

The Manipulation Dilemma: Leadership Pitfalls in a Post-Pandemic Workplace

ABSTRACT

Through the lens of a global perspective, this article examines the concept of manipulative leadership within human resources development, highlighting the challenges posed by evolving leadership styles and generational differences in the post-pandemic workplace. While leadership is traditionally viewed as a means of influencing collaboration towards shared goals, manipulative practices shift the dynamics, often undermining long-term motivation and organisational performance. Our article emphasises that effective leaders cultivate reciprocal relationships, while less effective leaders utilise manipulative tactics that are primarily self-beneficial in nature, which can have detrimental effects on workplace culture and employee engagement. We also examine the unique challenges that are associated with generational differences that exist in the modern workplace, and raises questions about how organisations can balance short-term pressures with the need to build sustainable, trust-based leadership models, especially in a world still grappling with the aftermath of COVID-19. We conclude with critical strategies for proactive steps that organisations can take in order to mitigate leadership practices that are detrimental.

KEYWORDS: Leadership, COVID, manipulation, generational, human resources, trust

Manipulative leadership is far from a new concept within human resources development field. At its core, leadership involves influencing followers to achieve shared objectives, yet the methods leaders employ can vary significantly. From transactional to transformational approaches (Hoch et al., 2018), leadership is often described as the art of influencing collaboration towards a common goal (Northouse, 2021). Research consistently underscores that effective managers guide their teams by cultivating reciprocal relationships among leaders, followers, and peers (Pearce, 2024). However, when leadership crosses into manipulation, the dynamics shift. Less effective managers often resort to coercive tactics to compel action, which may deliver quick wins or temporary results but carry long-term consequences that are far more complex and damaging for individual motivation and organisational performance (Lopez, 2020). Notably, research has demonstrated that employees' perceptions of inclusion impact a variety of critical workplace outcomes, such as commitment, performance, turnover, citizenship behaviour, and job satisfaction (e.g. Acquavita et al., 2009; Avery et al., 2008; Cho & Mor Barak, 2008; Downey et al., 2015; Nishii, 2013; Nishii & Mayer, 2009).

This raises a pressing question: How can organisations and their leaders balance short-term pressures with the imperative to build sustainable, trust-based leadership models? More importantly, what proactive measures can be taken to identify, address, and ultimately avoid the pitfalls of manipulative practices in the workplace? Why are these questions so urgent now? The post-pandemic era adds an additional layer of complexity. Organisations have been forced to rethink how we work, communicate, and collaborate or, in some cases, revert to pre-pandemic norms (Nachmias et al., 2022). Although the pandemic may now feel like a distant memory, its lingering effects on workplace culture remain a critical consideration. The fast-paced and

unpredictable nature of the current environment often hinders reflection, leaving little opportunity to examine whether COVID-19 has normalised certain manipulative behaviours initially adopted as crisis responses. Are we perpetuating habits rooted in control and power within the fragile, hybrid working structures born of the pandemic? If such behaviours persist, do we have the necessary knowledge to confront and resolve manipulative behaviour effectively?

In navigating the uncertainties of today's workplace, we feel compelled to address these questions and raise awareness across the broader community. Organisations must grapple with their shared responsibility for shaping a healthier, more resilient culture. Now is the time to critically assess how leaders can evolve to meet the demands of a post-pandemic world, free from the shadow of manipulative practices. Our hope is to also raise awareness and contribute to the current debate about the role of human resource development in enhancing organisational practices.

Leadership challenges: management, manipulation and abusive supervision

In the post-COVID business world, effectively managing employees has become more complex. Even though technological advances have made means of communication more plentiful, the worldwide workforce has changed (Hite & McDonald, 2020). Partial and fully remote work has exploded, and it is much more common for organisations to manage remote employees from across the world (Li et al., 2020; Pass & Ridgway, 2022). Not only does this potentially inject regional and cross-cultural differences into managing a team, it also means that managers are being asked to motivate and lead virtually. Most existing, best practices regarding management prescribe actions that are most effective in-person (Chatterjee et al., 2022). Nevertheless, the pandemic has required leaders to find novel means of overseeing and managing their teams, some of which they may have never met in-person. Organisations expect managers to get work done through others despite the challenges precipitating from COVID-19. This pressure placed on managers can often lead them to engage in manipulative behaviour to achieve their goals. Whereas there exist mutually beneficial approaches towards effective shared leadership (Pearce, 2024), many leaders opt towards opportunistic approaches that primarily benefit themselves over the greater good of their subordinates, their corresponding team, and even the greater organisation that they are part of (Maner & Mead, 2010; Ng & van Duinkerken, 2021). Others exercise abusive supervisor behaviour. Abusive supervision is when 'subordinates' perceptions of the extent to which their supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviours, excluding physical contact' (Tepper, 2000, p. 178). This is a type of leadership behaviour that has the tendency for leaders to humiliate and mistreat a follower and degrades a follower's status as a valuable and appreciated organisational member (e.g. Ambrose et al., 2002; Cropanzano et al., 2001; Cohen, Lind, & Tyler, 1989; Tyler et al., 1996). This type of abusive and unfair treatment is riddled with disrespect and hostile aggression. It should inherently violate the needs of belongingness and uniqueness being affirmed, which undermines the experience of organisational inclusion (Shore et al., 2011). A commonly accepted definition is that manipulation is about influencing someone so that she or he does not know the intention of the manipulator (Wrong, 1979). In this article, we understand manipulation as a discursive means used by managers for the purpose of the concealed influence of employees.

Manipulative management practices

In order to address future challenges, we need to understand common sources of manipulative management. Our work highlights three increasingly prevalent coercive managerial practices: weaponising the concept of the team player, minimising transparency, and treating human capital as a commodity. The nature and consequences of each manipulative managerial practice are discussed with the expectation that these behaviours can be recognised and attenuated as they are recognised in organisations. We attempt to tackle pressing issues that are often overlooked in discussions about leadership effectiveness, but also proposing recognition and attenuation strategies to foster a healthier, more equitable leadership approaches. We also attempt to explore whether the challenges of the ‘new’ work environments might exacerbate these practices due to the increased pressure to enhance performance.

Weaponizing the concept of a team player

Manipulative leaders may rely on intimidation tactics (Lukacik & Bourdage, 2019) to coerce employees who challenge their directives, creating ripple effects that extend beyond the targeted individual to the broader team (Mawritz et al., 2012). The concept of the ‘team player’, traditionally viewed as a positive attribute, has increasingly been weaponised by managers to isolate and pressure employees (Lauby, 2014). By labelling an employee as ‘not a team player’, manipulative leaders exploit coercive intimidation (Lukacik & Bourdage, 2019) and normative pressure (Keerasuntonpong et al., 2018) to erode the individual’s credibility and morale. Even when an employee’s dissent is valid, this tactic stigmatises the person, branding them with a metaphorical ‘scarlet letter’ that undermines their standing within the team. In such instances, leaders implicitly communicate that the targeted employee’s behaviour is a threat to team cohesion and success. This creates a toxic environment where other team members may unjustly perceive the individual as a hindrance to collective goals, potentially leading to ostracism. The situation is exacerbated if the leader’s trusted inner circle amplifies these perceptions, reinforcing the isolation of the targeted individual (Varma et al., 2022).

Hybrid work environments further intensify these challenges. The physical and emotional distance inherent in virtual work (Mynarek & Jahr, 2024) reduces opportunities for organic interactions and social cues that traditionally foster camaraderie and understanding (Xanthopoulou et al., 2009). We argue that this diminishment of daily informal communication makes it easier for manipulative leaders to weaponise the ‘team player’ label without significant pushback. Victims of this practice may struggle to defend themselves effectively in a setting where visibility and connection are already compromised. The hybrid model also places additional strain on managers, who must navigate the complexities of balancing organisational and employee needs in a flexible but often fragmented environment (Asatiani et al., 2021). While the success of such models depends on both managerial adaptability and employee resilience, limited socialisation opportunities can make it harder for teams to counteract manipulative behaviours. In this context, co-workers may lack the familiarity and rapport necessary to recognise or challenge a leader’s coercive tactics.

Ironically, managers who exploit the concept of the team player risk undermining the very group cohesion they seek to enforce. Informing team members about the leader’s manipulative tactics

can rally support for the targeted employee, potentially fracturing the group and diminishing trust in the leader. This loss of trust can escalate into a toxic culture where employees increasingly challenge the leader's authority, regardless of the merit of their initiatives. Such environments significantly hinder a manager's ability to motivate and influence their team effectively (Maner & Mead, 2010; Schmid et al., 2018). The negative impact of this manipulative practice is particularly pronounced for newer generations of employees. Those with full-time work experience prior to COVID-19 may possess the contextual knowledge needed to identify and navigate coercive management behaviours. However, employees who lack such experience, especially recent graduates or entry-level hires, are more susceptible to manipulation. They may struggle to contextualise such behaviours or feel alienated when labelled as 'not a team player'. This can lead to increased turnover, disrupting the organisation's entry-level talent pipeline and impairing its ability to retain fresh talent.

Minimizing transparency

Another common manipulative tactic employed by leaders is minimising transparency (Ng & van Duinkerken, 2021). While certain information, such as confidential data or personal details, may be justifiably withheld for legal or ethical reasons, withholding information to manipulate subordinates into compliance can be detrimental. Some leaders choose to share only the minimum amount of information on a 'need to know' basis, despite evidence suggesting that transparency enhances team performance. Research shows that the more information shared between managers and employees, the better the overall performance of the team (Maner & Mead, 2010). Information is a key tool for empowering employees and helping them understand their leader's motivations. When transparency is lacking without a valid reason, subordinates may begin to question the leader's intentions, and projects may be executed improperly or remain incomplete (Ng & van Duinkerken, 2021). The consequences of non-transparency are significant: subordinates are likely to create their own theories about the lack of clarity surrounding the tasks they are given, often leading to confusion and a lack of trust (Bennis et al., 2008).

These issues are compounded in the increasingly virtual workplace. The saying 'you don't know what you don't know' encapsulates the challenge of communication in most organisations, particularly as virtual work reduces the frequency of in-person interactions (Shockley et al., 2021). Without the ability to observe and engage with employees daily, we argue that managers must make a concerted effort to maintain open lines of communication. In virtual settings, communication issues can easily go unnoticed until they manifest in problems. Nevertheless, withholding information may initially seem advantageous, especially if the leader is delegating tasks that they perceive as mundane or undesirable. This tactic may be particularly evident when leaders delegate tasks under the guise of 'leadership' even though no formal title or responsibility has been assigned. For example, if a leader finds it inconvenient to manage the differing schedules of team members, they may pass this responsibility onto a subordinate, presenting it as a leadership task despite there being no formal 'team leader' role. Such situations can escalate quickly, as subordinates may begin to speculate about the leader's true motives, leading to the spread of either accurate or baseless rumours about their lack of transparency. This lack of clarity and openness can erode trust, damage morale, and undermine a leader's effectiveness (Pass & Ridgway, 2022).

It may be the case that managers who worked before the pandemic assume that employees possess certain knowledge and abilities that were commonly understood in pre-COVID office settings. In a traditional in-person work environment, gaps in knowledge or skills were typically identified and addressed through direct interaction and managerial oversight (Chatterjee et al., 2022). However, the shift to virtual and hybrid work arrangements has changed this dynamic. Managers can no longer assume that employees possess the same contextual knowledge or experience, especially given the significant disruptions in education, training, and professional development caused by the pandemic (Li et al., 2020).

Human capital as a commodity

Finally, leaders who view their subordinate team members as disposable and replaceable pose a threat to any organisation (Maner & Mead, 2010). Evidence suggests that modern organisations should prioritise the understanding that their greatest competitive advantage often lies not in their products or services, but in the human resources they employ (Harbert, 2021). In a loose labour market, manipulative leaders may come to see employees as mere cogs in a machine, easily replaced (Babiak, 2015). While this mindset is less likely to emerge in a tight labour market, when the labour market becomes more favourable, employees treated poorly are more likely to seek new opportunities. Leaders who treat employees as commodities may experience short-term gains, but they are likely to face long-term losses in employee retention (Schmid et al., 2018). For example, it is not uncommon for organisations to resort to layoffs to boost short-term profits when sales are underperforming (Keum & Meier, 2024). While shareholders may benefit in the immediate term, such strategies are rarely well-received by employees or consumers. The practice of treating employees – human capital – as expendable can have detrimental long-term effects on an organisation's culture and reputation (Schyns & Schilling, 2013). Team members who feel dehumanised by their leaders are more likely to experience burnout, disengage from their work, lose motivation, and ultimately resign (Lagios et al., 2021).

Moreover, poor leadership that prioritises short-term organisational gains at the expense of employee well-being can also lead to more severe consequences, such as whistleblowing (Gip et al., 2023). If not handled properly, these situations can result in costly litigation, damage to public relations, and strained relationships with stakeholders and consumers. This form of manipulative leadership is particularly dangerous because it can prompt the departure of employees who possess rare and valuable skills and knowledge that cannot easily be replaced (Schyns & Schilling, 2013). The COVID generation, in particular, may be more sensitive to these issues. Having experienced increased emotional distance from teachers and supervisors due to the virtual nature of education and work during their formative years, this generation may have a lower level of organisational commitment compared to previous generations. With virtual work environments removing many of the physical constraints of traditional office settings (Nachmias et al., 2022), entry-level employees may care less about the specific organisation they work for and more about who can offer the highest compensation. If organisations fail to actively demonstrate an employee's value and create a culture of trust, they risk losing the loyalty of this emerging workforce.

The ‘challenge’ of generational differences

The managerial landscape is increasingly complicated by a growing generational gap in the work and life experiences of individuals entering the workforce. We argue that this is a significant source of tension between generations in the workplace as it pertains to management and leadership. These areas not only influence workplace dynamics but are also influenced by fundamental differences across generations regarding retention strategies, values, motivation, work style preferences, and perceptions of leadership itself. The definition of what constitutes a good leader has evolved with each generation, often leading to conflicts when new generations enter an organisation (Arsenault, 2004). One of the most profound shifts in these generational expectations has been driven by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which altered how work is done and how employees interact with their leaders. Whereas manipulative leadership practices, those characterised by intimidation, coercion, or manipulation of subordinates, should never have a place in the workplace, there is increasing evidence that leadership expectations are shifting, especially among newer generations. The pandemic accelerated changes in work environments, particularly with the widespread shift to remote work. These changes have influenced the values and expectations of younger employees, especially Generation Z, who may have had little to no exposure to traditional, in-person, full-time work environments prior to the pandemic.

For many recent college graduates, their first full-time work experiences were shaped by the abrupt transition to virtual and hybrid work environments. Rather than having the typical in-person exposure to managers and co-workers, these employees navigated a work world defined by virtual meetings, emails, and distant interactions. The lack of face-to-face socialisation and real-time feedback has impacted how Generation Z interacts with their work and how they view leadership (Burbano & Chiles, 2022; Ghosh et al., 2013; Mynarek & Jahr, 2024). This shift has become so ingrained that it may be challenging for existing managers and organisations to fully understand or adapt to the altered expectations of this emerging workforce.

Research conducted by McGaha (2018) identifies several key traits that Generation Z seeks in a leader, revealing their clear preferences for certain leadership qualities. According to McGaha, Generation Z values leaders who are: (1) strong and effective communicators, (2) committed to fostering a positive and inclusive workplace culture, (3) emotionally intelligent, (4) mentors who provide ongoing support and guidance, (5) engaged and approachable, (6) highly competent, and (7) advocates for equality in all forms. These attributes align closely with the principles of transformational leadership, a style that emphasises inspiring and motivating employees, rather than merely overseeing their compliance with tasks. In fact, McGaha’s research suggests that Generation Z is far more inclined towards transformational leadership than the more traditional transactional approach, which is often characterised by leaders focusing on rewards and punishments to drive employee performance. Further research by Grow and Yang (2018) supports these findings, indicating that Generation Z places a high value on leaders who exhibit fairness, confidence, soft skills, and an open-minded, approachable demeanour. Interestingly, 77% of the Generation Z respondents in their study expressed a preference for having a Millennial manager over one from Generation X or the Baby Boomer generation. This preference may be partly explained by Millennials’ greater familiarity with technology and their generally more flexible and inclusive leadership styles, which tend to align more closely with the

expectations of Generation Z. As the workplace continues to evolve in response to technological advancements and global events like the pandemic, understanding the implications of leadership behaviour, the appropriateness of effective leadership and the impact of manipulative thinking to emerging generations, such as Generation Z, is crucial.

Thinking forward

To navigate the evolving challenges in leadership dynamics, organisations must stay proactive in addressing manipulative behaviours, particularly those arising from coercive practices or a lack of transparency. If left unchecked, such behaviours can erode organisational culture, diminish employee engagement, and hinder retention – an issue that remains unresolved in many industries and sectors. Therefore, it is crucial for organisations, especially those operating in hybrid and remote environments, to implement proactive measures to prevent these manipulative tactics from taking root, fostering a healthier and more transparent work culture. This should have been the norm, not merely an expectation.

One of the most effective strategies for mitigating these issues is to prioritise best practices in the recruitment, selection, and retention of ethical and empathetic leaders. Research shows that cultivating a workplace culture that actively discourages manipulative leadership is not only vital for minimising conflicts between leaders and subordinates but also for ensuring long-term organisational health. Leaders who demonstrate ethical conduct, emotional intelligence, and inclusivity can build an environment where trust, collaboration, and employee loyalty thrive (Harvey et al., 2009; Marquardt, 2005; McLean, 2017; Varma et al., 2022).

Equally important is the role of transparency in leadership. Managers must be clear and open with employees, especially new hires, about their roles, expectations, and areas for growth. Without access to necessary information, employees may struggle with skill or knowledge gaps that go unnoticed, eventually impacting the organisation's performance. This issue becomes even more critical in hybrid and remote settings, where the lack of face-to-face communication can obscure vital concerns. Thus, managers must take a proactive approach, providing ongoing support and clarity, especially to remote workers. By keeping employees informed and empowering them to address potential problems before they escalate, organisations can prevent costly mistakes and improve overall productivity.

To combat high levels of dissatisfaction and turnover, organisations must ensure that their managers make a concerted effort to build meaningful connections with their employees. Whereas this might seem like a natural, logical approach to management, it is especially important with Generation Z. This generation seeks more than just technical expertise from their leaders; they desire leaders who engage with them, demonstrate empathy, and foster an inclusive, positive work environment. Organisations that fail to meet these expectations risk increased turnover, disengagement, and difficulty in retaining top talent. These shifts in leadership preferences are not just theoretical; they have tangible, real-world implications for organisations. As Generation Z continues to enter the workforce, their expectations will increasingly shape leadership strategies and organisational practices. We strongly believe that organisations that fail to adapt their leadership models to meet the needs of younger employees may struggle to retain talent, drive high performance, and build long-term loyalty. Therefore, managers must

understand that traditional leadership approaches, particularly those involving manipulative or coercive behaviours, are no longer effective in engaging and motivating the new generation of workers. Adapting to these changes is not optional; it is essential for both organisational success and long-term survival.

In light of these evolving expectations, investing in leadership development programmes that emphasise transformational leadership, emotional intelligence, and mentorship will better equip managers to meet the needs of Generation Z and other employees working in modern workplace environments. As leaders shift away from transactional and manipulative tactics towards more supportive and inclusive styles, they will be better positioned to build resilient, high-performing teams. While this may not be a new concept for many academics and practitioners, the challenge now lies in responding more effectively to the developmental needs of future leaders.

Leaders who treat employees as mere commodities rather than valuable assets risk losing high-performing individuals, which can lead to a loss of trust, job satisfaction, and organisational loyalty, factors that have serious consequences for the company (Caesens et al., 2019; Lagios et al., 2021). This is neither a new suggestion nor a new phenomenon. However, the distinction here lies in the fact that manipulative leadership tactics, framed within the context of human capital, have wide-reaching implications across industries and organisations of all sizes. Therefore, further research is needed to explore the darker side of leadership tactics, examining how manipulative behaviours impact organisational outcomes and employee well-being. Such research will provide valuable insights for both academics and practitioners, helping to shape more ethical and effective leadership strategies moving forward.

Our paper argues that, in contrast to the historical use of manipulative leadership tactics that may have provided short-term gains, modern organisations must carefully evaluate the risks associated with such approaches. In an era of instantaneous global communication and easy access to information, employees are more aware of manipulative behaviours and may quickly expose them, leading to significant reputational damage. Therefore, human resource development professionals should not merely act as passive observers or ‘critical friends’ in this transformational journey but must take a leading role in designing and enforcing protocols for the recruitment and selection of leaders who prioritise the well-being of their subordinates and the broader organisation. It is equally important that current leaders receive training on the long-term consequences of manipulative tactics, including employee burnout, disengagement, and legal challenges.

Conclusion

We aim to raise awareness of manipulative leadership and highlight the critical role of human resource development in fostering healthier, more resilient workplace cultures. The challenges arising from generational differences in leadership expectations, coupled with manipulative leadership practices, require immediate attention from both organisations and academics. By prioritising transparency, empathy, and transformational leadership, organisations can cultivate environments that promote trust, loyalty, and high performance. For academic researchers, further exploration of these topics will be essential in shaping the future of leadership theory and practice, guiding organisations through an increasingly complex and diverse workforce. Whereas

we are not asserting that manipulative leadership practices are on the rise in post-COVID workplaces, the consequences of manipulative leadership have become more complex post-pandemic (Shirmohammadi et al., 2022), alongside the increased need to examine the impact of hybrid work. We extend our understanding of leadership development and behaviours in the workplace and provide a critical perspective to the human resource development community, offering insights that can support positive actions and changes in the future.

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