CEO dark triad traits and organization COVID-19 response: the mediating effect of COVID-19 anxiety and moderating effect of follower self-leadership

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Abstract
Purpose – This research aims to examine the influence of Chief Executive Officer (CEO) dark triad traits, follower COVID-19 anxiety and self-leadership on follower evaluations of the effectiveness of organizations’ response to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis.
Design/methodology/approach – In this paper data were collected over two time periods. At time 1, mid-October 2021, 650 participants responded to questions on their CEO’s leadership traits and self-leadership. At time 2, (3-week lag) 275 matched individual responses provided followers’ evaluations of the effectiveness of the organization’s COVID-19 response and follower self-leadership.
Findings – CEO dark triad traits had direct and indirect negative effects on followers’ evaluations of the organization’s COVID-19 response (through COVID-19 anxiety). Follower self-leadership mitigated the negative effects.
Research limitations/implications – By examining the moderating role of self-leadership, we can offer organizations evidence-based strategies to mitigate some harmful effects of leaders exhibiting dark triad traits.
Practical implications – Given that organizations are still dealing with the ongoing ramifications of COVID-19 and planning for future crises, our findings emphasize the negative effects of dark traits on COVID-19 anxiety, and in turn, on follower’s evaluation of effective organization response to a crisis, highlighting the importance of top-level leader selection.
Social implications – Our results bolster Manz’s (1986) argument that self-leadership might be key to achieving peak performance in organizations and important for follower well-being.
Originality/value – This study of dark traits is especially important in a crisis context to understand how leaders affect followers’ perceptions about organizational outcomes and factors that might mediate or moderate the negative impact. Despite interest in understanding leadership during a crisis, the majority of research is focused on positive traits of leaders (Palmer et al., 2020).
Keywords Leadership, Crisis, Dark triad, Self-leadership anxiety, COVID-19, CEO

Beginning in March 2020, the world found itself in one of the most significant crises many have experienced in their lifetime. COVID-19, the disruptive pandemic, left individuals and organizations with many uncertainties adopting new ways of working, balancing work and family demands, and managing health and financial challenges (Sadovyy et al., 2021). The
impact was severe, affecting the overall economy and individuals’ overall well-being, physical health, mental health and work conditions (Sadovyy et al., 2021); and the way this disruption was handled within organizations varied considerably. The responses of organizational CEOs, who serve as chief calibrators for the handling of a crisis, are vital to making swift and adaptive changes (McKinsey and Company, 2020). Because CEO initiatives aimed at adapting to and recovering from crises are enacted by others, it is important to study individuals’ perceptions of their CEOs and their subsequent responses during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis (Kim et al., 2021).

COVID-19 is just one form of the types of crises organizations will have to handle in the future and yet, scholarship on leadership during a crisis remains an under-researched area (Caringal-Go et al., 2021; Hannah et al., 2009). Further, research on leadership during a crisis has predominately examined positive traits of leaders (Palmer et al., 2020). This results in a gap in our knowledge about the role of dark traits in follower perceptions during a crisis (Palmer et al., 2020). With dark leadership being more likely to emerge in a crisis environment (due to it being rife with ambiguity) (Padilla et al., 2007), it is of utmost importance to understand how leaders’ dark traits affect followers’ perceptions about organizational outcomes as well as factors that might mediate or moderate the negative impact. Dark triad traits describe leaders with narcissism (inflated self-views), Machiavellianism (manipulation and lack of concern for others) and psychopathy (disregard for others and social norms) that lead to counterproductive work behaviors and over time harm other members and organizational functioning (Jonason et al., 2015). Conceptually, the dark triad represents a short-term, agentic, exploitative social strategy (Jonason and Webster, 2010); with empirical evidence suggesting that narcissism, psychopathy and Machiavellianism measure a single, latent construct (Jonason et al., 2010; Williams et al., 2021). Hereafter we employ the term dark triad to represent this construct.

While research over the past fifty years has highlighted the role that leadership and CEO personality play in decision-making, organizational strategy and firm performance (e.g., Xenikou and Simosi, 2006), we know relatively little about the micro-processes through which dark traits influence follower perceptions (Palmer et al., 2020). Our aim in this research is to deepen our understanding of the relationship between CEO dark triad traits and followers’ evaluations of the organizational response to a crisis (follower perceptions about the effectiveness of the organization’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis); we also examine the role that sustained feelings of anxiety play and how follower self-leadership strategies might moderate the impact of dark traits. Though followers experience anxiety (an unpleasant emotion reflecting inner turmoil: Seligman et al., 2001; Carnigal-go et al., 2021) during a crisis and in response to stressors such as negative leadership (Pyc et al., 2017), their self-leadership practices could help increase their confidence in facing the challenges. This is because self-leadership is a process in which individuals lead themselves to meet self-set standards using strategies (Manz, 1986; Neck and Houghton, 2006) that are behavior-focused (using heightened self-awareness to manage behaviors of self-cueing, self-observation, self-goal setting and self-rewards), natural rewards focused (building enjoyable aspects of work into activities performed to feel competent, purposeful and self-controlling), and cognitive thought focused (using positive thinking focused on positive outcomes through self-talk, evaluating beliefs and assumptions, and visualizing performance success).

To this end, the purpose of this research is to examine the influence of CEO dark triad traits on followers’ perceptions that the organization’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis was effective. This response captures a range of the microprocesses of followers’ evaluations of an organization’s response to the pandemic for example how well they responded to pandemic restrictions, made decisions, managed changes, communicated proactively and were flexible and empathetic toward employees. Further, we want to understand more about the mediating role that the follower’s state anxiety (situationally
anchored stressor), surrounding the COVID-19 crisis, plays in their overall evaluations of the organization’s response to the crisis. Finally, we examine the moderating role of follower self-leadership on their evaluation of the effectiveness of the organization’s COVID-19 response.

We draw on implicit leadership theory which suggests followers have ideal schemas of their leader; and the congruence between leader behaviors and follower schemas influences their perceptions of a leader’s effectiveness (Magsaysay and Hechanova, 2017). This theory suggests a process in which followers’ negative emotions (COVID-19 anxiety) in response to CEOs’ dark triad traits as well as their self-regulation (self-leadership) will have a potentially heightened influence on their evaluation of how effective the organization was in handling the crisis (Figure 1).

Theory and hypotheses

CEO dark triad traits, COVID-19 anxiety and evaluation of the effectiveness of the organization’s COVID-19 response

Dark triad traits describe leaders with narcissism or entitlement and an inflated self-view with self-orientation; Machiavellianism or being manipulative involving holding a moral outlook focused on the ends rather than the means and lacking concern while exploiting others; and psychopathy or lacking guilt and remorse involves holding a disregard for others and social norms, characterized by antisocial behavior (Koehn et al., 2019; Paulhus and Williams, 2002). Research has suggested leaders that hold dark triad traits exhibit counterproductive work behaviors (Hogan and Hogan, 2001) and that negative impressions of a leader’s personality may carry over to perceptions about their behavior and even influence followers to reject them (Sekiguchi and Huber, 2011). It follows that CEO dark triad traits would influence followers’ perceptions of how effective decisions and responses made during a crisis were.

While Machiavellianism might make someone more likely to adapt quickly (necessary during a crisis), it will likely be to gain benefits for themselves rather than to benefit the organization or employees (Jones and Paulhus, 2009). The narcissism of a CEO might result in overly optimistic bias, feelings of control even in a crisis where there are many unknowns and result in riskier behaviors and lack of communication due to downplaying fears (Lakey et al., 2008). Finally, psychopathy relates to the regulation of impulses and lack of concern for others which may result in quick actions, needless risks and a disregard for others or social norms that might impact employees’ well-being and the overall evaluation of the effectiveness of the organization’s COVID-19 response (Doerfler et al., 2021). This research highlights the possibility that CEOs with dark triad traits might have been more likely to engage in more negative behaviors during the pandemic, influencing followers’ perceptions of inadequate organization responses. Followers’ evaluation of the effectiveness of the organization’s COVID-19 response captures microprocesses of the followers’ evaluations of the response to the crisis.

CEO Dark Triad Traits → Follower COVID-19 Anxiety → Effectiveness of the Organization COVID-19 Response

Follower Self-Leadership

Source(s): Figure created by authors

Figure 1. The theoretical framework
Dark triad traits have been linked with a variety of negative outcomes regarding organizational performance as well as COVID-19 responses. For example, dark triad traits have been linked to a lack of empathy, remorse, disengagement, bold behaviors, lack of self-control, impulsive behaviors and overinflated beliefs of superiority (Jonason et al., 2015). Dark triad traits have been associated with various negative COVID-19 pandemic-related behaviors such as hoarding, lack of social distance and other self-center-oriented behaviors; and being less likely to engage in preventive behaviors (Nowak et al., 2020). As followers observe their CEOs, they will apply their own implicit leadership schemas in evaluating whether the organization’s COVID-19 response was effective. Therefore, we suggest the following hypothesis.

H1. Perceptions of CEO dark triad traits will have a direct negative association with followers’ evaluation of the effectiveness of the organization’s COVID-19 response.

There can be no denying that the COVID-19 pandemic caused immeasurable human suffering globally with high death tolls, individuals feeling isolated and changes in how society operates (Hwang et al., 2020). When individuals are working under unpredictable conditions, especially during an organizational crisis, there is a higher likelihood of negative emotions such as anxiety (Neck and Manz, 1996). Pyc et al. (2017) note that negative work outcomes are considered distal outcomes of job stressors because they develop after repeated exposures to stressors. Individuals experiencing anxiety related to COVID-19 might have been even more critical in their views of CEOs with dark triad traits and the resulting evaluation of the effectiveness of the organization’s COVID-19 response.

Research suggests that COVID-19 worry is related to a more adaptive response from individuals as they perceive the pandemic as more of a threat, predicting greater compliance with restrictions (Monteiro et al., 2022). Therefore, followers with high levels of sustained COVID-19 anxiety might have been more critical of their organization’s COVID-19 responses. Further, CEOs’ destructive leadership, i.e., dark triad traits, might trickle down to lower-level employees as an important psychosocial job stressor potentially exacerbating COVID-19 anxiety. Therefore, dark triad traits will likely have a positive association with COVID-19 anxiety which will, in turn, likely result in a more negative view of outcomes such as the effectiveness of the organization’s COVID-19 response.

H2. Perceptions of CEO dark triad traits will have an indirect negative association with followers’ evaluation of the effectiveness of the organization’s COVID-19 response, through follower COVID-19 anxiety.

CEO dark triad traits, COVID-19 anxiety, self-leadership and evaluation of the effectiveness of the organization’s COVID-19 response

Individuals may exercise self-leadership strategies to be more effective, gain motivation, self-direction and self-discipline (Neck and Houghton, 2006), creating feelings of empowerment and promoting actions that achieve goals and help them reframe their mindset when it is not serving them. Through self-leadership strategies, individuals are better able to influence and control their personal behaviors and motivations as well as their cognitive thoughts (Manz, 1986). Research has focused on how self-leadership enhances how an individual deals with workplace events (Neck and Houghton, 2006) and how self-leadership equips individuals with strategies to persist in the face of challenges and be resilient (Manz, 1986). It should therefore contribute to the ability to better deal with CEOs with dark triad traits, especially during a crisis.

Self-leadership relies on internal rather than external influence. During a time of crisis, (e.g., COVID-19) this may be more important than ever in promoting positive evaluations of one’s job and organization (Bakker et al., 2021). For example, behavior-focused strategies will help individuals find new motivation as changes occur; natural rewards focus efforts to
exercise more autonomy over their rewards, work schedule and progress towards goals; and constructive thought pattern strategies enable individuals to better handle crises resulting in the development of more positive attitudes toward their job (Harari et al., 2021). Self-leadership provides a lens for reframing experiences as changes occur, using self-influence for a more positive outlook on the organization’s response. We, therefore, expect it to mitigate the negative impact of CEO dark triad traits on followers’ evaluation of the effectiveness of the organization’s COVID-19 response.

H3. Follower self-leadership will moderate the negative effect of perceptions of the CEO’s dark triad traits on the followers’ evaluation of the effectiveness of the organization’s COVID-19 response, with weaker effects when high levels of self-leadership are present.

Methods
Participants and procedure
The study was conducted in 2 waves with a national United States (U.S.) Qualtrics panel (Qualtrics.com, 2020) and individual responses were recorded. During data collection, we used screening questions to determine eligibility for participation in the survey and to ensure only participants who were attentive in answering screening questions were included. To be eligible participants had to be U.S. registered voters (as part of a larger study on leadership at the national level), reside in the U.S. be over age 18, be employed on a full-time basis, have worked at their main employing organization for at least 2 years (to ensure familiarity with the organization and its leadership) and were required to have had contact with their organization’s CEO.

At time 1, during late October 2021, 700 participants responded to questions on their demographics, their CEO’s leadership traits and social desirability in responding (SDRS) – after a survey update (5 days into data collection) that added the self-leadership questionnaire, 650 responded about their self-leadership. At time 2 (a 3-week time lag, during November 2021) 302 matched individual responses provided respondents’ repeated feelings of anxiety (early in the survey) and their evaluation of the effectiveness of the organization’s COVID-19 response (late in the survey) and 275 responses were matched to self-leadership. As noted by Schönbrodt and Perugini (2013) a sample size approaching 250 is needed to have a confidence level (power) of 0.80 (a level that is typically used for statistical power analyses, Cohen, 1988).

Over 46% of respondents interacted with their CEO on a weekly basis. The sample was 48% male with a mean age of 41.45 years. Respondents were 71.2% White, and representation of the national population geographic spread by region (based on U.S. Census Bureau data, 2019) was 23.2% for the Midwest, 8.3% for the Northeast, 44% for the South and 24.5% for the West.

Measures
Scale anchors ranged from 1 “strongly disagree” to 5 “strongly agree” when measuring traits, SDRS, and followers’ evaluation of the effectiveness of the organization’s COVID-19 response. For COVID-19 anxiety the anchors ranged from 1 “not at all” to 4 “nearly every day”.

The twelve-item measure of the Dark Triad (Jonason and Webster, 2010) was employed at time 1. The items were adapted so that they referred to “your CEO” rather than “I” to represent CEO narcissism (Tends to seek prestige or status . . .), psychopathy (Tends to be callous or insensitive . . .) and Machiavellianism (Tends to manipulate others . . .). A similar approach is used in previous research on leadership traits to collect reports on perceived traits (Williams et al., 2021). The three dimensions were all highly correlated at 0.87 and 0.91 for Machiavellianism with narcissism and psychopathy; and 0.87 for narcissism with
psychopathy. Similar to other research that has found the 3 dimensions to be indistinguishable in normal samples (Furnham et al., 2013), we present the measure as a single latent construct. The coefficient alpha of reliability ($\alpha$) was 0.94.

The 35-item Self-Leadership measure was employed (Houghton and Neck, 2002) at time 1. This scale asks followers about their use of self-leadership strategies that are behavior-focused (such as “... I establish specific goals for my own performance”), natural rewards (such as “I focus my thinking on the pleasant ... aspects of my job activities”) and constructive thoughts (such as “I use my imagination to picture myself performing well on important tasks”). Given the high correlations between the strategies (0.77–0.85) we used the global representation of self-leadership (a global representation has also been employed by others, e.g. Yun et al., 2006) by using all items for one measure of self-leadership ($\alpha$ 0.96).

The measure of COVID-19 crisis anxiety used was the Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)-7 for assessing generalized anxiety disorder (tendency to feel anxious over a period of time; Spitzer et al., 2006), assessed at time 2. We asked, “At this time during the COVID-19 Pandemic, over the past 2 weeks how often have you been bothered by the following problems?” This captures anxiety symptoms during this period such as “feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge” or “not being able to stop or control worrying” ($\alpha$ 0.96).

A measure of followers’ evaluation of the effectiveness of the organization’s COVID-19 response was developed for this study to capture how well employees perceived the employing organization responded to the pandemic. It is a general evaluation of the way followers perceived the organization’s response to pandemic restrictions and worked with employees as they managed changes. The 6 items were: “My organization did a good job responding to pandemic restrictions”; “My organization made good decisions during the pandemic”; “My organization effectively managed changes due to the pandemic”; “My organization was proactive in communicating with employees during the pandemic”; “My organization was flexible with employees during the pandemic”; “My organization was empathetic toward employees during the pandemic” ($\alpha$ 0.96).

Analysis strategy

We controlled for age, gender, education, CEO gender, and race as they are expected to play a role in performance perceptions as these factors make an individual sensitive to their environment (Ali et al., 2011; Khan and Vieito, 2013; Treadway et al., 2005). Gender was coded “1” for males and “0” for females and race was coded 1 for “white” and 0 for “all others.” SDRS was a final control variable added to address biased response tendencies (Hays et al., 1989; $\alpha$ 0.65).

All variables were computed by calculating the mean of the items comprising each measure and hierarchical regression analyses with SPSS version 28 were used to examine the hypotheses (Dalal and Zickar, 2012). Tests for normality revealed that the data was not normally distributed, so we present our results using bootstrapping procedures with confidence intervals because they do not require restrictive assumptions, such as normally distributed data (Russell and Dean, 2000). The PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2015) was employed to examine indirect effects (Memon et al., 2018).

Results

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations and intercorrelations for the main study variables; they generally exhibited low to moderate between-scale correlations.

Hypothesis 1 was supported, with perceptions of CEO dark triad traits negatively related to followers’ evaluation of the effectiveness of the organization’s COVID-19 response. For hypothesis 2, there was an indirect effect of $-0.02$ for CEO dark triad traits through follower COVID-19 anxiety [CI: $0.06$, $-0.004$]. Supporting hypothesis 3, follower self-leadership moderated
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Age</td>
<td>41.45</td>
<td>12.46</td>
<td>–</td>
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<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Gender</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>–0.03</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Educ</td>
<td>4.23</td>
<td>1.44</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.13*</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. CEO</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>–0.01</td>
<td>0.55**</td>
<td>0.14*</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td>CEO Gender</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
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<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Race</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>0.18***</td>
<td>–0.05</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>–0.04</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
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<td>6. SDRS</td>
<td>3.49</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>0.20**</td>
<td>–0.16**</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>–0.10</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
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<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. CEO DT</td>
<td>2.69</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>–0.28**</td>
<td>0.25**</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.16**</td>
<td>–0.16**</td>
<td>–0.51**</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. COV. Anxiety</td>
<td>2.13</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>–0.35**</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>–0.07</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>–0.02</td>
<td>–0.34**</td>
<td>0.36**</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>–</td>
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<td>9. SL</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>–0.07</td>
<td>0.22**</td>
<td>0.16**</td>
<td>0.22**</td>
<td>–0.10</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.20**</td>
<td>0.20**</td>
<td>0.96</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. COV. Response</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.14*</td>
<td>–0.02</td>
<td>–0.02</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>–0.13*</td>
<td>–0.18**</td>
<td>0.34**</td>
<td>0.93</td>
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</table>

**Note(s):** Overall N = 302. N = 275 for Self-leadership. Reliabilities appear on the diagonal. COV. = COVID-19; DT = Dark Triad; SDRS = Social Desirability in Responding; SL = Self-Leadership; COV. Response = Evaluation of the Effectiveness of the Organization’s COVID-19 Response *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01

**Source(s):** Created by authors

Table 1. Means, standard deviations and intercorrelations among variables.
the relationship between CEO dark triad traits and followers’ evaluation of the effectiveness of the organization’s COVID-19 response. There was a weaker negative relationship when followers reported high levels of self-leadership (Table 2, Alternate step 2; Figure 2). Simple slope: +1 standard deviation (SD): $b = -0.06$ $p = 0.51$; at −1 SD: $b = -0.29$ $p < 0.01$.

**Discussion**

This research extends the literature on leadership in extreme contexts, investigating CEO dark triad traits during a crisis, the role of anxiety around it and the possible mitigating role

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>$B$</th>
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<th>$p$ (95% CI)</th>
<th>$R^2$</th>
<th>F-Change</th>
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<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.75 (−0.01, 0.01)</td>
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<td>Gender</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.54 (−0.16, 0.31)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.01 (0.02, 0.16)</td>
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<td>CEO Gender</td>
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<td>0.38 (−0.36, 0.14)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>−0.05</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.68 (−0.27, 0.17)</td>
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<td>Social Desirability</td>
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<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.08 (−0.01, 0.25)</td>
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<td>1.70</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Step 2 (H1)</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>CEO Dark Triad</td>
<td>−0.09</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.048 (−0.18, −0.001)</td>
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<td><strong>Step 3 (H2)</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>(CEO Dark Triad)</td>
<td>(−0.07)</td>
<td>(0.05)</td>
<td>(0.14) (−0.16, 0.02)</td>
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<td>COVID-19 Anxiety</td>
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<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.01 (−0.26, −0.03)</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>6.20*</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Alternate Step 2 (H3)</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>CEO Dark Triad (CDT)</td>
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<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.00 (−1.19, −0.35)</td>
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<td>Self-Leadership (SL)</td>
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<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.94 (−0.32, 0.34)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CDT *SL</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.00 (0.26, 0.02)</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>19.07**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2.** Results of regression analysis for followers’ evaluation of the effectiveness of the organization COVID-19 response (with dark triad)

**Note(s):** N = 275 for Self-Leadership (SL). Statistical significance is highlighted in italic face. *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01

**Source(s):** Created by authors

![Figure 2](source)

**Figure 2.** Interaction plot of dark triad traits and self-leadership (SL)

**Source(s):** Figure created by authors
of self-leadership. Results of the study indicated that CEO dark triad traits had a direct negative association with followers’ evaluations of the effectiveness of the organization’s COVID-19 response. The examination of dark triad traits has predominantly focused on CEO narcissism and firm performance (Palmer et al., 2020); however, within this research, we present the negative influence of CEO dark triad traits on a micro-level outcome – followers’ evaluations of the effectiveness of organization response to a crisis. Additionally, we studied how followers’ COVID-19 anxiety mediated this relationship. Finally, we found that follower self-leadership weakened the negative influence that CEO dark triad traits had, mitigating their negative effects.

**Theoretical implications**

We make significant contributions to the existing body of literature in several ways. First, we contribute to the literature on leadership in extreme contexts, by exploring the relationships during an ongoing crisis and examining the role of anxiety surrounding the crisis (Caringal-Go et al., 2021). Second, studying dark leadership traits is vital for our understanding of perceptions during crises because it is during such periods that dark leadership is more likely to emerge due to chaos and uncertainty in the environment (Padilla et al., 2007). The COVID-19 pandemic provided an opportunity to study the negative influence of CEO dark triad traits on followers’ evaluation of the effectiveness of the organization’s COVID-19 response (during the crisis). Understanding this is critical to developing a more thorough understanding of CEO influence, especially in a crisis situation (Barney and Felin, 2013; Palmer et al., 2020). The current study results indicated that CEOs with dark triad traits negatively impacted followers’ evaluation of the effectiveness of the organization’s COVID-19 response. As implicit leadership theory suggests, followers’ leadership schemas represent an ideal leader and because dark triad traits are not ideal, they are a detriment to perceived effective crisis response. Research suggests that dark triad traits may be higher among top leaders of an organization and more likely to emerge during a crisis (Babiak and Hare, 2006; Chatterjee and Hambrick, 2011; Landay et al., 2019; Palmer et al., 2020). This is important because top executives may be more likely to influence decision-making processes and other important workplace behaviors. Third, research on leadership during a crisis has focused on positive leadership traits (Palmer et al., 2020), but with dark personality being perhaps more prevalent during crises, continued examination of the dark triad traits of leaders during a crisis is warranted. Therefore, this study answers the calls for research to advance our understanding of CEO personality by examining the less researched dark personality traits and going beyond narcissism by examining the full complement of dark triad traits (narcissism, Machiavellianism and psychopathy).

Further, we examined what follower variables may influence this relationship by examining followers’ anxiety and self-leadership. Individuals who are experiencing anxiety appear to be more critical of a CEO with dark triad traits and in their resulting evaluation of the effectiveness of the organization’s COVID-19 response. However, it appears that those who exercise self-leadership responded less negatively to the CEO’s dark triad traits. We contribute to self-leadership literature by examining its influence in aiding employees amid a crisis, being led by a CEO with dark triad traits. By examining the moderating role of self-leadership, we can offer organizations evidence-based strategies to mitigate some harmful effects.

**Practical implications**

By identifying the negative relationship between CEO dark triad traits and followers’ evaluation of the effectiveness of the organization’s COVID-19 response as well as the impact of follower anxiety and self-leadership, our results provide practical implications for
organizations wishing to identify what may be effective or not in a crisis. Given that
organizations are still dealing with the ongoing ramifications of COVID-19 (e.g., challenges of
hiring and retaining good employees) our findings emphasize the negative effects of dark
traits on COVID-19 anxiety, and in turn, on followers’ evaluation of effective organization
response to a crisis. This highlights the importance of top-level leader selection.
Organizations might focus early on during hiring or promotion to screen for leaders with
high levels of dark triad traits. This can be done through background checks, 360-degree
feedback and addressed with a strong focus on ethical leadership (Kwak and Shim, 2017).

While the focus should be on addressing CEO dark triad traits, it is important for
organizations to strive to aid employees as well. Because our results highlighted the role of
COVID-19 anxiety in the relationship between CEO dark triad traits and followers’
evaluations of the effectiveness of the organization’s COVID-19 response organizations
should also focus on effective interventions to aid followers. For example, organizations could
employ mindfulness programs which have been shown to reduce anxiety and intrusive
thoughts (Banfi and Randall, 2022). Emotional intelligence training is also especially effective
for those prone to anxiety (Sadovyy et al., 2021). Further, our results bolster Manz’s (1986)
argument that self-leadership might be key to achieving peak performance in organizations
and important for follower well-being (in our sample, organization COVID-19 response and
well-being were correlated 0.41). These findings suggest that organizations might focus on
providing self-leadership training as a vital Human Resource management tool for
empowering employees, especially during crises. As our findings highlight the role of self-
leadership in mitigating the negative effects of dark triad traits on followers’ evaluation of
effective organization COVID-19 response, interventions should target participants to help
them develop high levels of self-leadership. Ensuring these employees get adequate add-on
training and support to foster their self-leadership strategy usage may be important.

Strengths, limitations and future research
Strengths of the research include capturing follower responses about their CEO – we screened
participants to ensure that they had served with the CEO for at least 2 years. Limitations
include potential for common method variance and data collected from a single source; this,
however, was somewhat mitigated because we controlled for SDRS and collected responses
from across the geographic regions of the U.S. to address generalizability concerns. We also
separated the collection of the data over two time periods to understand the influence of traits
on follower crisis-related anxiety and perceived outcomes. While we capture follower
perceptions of leaders’ dark traits and evaluate the organization’s COVID-19 response, future
research might investigate news reports or CEO speeches that depict leader traits and more
objective measures of organization response or performance. Given, our efforts to capture
responses across geographic regions of the U.S. we did not identify CEOs or their
organizations. Multisource data collected in organizations can also be used in future research
to address these limitations. We only captured self-leadership at time 1 of our data collection
and this limited our ability to report the role it might also play in mitigating the effects of
COVID-19 anxiety on followers’ evaluations of the organization’s COVID response.

Given that future research will likely continue to explore the way that top leaders in
organizations handled the COVID-19 crisis, this is an important first step in investigating
how followers viewed organizational responses – about 50% of our sample indicated that
COVID-19 influenced the way they viewed their CEO and over 70% indicated that their job
was affected by the pandemic. Heroic forms of leadership such as charisma and resilient traits
are important to motivate followers during a crisis (Williams et al., 2021) with less research
focusing on coping strategies used by followers. More research can investigate how to
mitigate negative influences (such as CEO dark traits and self-focused leadership) during a
crisis, including individual coping strategies beyond self-leadership such as stress management or emotional self-regulation. Future research might also address organization training and flexible adaptation of work schedules, locations (e.g., the hybrid workplace) and resources provided to understand the role of managers and organization flexibility in managing crises and promoting follower well-being.

Conclusion
The current study suggests that while negative CEO traits and follower anxiety have a negative influence on the way organizational responses are perceived, follower capabilities are important for mitigating these challenges. Self-leadership involves followers’ processing visual models into cognitive models to guide future actions, learning by observing and self-regulation (Harari et al., 2021). Over the past 15 years, we have seen a multitude of global crises (the great recession, COVID-19 and the war between Russia and Ukraine for example), and our hope is that this study might help organizations build resilience in employees, so they are better able to handle difficult situations, disruptors and global crises that occur in the future. We encourage further research exploring the roles of CEO traits, leadership influence and follower capabilities in responding to organizational crises.

References


**Further reading**


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