructive behaviours.

Conclusions

1. The findings indicate that constructive managerial orientations clearly predominated in the analysed sample. However, the results also show that these orientations are not equally stable across all organizational situations, suggesting that managerial behaviour should be analysed in relation to the context in which decisions are made rather than as a set of fixed individual characteristics.

2. Situations involving time pressure, stress, communication problems, limited information flow, and conflicts generated the highest proportion of ambivalent, risky, or potentially toxic responses. This suggests that demanding organizational conditions may weaken otherwise constructive managerial orientations and increase the likelihood of less supportive behaviours.

3. No statistically significant gender differences were found in the overall managerial orientation index. The results therefore indicate that organizational circumstances appear to be more influential than gender in shaping respondents' declared managerial reactions.

4. The study supports the assumptions of sustainable HRM by demonstrating that responsible people management depends not only on individual leadership competences but also on organizational conditions that facilitate constructive communication, psychological safety, employee participation, and balanced work demands.

5. The study contributes to the literature by extending research on managerial behaviour from the perspective of scenario-based managerial orientations rather than exclusively analysing experienced destructive leadership. It also demonstrates the usefulness of hypothetical organizational situations as an exploratory research approach. From an educational perspective, the findings support the inclusion of scenario-based learning, simulations, and reflective exercises in management and HRM curricula to prepare future managers for decision-making under pressure. For business practice, the results suggest that organizations should complement leadership development programmes with organizational solutions that reduce excessive time pressure, improve communication, strengthen psychological safety, and support sustainable HRM implementation. Unlike most previous studies focusing on employees' perceptions of destructive leadership, the present study explores declared managerial orientations of potential future managers, thereby offering a complementary perspective on the situational determinants of constructive and potentially toxic managerial behaviour.

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