

Destructive Leadership in Sport: Reimagining the Toxic Triangle

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How to cite this paper: Tietjen-Smith, T. M., Roberts, S. G., & Blount, H. N. (2025). Destructive Leadership in Sport: Reimagining the Toxic Triangle. *Open Journal of Leadership*, 14, 664-686. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ojl.2025.144031>

Received: November 11, 2025

Accepted: December 21, 2025

Published: December 24, 2025

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Abstract

Sport is replete with examples of leaders who push the boundaries of ethical leadership. The concept of toxic, or destructive, leadership has been extensively discussed in the fields of business, politics, and the military, but not as greatly in the sports industry. The applicability of the Toxic Triangle (Padilla et al., 2007) model is discussed and expanded in the context of sport. The three parts of the model include destructive leaders, conducive environments, and susceptible followers. Adaptations to the Toxic Triangle in all three areas of the model are highlighted and analyzed, and a new version of the model, Toxic Triangle of Sport Management (TToSM), is proposed.

Keywords

Toxic Leaders, Followers, Integrity, Sport Corruption, Conducive Environments

1. Introduction

For an industry reliant on the concept of *ceteris paribus*, or all things being equal, the integrity of sporting competition is of crucial importance (Costa et al., 2025). Believing that athletes are competing without the assistance of performance-enhancing substances (PEDs), not playing to lose, or that executives and officials are making fair and rational decisions, is vital to the long-term sustainability of the industry. This belief attracts many stakeholders to sport, including media organizations that invest millions of dollars in covering live events, sponsors who seek to be associated with the industry's biggest and brightest stars, athletes who train for years in the hopes of making it to the proverbial big time, and fans who devote time and resources to following their favorite teams.

Despite this idealized view, sport has had a history of corruption (Roberts & Bolton, 2018). In recent years, however, the integrity of some of the sport indus-

try's leading international governing bodies has repeatedly been questioned. Historically, the media has been rife with reports of corruption within some of sport's most powerful organizations. Some examples include the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA, e.g., [U.S. Department of Justice, 2015, 2022](#)), Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI, e.g., [U.S. Anti-Doping Agency, 2012](#)), International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF, e.g., [World Anti-Doping Agency, 2023](#)), and International Olympic Committee (IOC, e.g., [McDowell & Maniece, 2021](#)). In large sporting organizations (e.g., IOC, FIFA), many officials have been accused of systematically accepting bribes to award contracts and hosting rights for major tournaments and competitions, as well as manipulating voting processes in Executive Board elections. Some of these officials have been indicted by United States (US) federal authorities and other international entities for that behavior, and other criminal activities, such as wire fraud, money laundering, and racketeering. These indictments have led sponsors to decide against renewing contracts with organizations, due to continuing investigations and allegations of corruption by those in power ([Naby, 2017](#)).

Track and field and cycling both have histories tarnished by reports of the use of illegal PEDs, leading to extensive discussions about testing and sanctions. Indeed, officials accused of accepting bribes to award hosting and construction rights for some of sport's biggest events and allegedly covering up systematic doping programs have led to international investigations, indictments, and arrests ([Roberts & Bolton, 2018](#)). Although much of this behavior is conducted by individuals (e.g., athletes, officials, individuals in positions of governance), the environment is such that this activity is tolerated and, in some cases, facilitated by those in positions of power. For instance, the mechanisms used to manage the use of PEDs or other forms of corrupt behavior in sport seem to largely reflect "the attitude of the political body [or, in this context, a sport's governing body] toward this problem" ([Tanzi, 1998: p. 575](#)), particularly those in positions of authority and responsibility, or leadership.

Thus, the focus on those in positions of leadership within sport provides the context for this paper. In particular, examples of what may be deemed as destructive or toxic leadership frame the discussion here. This concept has been discussed extensively in extant literature (e.g., [Fraher, 2016](#); [Krasikova et al., 2013](#); [Lipman-Blumen, 2010](#)), primarily focusing on the contexts of business (e.g., [Mehta & Maheshwari, 2013](#); [Pelletier, 2010](#)), politics (e.g., [Bostock, 2010](#); [Heppell, 2011](#)), and the military (e.g., [Dagless, 2018](#); [Gallus et al., 2013](#)). This focus has not yet been widely analyzed in the sports industry.

2. Destructive Leadership

Leadership has been defined as "the office or position of a leader; capacity to lead; the act or instance of leading" ([Merriam-Webster, n.d., para. 1](#)). In the organizational leadership literature, leadership has been defined in several different ways with no true consensus. For instance, [Selznick \(1984\)](#) and [Kollenscher et al. \(2018\)](#)

defined a leader as “one who shapes the organization’s purpose and works to realize it by defining policies and building the means for this realization through the institutional embodiment of the purpose and policies embedded in the organizational structure” (p. 20). [Winston and Patterson \(2006\)](#) revealed an integrative definition of a leader as

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)

[Asrar-ul-Haq and Awar \(2018\)](#) defined leadership as “a power relationship which exists between the leader and the followers” (p. 180). Most definitions of leadership share commonalities, such as influence, power over others, and transformation.

Many people argue that leadership is primarily a positive construct ([Kellerman, 2004](#)). Conversely, various forms of leadership have been classified as destructive in several contexts, including the political, business, and military areas. The concept of toxic, or destructive, leadership has been attracting more attention in recent years ([Krasikova et al., 2013](#)). Other terms used to describe this type of leadership include abusive supervision, bullying, incivility, and tyranny ([Reed, 2014](#)). This increased attention has led to three fundamental issues in the study of destructive leadership. As identified by [Krasikova et al. \(2013\)](#), these issues are as follows:

(a) the lack of a unified definition of ‘destructive’ leadership that would clarify boundaries of the construct and distinguish it from the related phenomena, (b) a multiplicity of constructs used to describe the phenomenon of ‘destructive’ leadership... and, (c) the lack of a unified theoretical framework based on a shared understanding of what destructive leadership is and what it is not. (p. 1309)

One of the significant issues with clarifying boundaries of destructive leadership is the continuum of how negative leader behavior may be viewed, ranging from ineffective or incompetent leadership to behaviors seen as unethical or evil ([Kellerman, 2004](#)). Many different terms are used to describe actions by individuals who would fit within potential parameters of destructive leadership behavior ([Einarsen et al., 2007](#)): terms like bullies ([Namie & Namie, 2000](#)), abusive supervisors ([Tepper, 2000](#)), derailed leaders ([Shackleton, 1995](#)), petty tyrants ([Ashforth, 1994](#)), psychopaths ([Furnham & Taylor, 2004](#)), and intolerable bosses ([Lombardo & McCall, 1984](#)). Even among these terms, the definitions vary significantly from “hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors” ([Tepper, 2000: p. 178](#)) that do not extend to physical contact to “someone who uses their power and authority oppressively, capriciously, and perhaps vindictively” ([Ashforth, 1994: p. 126](#)). The same issues

may be raised when considering the concept of toxic leadership, one that overlaps with conceptualizations of destructive leadership but could be seen as a potentially more damaging form of leadership behavior (Pelletier, 2010). Lipman-Blumen (2010) defined toxic leadership as “a process in which leaders, by dint of their destructive behavior and/or dysfunctional personal characteristics inflict serious and enduring harm on their followers, their organizations, and non-followers, alike” (p. 1). Toxic leadership has also been defined as “the cumulative effect of demotivational behavior on (follower) morale and climate over time” (Reed, 2004: p. 64).

When considering destructive leadership, much research focuses on repeated and systematic behaviors (Einarsen et al., 2007). The environment in which these leaders operate may allow this type of behavior not only to manifest but to infiltrate an organization’s culture. Historically, the same may be said in politics. For example, Adolf Hitler has, historically, been viewed as a destructive leader, through years of manipulation and oppressive leadership that changed a nation’s perspective of the outside world (Wistrich, 1995).

Powers et al. (2016) found four characteristics of destructive leadership:

(a) it is seldom absolutely or entirely destructive; (b) it involves control and coercion rather than persuasion and commitment; (c) it focuses on the leaders’ individual objectives and goals, as opposed to the needs of constituents and the larger social organizations; and (d) it produces organizational outcomes that compromise quality of life for constituents and detracts them from their main purposes (p. 307-308).

In a study of a Division I intercollegiate athletic department in the US, the authors found leadership and environmental factors that contributed to a toxic environment. Through interviews, they identified that the cause of the toxicity included “the university’s lack of internal and external checks and balances, a president who centralized control, and an absence of effective athletic department leadership” (p. 297). The authors also found “follower repercussions” including “avoidance of the athletic director, keeping opinions to oneself, and adherence” (p. 297). Followers sought to avoid controversy and the possibility of being fired.

Lipman-Blumen (2005) described toxic leaders as “generat(ing) a serious and enduring poisonous effect on the individuals, families, organizations, communities, and even entire societies they lead” (p. 1). The author posited that many of us live with grand illusions and that leaders who have grand illusions attempt to conceal them as noble visions. Thoroughgood et al. (2010) referred to destructive leadership as aversive leadership. The researchers recommended examining other factors such as gender, organizational climate, finances, and follower perceptions. They stated that aversive leadership is “a form of destructive leadership based on coercive power” (p. 647). Johnson (2014) suggested that moral disengagement of followers allows toxic leaders to succeed. Additionally, Hinrichs (2007) believed that individuals who felt confident in themselves as being good leaders would be more likely to follow toxic leaders and engage in unethical behaviors. Mehta and

[Maheshwari \(2013\)](#) found that the more toxic leadership behaviors are exhibited in the workplace, the less overall job satisfaction reported by employees. This lack of job satisfaction also predicted a lack of organizational commitment.

Several qualities have been attributed to toxic leaders, including narcissism ([Sankowsky, 1995](#)), charisma, and authoritarianism ([Lipman-Blumen, 2005](#)). Other adjectives include poisonous, incompetent, careless, or reckless ([Lipman-Blumen, 2005](#)), but despite these attributes, many toxic leaders continue to flourish. Much of this is due to the people who hire them and others who follow them.

[Sankowsky \(1995\)](#) described a psychological construct known as symbolic status. Symbolic status is similar to transference. One example of transference is where clients think of their psychologists or counselors as parental figures; symbolic status, in this case, is “the tendency for followers to tacitly regard leaders as parent figures, a tendency that becomes pronounced in the presence of charismatic leaders” (p. 57). Symbolic status tends to lead followers to “unquestioningly obey an unethical leader” ([Hinrichs, 2007: p. 69](#)). Destructive leaders tend to capitalize on symbolic status and use it to further their own agendas at the expense of others. Followers may then do things that they normally would not do because of the perceived power relationship. The results of this unethical behavior are called crimes of obedience (p. 69), where followers put responsibility for the results of their actions onto the leader (i.e., displacement of responsibility), thus absolving themselves from guilt. They may do this through moral disengagement, telling themselves that morals and/or ethics do not apply in certain situations, allowing them to excuse unethical or immoral behavior and absolve themselves of responsibility ([Johnson, 2014](#)). Individuals with less power (e.g., lower social status) are more susceptible.

A famous example of this phenomenon occurred during [Milgram’s \(1974\)](#) psychological studies, where most participants delivered perceived electric shocks to another person just because they were told to do it. Socialization, hierarchies, and obedience to authority were some of the reasons given for those who succumbed. Other rationalizations for normally ethical people exhibiting unethical behaviors include diffusing responsibility, disregarding consequences, dehumanization, and attribution of blame ([Johnson, 2014](#)).

[Thoroughgood et al. \(2018\)](#) posited that a broader definition of leadership is needed and that we spend too much time focusing on the qualities and influence of leaders without examining other factors. The authors believed leadership “is a dynamic, co-creational process between leaders, followers, and environments, the product of which contributes to group and organizational outcomes” (p. 627). While various models and frameworks exist that could be used to underpin the discussion of toxic leadership in the sports industry, the work of [Padilla et al. \(2007\)](#) and the Toxic Triangle framework provided the theoretical foundation for this research. The mechanics of this model are discussed in this paper. The applicability of the model to the sport context is analyzed. A reimagined version of the Toxic Triangle is then presented.

3. Examining the Toxic Triangle

The Toxic Triangle was developed using political leaders Fidel Castro and Adolf Hitler as case examples. Padilla et al. (2007) acknowledged the “confluence of leader, follower, and environmental factors” (p. 176) that facilitate the existence of toxic leadership, while also recognizing the lack of a consistent and overarching definition of toxic leadership, as discussed earlier in this paper. They sought to address this perceived gap in knowledge by seeking to define destructive leadership, providing a theoretical context and measures to analyze the environmental factors that lead to or facilitate such behavior. The confluence of the three factors facilitating toxic leadership (i.e., destructive leaders, susceptible followers, conducive environments) allowed for a triangle as the most suitable way of pictorially representing that relational dynamic. Each of the three factors represents a vertex of the two-dimensional shape (see Figure 1).

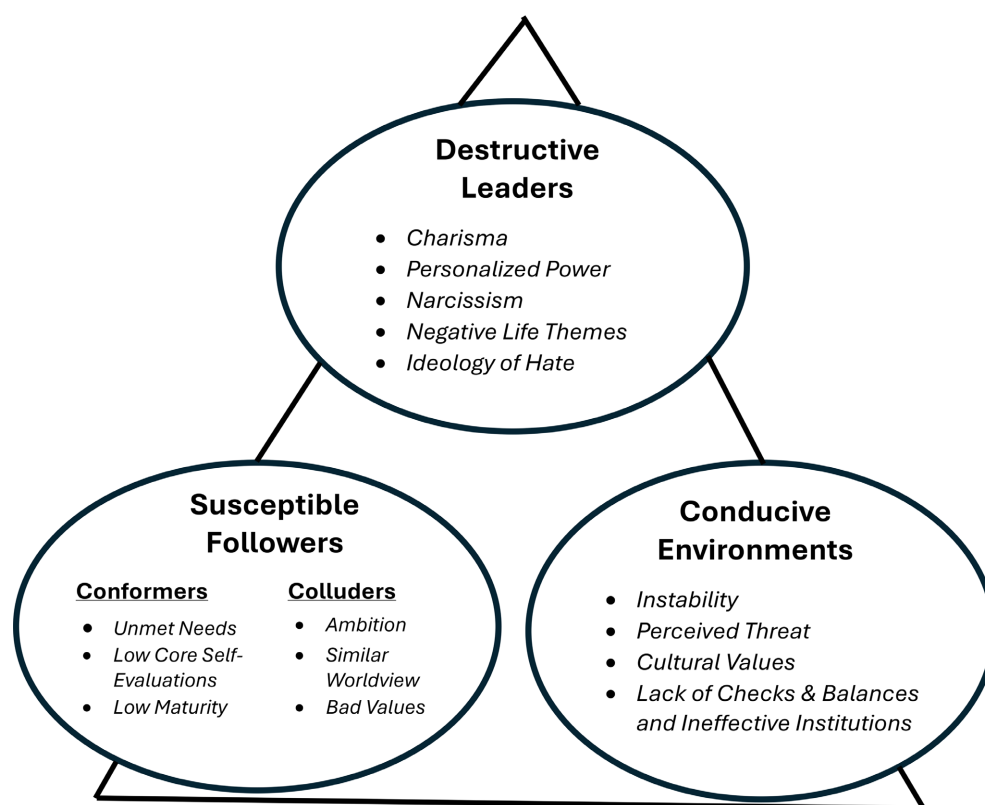


Figure 1. The toxic triangle (Padilla et al., 2007—reprinted with permission from the authors).

3.1. Destructive Leaders

The first of the three vertices of the triangle is focused on destructive leaders. Padilla et al. (2007) identified five characteristics of destructive leaders—charisma, personalized power, narcissism, the existence of negative life themes, and an ideology of hate—each of which was clearly demonstrated by Castro and Hitler, who, as previously discussed, provide the contextual background for the development of the original model.

3.1.1. Charisma

Charisma, as identified in the extant literature (Conger, 1990; Howell & Avolio, 1992), is a central characteristic of leadership, both constructive and destructive, although it seems to be a common factor exhibited by toxic leaders. “Not all charismatic leaders are destructive, but most destructive leaders are charismatic” (Padilla et al., 2007: p. 180). For example, charismatic leaders, including individuals such as Winston Churchill and Theodore Roosevelt, were effective in positive ways, although not without mistakes along the way. On the other hand, some political and religious leaders, such as certain cult leaders (e.g., Shoko Asahara, Jim Jones, David Koresh) were able to influence and manipulate their followers because they were charismatic: people listened when they spoke and believed in what they had to say because of the way they delivered their message (Burns, 1978; Padilla et al., 2007). As a result, these leaders were able to exaggerate “positive achievements and take unwarranted credit... cover up mistakes and failures... blame others for mistakes... and limit communication of criticism and dissent” (Yukl, 1999: p. 296). Charisma seems to be a necessary skill in the sports industry. One example is the ability of leaders to deflect when stakeholders (e.g., media) have access to stories that might bring an organization into disrepute.

Padilla et al. (2007) suggested that three components of charisma apply to destructive leaders. First, destructive leaders may influence followers to invest in their vision of a future that meets their apparent needs, enhancing their personal power. Second, impression management is key – being able to speak well and present oneself in a manner befitting the role as a leader strengthens this perception, regardless of the format (e.g., in person, social media). For example, many famous (and infamous) leaders, including John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., as well as Hitler, exhibited excellent oratorical skills and could speak to millions of people seemingly without hesitation (Padilla et al., 2007). House and Howell (1992) suggested that “consistent with their selfish orientation, destructive leaders are typically self-promoting and concerned with building support for themselves rather than pro-social causes” (p. 181). Third, energy levels are an important dynamic of charisma, one displayed by many toxic leaders. When Hitler spoke to hundreds of thousands of people, he did so with volume and vigor, drawing people to him.

3.1.2. Personalized (Need for) Power

The need for personalized power is important in distinguishing between ethical and destructive leaders (Padilla et al., 2007). Coercion or manipulation may be used to impose the views, opinions, and goals of a destructive leader on a population. Control may then be exerted to ensure that opposing views may not be heard. Adolf Hitler coerced a population into believing in his plan for Germany and the world, attempting to recover from defeat in World War I. He reminded Germans of their supposed elite heritage, capacity for building bridges and highways, and contributions to music and the arts worldwide. The use of propaganda mixed with truth became a principal component of the 1936 Olympic Games, which became

known as Hitler's Games. Hitler attempted to show the world a strong and united country with superior facilities and superior athletes, as well as a nation capable of visual and aesthetic intimidation (U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, USHMM, 2025a).

Destructive leaders “describe dissidents or rivals in terms designed to devalue and isolate them while promoting in-group solidarity” (Padilla et al., 2007: p. 181). Hitler demonstrated this in his portrayal of the Jewish communities (USHMM, 2025b). Again, destructive leaders tend to try to devalue the role of stakeholders (e.g., media) who may uncover the depth of their corrupt behavior. In the sports context, FIFA executives blackballed prominent British journalist Andrew Jennings for that very reason. Much of Jennings' work had been focused on shining a light on some of the darker dealings of FIFA. As a result, he was banned from press conferences, vilified through press channels within the organization, and even spat at by Executive Council members in order to protect what could be deemed as personalized power (Padilla et al., 2007).

3.1.3. Narcissism

This personalized need for power may lead to a sense of entitlement, in that the destructive leader becomes self-absorbed and self-centered. The construct of narcissism has been studied for over a century and “appears to be primarily driven by self-enhancement sensibilities...but lacks the concern for others” (Braun, 2017: p. 2). Research (Braun, 2017; Yakely, 2018) has supported narcissism as a personality trait, but a lack of consensus exists on whether it is good or bad. According to Freud (1914), narcissism is a normal part of childhood development. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychological Association (APA), 2013) originally defined narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) as “a pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or behavior), a constant need for admiration, and a lack of empathy, beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts” (part 301.81). Narcissistic individuals generally present with at least five of the following criteria:

- (1) grandiosity and self-importance; (2) persistent fantasies of success, power, attractiveness, intellectual superiority or ideal love; (3) sense of superiority and specialness; (4) wish to be admired; (5) strong sense of entitlement; (6) manipulate and exploit others; (7) lack of empathy; (8) believe others are envious of them and envy of others; (9) arrogant and contemptuous attitude and behavior. (part 301.81)

3.1.4. Negative Life Themes

Padilla et al. (2007) identified negative life themes as a characteristic of “a destructive leader, reflecting the extent to which the leader had a destructive image of the world and his or her role in the world” (O'Connor et al., 1995: p. 539). Throughout history, many of the leaders deemed destructive, like Hitler and Castro, were subjected to abusive childhoods and other distresses, contributing to a negative life theme. This childhood abuse may or may not be the case when sport leaders are

considered.

3.1.5. Ideology of Hate

The final characteristic of a destructive leader is the ideology of hate—the desire to “vanquish rivals and destroy despised enemies” (Padilla et al., 2007: p. 182). Hitler, Castro, Stalin, Mussolini, Ceausescu, and other destructive leaders reviled certain sections of society (e.g., Jews) and took action accordingly. Whereas sport competition is generally based on wanting to be the best, destructive leaders in sport do not appear to use hate as a motivator. This characteristic of the Toxic Triangle does not necessarily fit into a discussion about destructive leaders in sport.

3.2. Destructive Leaders (In the Sport Context)

In reimagining the Toxic Triangle for application in the sports context, three characteristics of the destructive leaders’ vertex of the original Toxic Triangle applied to individuals in positions of power or leadership in sports organizations: charisma, personalized power, and narcissism. As previously stated, the applicability of the areas of negative life themes and ideology of hate is questioned, and alternative characteristics are suggested here to underpin the behavior of those exhibiting destructive or toxic leadership within the context of sport (see Figure 2).

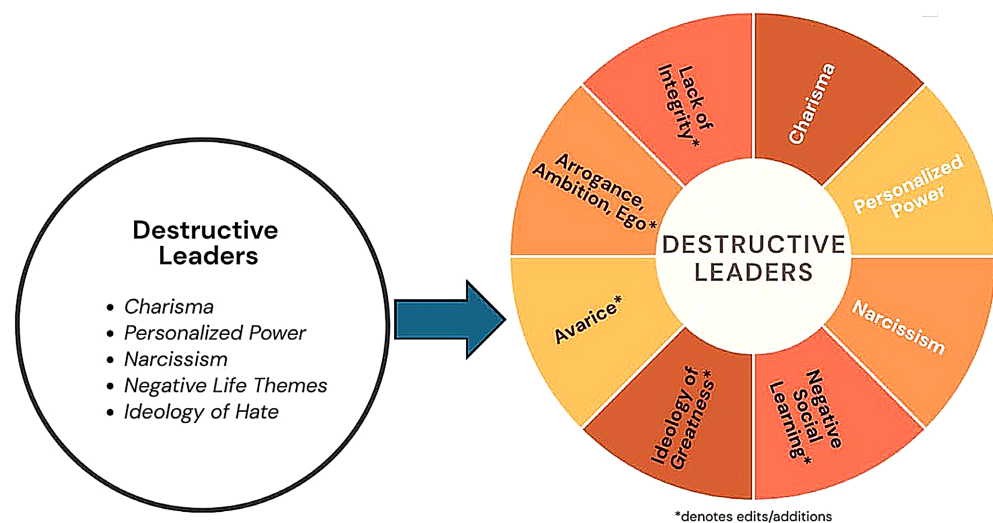


Figure 2. Changes to destructive leaders vertex from original toxic triangle.

3.2.1. Negative Social Learning

Rather than negative life themes, the concept of negative social learning is proposed. Bandura’s social learning theory posits that people learn by watching others (i.e., role modeling) (Stuart-Hamilton, 2007). Even when the behavior being learned is perceived as negative, it is reinforced and therefore becomes the norm. In sport, many leaders acquire their leadership style from others already in the field that they hope to emulate. The toxic environment may have already been established. For instance, an assistant coach may follow the example set by a head

coach, even when this example is unethical. The assistant coach views the coach as successful and seeks to emulate the same characteristics and behaviors. Another example would be a rookie player imitating negative behaviors exhibited by other, more experienced players, or even role models. This is an example of negative social learning, as the rookie player exhibits unethical behaviors by emulating a model.

3.2.2. Ideology of Greatness

Whannel (1992) suggested that “like other forms of entertainment, sport offers a utopia...Sport entertains, but may also frustrate, annoy and depress. But it is this uncertainty that gives its unpredictable joys their characteristic intensity” (p. 199). Athletes compete to win, nations seek to be World Champions, and governing bodies may compete for sponsorship revenue, media coverage, and fan loyalty. A win-at-all-cost mentality may underpin the actions of destructive leaders in the sports industry. Moreover, fans tend to view rival teams in relation to who is better than the other. The term hate might be used to describe the feelings associated with that rivalry, but the behaviors that accompany the designation of hate (e.g., trying to eradicate a particular race or gender) would probably not manifest (Paddilla et al., 2007).

One example of this mentality was the Major League Baseball (MLB) sign-stealing scandal. The Houston Astros staff used technology to steal signs from opposing teams. Then, they relayed their findings to their team during the game. The cheating was ultimately blamed on the environment created by the general manager, although it was executed by the coaching staff (Clasberry, 2023).

3.2.3. Avarice

The concept of avarice refers to “extreme greed for wealth or material gain” (Oxford University Press, 2005: para. 1). Money is a major factor in sport, and many leaders take advantage of that by putting money before people. Senkbeil (2016) stated that “where there is greed, there is avarice... and where there is avarice, there will be corruption” (p. 114). Most toxic leadership behaviors that have been evidenced in the sports industry in recent years have been as a result of the pursuit of personal material gain, a fundamental concept of corruption in sport (Gorse, 2014). Some overlap exists with narcissistic individuals. For instance, avarice may be exhibited by a narcissistic individual, but not all narcissistic individuals exhibit avarice. Thus, the concept of avarice is presented as a separate characteristic.

3.2.4. Arrogance, Ambition, and Ego

Arrogance, ambition, and ego are also presented as separate characteristics from narcissism, even though a narcissistic person may exhibit these traits. Arrogance, ambition, and ego may be differentiated from narcissism in that narcissism is part of a broader pattern including an enduring need for admiration, weak self-esteem, and a noted lack of empathy. Arrogance is the outward behavior of superiority. Narcissism is a deeper personality trait that masks the need for external validation and ego-boosting (Lipman-Blumen, 2010).

Individuals who display the traits of arrogance, ambition, and ego “put their own sustained power, glory, and fortunes above their followers’ well-being” (Lipman-Blumen, 2010: p. 4) and seek to blame others for problems due to a lack of insight into themselves. The entire doping culture in cycling in the 1990s and early 2000s was largely blamed on one rider (i.e., Lance Armstrong), despite the evidence of widespread doping across the sport and the lack of effective mechanisms within cycling to address PED use (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2012).

3.2.5. Lack of Integrity

Lack of integrity is a fundamental issue facing sport governance today. Integrity, in this case, refers to “the quality of being honest and having strong moral principles” (Lipman-Blumen, 2010: p. 4). When leaders lack integrity, lines may become blurred between right and wrong, leading to issues of trust.

3.3. Conducive Environments

Padilla et al. (2007) identified four universal environmental factors that are important for destructive leadership to occur in the wider political context: instability, perceived threat, cultural values, and *lack of checks and balances and ineffective institutions*.

3.3.1. Instability

Toxic leadership “is more likely to emerge in times of instability in the social, organizational, or political environment” (Mulvey & Padilla, 2010: p. 61), where leaders may better build and strengthen power and control and may advocate “radical change to restore order” (Padilla et al., 2007: p. 185). In sport, however, this is not necessarily the case. Toxic leaders may thrive due to prolonged security and the overwhelming desire for those in positions of power to maintain the status quo. Moreover, as suggested again by Padilla et al. (2007: p. 185), “shrewd leaders may exploit fluid and transient structures closed to external scrutiny.” While the fluid and transient structures might not always be evident, being closed to external scrutiny is one of the most significant issues in the governance of international sport organizations.

Many stakeholders typically do not want to know in advance who will win a race or game. As previously stated, for an industry reliant on the concept of *ceteris paribus*, or all things being equal, the integrity of sporting competition is of crucial importance. Anything that either publicly undermines this integrity (e.g., failed drug test) or exposes behaviors by leaders conducted behind closed doors (e.g., bribery) may be perceived as threats to the status quo.

3.3.2. Perceived Threats

Perceived threats, which might allow a leader to “create and heighten the perception of an external or internal threat in order to gain more power” (Mulvey & Padilla, 2010, p. 62), do not typically arise in the same way in a sports organization. Padilla et al. (2007) discuss how these perceived threats could take the form of

desperate economic or social situations in countries like Iran or an organization facing a hostile takeover or pending bankruptcy. Arguably, nonprofit sports organizations (e.g., UCI, FIFA) should never go bankrupt. International competitions, as well as multi-billion-dollar sponsorship agreements with some of the world's largest organizations, provide a consistent and substantial revenue stream.

3.3.3. Cultural Values

The cultural values of an organization or society, as well as the conduciveness of the environment, are critical to the success of a toxic leader. [Mulvey and Padilla \(2010\)](#) suggested that “in a collectivistic society or organization, leaders have the potential to have greater influence because they operate in an environment in which followers may think of group, organizational, or societal need before their own self-interests” (p. 63). Major sporting governing bodies have clear societal objectives as part of their corporate plans (e.g., [National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2021](#)).

3.3.4. Lack of Checks & Balances and Ineffective Institutions

The fourth factor—a lack of checks and balances and ineffective institutions—may certainly be applied to the sports industry. In business and management literature, the term discretion has been utilized to describe an environment where managers or leaders are free to do their job without having to deal with, or answer to, organizational constraints ([Finkelstein & Hambrick, 1990](#)). Many leaders would thrive in this situation; however, those with more toxic tendencies might use this as an opportunity to abuse or strengthen their power. Without effective checks and balances, also known as monitoring and punishment, this chance to abuse one's position only becomes more enticing. Some of the world's largest and most powerful governing bodies may have few real checks and balances in place despite attempts to enact them ([Philippou & Hines, 2021](#)).

One example of this is the World Cup bidding scandals. Russia and Qatar were awarded as hosts of the World Cup in 2018 and 2022, respectively. An investigation by the US Department of Justice found that “a lack of effective external regulation allowed a toxic culture of unethical behavior to become entrenched over decades.” The US Justice Department and the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) arrested fourteen FIFA officials due to “wire fraud, racketeering and money laundering” ([Nadkarni, 2017: para. 1](#)). The US Justice Department found a serious lack in oversight with a concentration of power given to a small executive committee, and “a culture of corruption” ([Gill et al., 2019: p. 1044](#)).

3.4. Conducive Environments (In the Sport Context)

Of the four characteristics identified by [Padilla et al. \(2007\)](#) as those that constitute a conducive environment for toxic leadership, three apply to the sport context: perceived threat, cultural values, and the lack of checks and balances and ineffective institutions. While acknowledging that instability is part of many industries, the term supercomplexity more accurately describes this environment. Another characteristic includes recognizing the power of external constituents, or stake-

holders (see [Figure 3](#)).

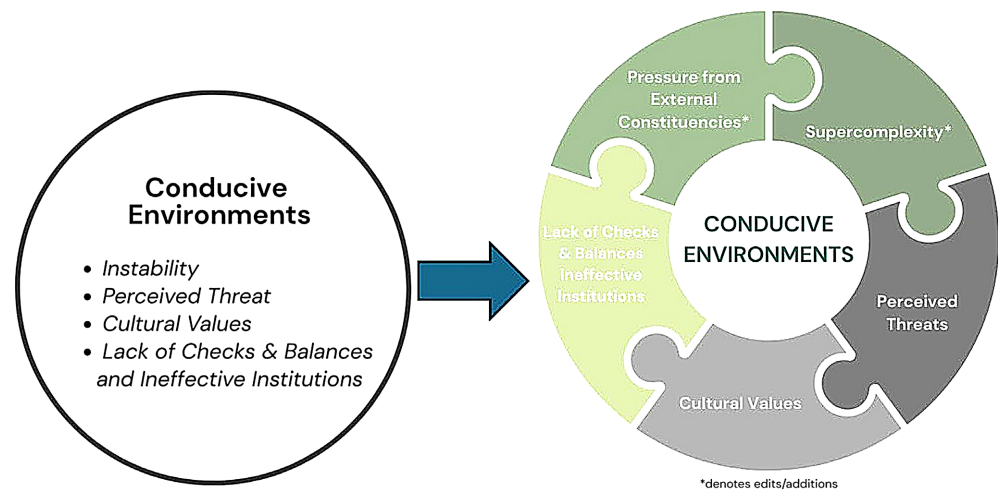


Figure 3. Changes to conducive environments vertex from original toxic triangle.

3.4.1. Supercomplexity

A term previously applied to universities, supercomplexity refers to uncertainty and unpredictability, including constant change (Barnett, 2000). Lipman-Blumen (2010) described it as “the uncertain, disorderly world in which we all live. As humans, we face non-stop uncertainty, change, turbulence, and crises” (p. 7). Sports organizations are changing as quickly as technology, public opinion, money, politics, and other stakeholders will allow, thus presenting a much more complex environment than in the past. Supercomplexity has been compounded by recent events such as the pandemic.

The global sport environment operates across different cultures, political systems, and social norms. Policies on everything from amateur status to anti-doping rules vary and may influence decisions related to what is acceptable. Changing technology and artificial intelligence raise ethical concerns and affect how the public views and experiences sport. For instance, using technology (e.g., artificial intelligence (AI), specialized video systems) to referee an important game or to review replays could affect the ultimate results of some high-stakes matches. AI may make mistakes just like humans do, and reliance on this technology adds another layer of complexity to the referee process (Dowsett, 2024).

When one federation makes a change, this change may disrupt other sport entities in various ways, from training regimens to eligibility. Political tensions and global events may impact individual athletes, events, sport integrity, and ultimately human rights. For instance, eligibility decisions made related to political sanctions on individual countries and the resulting sport sanctions on athlete participation may affect the livelihoods of several stakeholders (e.g., coaches, athletes, consumers, federations/associations). Decisions based on trans. athlete eligibility to compete have varied across sports and sport organizations. For instance, World Rugby banned trans. women, while other organizations such as World Athletics have guidelines around testosterone levels. The IOC has implemented new guide-

lines, but the ultimate decision is made by each sport's international organization (Elsesser, 2024).

Ultimately, the increased pervasiveness of misinformation online, including on social media, may cause a multitude of challenges to the future of sport. One example occurred during the 2024 Paris Olympics when Algerian boxer Imane Khelif beat Italian boxer Angela Carini. False claims spread across social media that Khelif was a biological male or trans. This event coincided with international concern with trans. and sport participation as well as being used as a political weapon in many elections (Kakouris, 2024).

3.4.2. Pressure from External Constituencies

So many different types of external constituencies, or stakeholders, have a vested interest in the long-term success and sustainability of sport. Media organizations invest major resources into televising and reporting sports at many levels (e.g., professional, intercollegiate). Sponsors spend millions of dollars securing official partnership status and leveraging these relationships, and fans devote many hours to supporting their favorite teams, athletes, or home nations. These constituents have their own objectives related to sport and sporting competition. For instance, media organizations want close contests with lots of action to encourage viewers to stay tuned; fans want their teams to win; and sponsors rely on the visibility of athletes, teams, events, and leagues to enjoy the benefits of image spillover in the eyes of target market consumers (Cliffe & Motion, 2005; Ferrand & Pages, 1999).

The lengths stakeholders might go, or allow others to go, to achieve these objectives may come into question. For instance, British sprinter Dwain Chambers suggested in his autobiography that a performance clause in a sponsorship contract may have perpetuated his use of PEDs (Chambers & Scott, 2009). The questions then become, to what extent do sponsors influence the behavior of athletes? Where is the toxic leadership in this relationship, or is it the environment facilitated by the leader that allows this type of clause to be in place? Does the inactivity of fan response, concerning how governing bodies are addressing corruption and cheating in sports, mean that this toxic environment is strengthened?

3.5. Susceptible Followers: Conformers and Colluders

Without followers, there are no leaders. Despite the roles of followers not receiving the same amount of attention from academic researchers as the roles of leaders, followers are vital to the leadership process. As such, Padilla et al. (2007) identified two different types of followers – “conformers comply with destructive leaders out of fear, whereas colluders actively participate in a destructive leader's agenda” (p. 183). The vulnerability of conformers is based on unmet needs, negative self-evaluations, and psychological immaturity, whereas colluders are identified as being ambitious, selfish, and often sharing the destructive leader's worldview (See **Figure 1**).

Leaders like Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini were able to build their proverbial empires on the torn nations of Germany, Russia, and Italy after World War I (Pauley,

2003)—each country lay in ruin and citizens were left on the edge of starvation, meaning that basic needs (Maslow, 1954), like food and safety, were not being met. By using this as a platform, Hitler, for example, was able to manipulate his nation into believing that his views would lead to prosperity, thus ensuring that those basic needs were met. In turn, an individual with low self-esteem or a negative core self-evaluation may be more inclined to follow a leader who has charisma and may make them believe they are worthy of such treatment. In the sports industry, the applicability of these two characteristics is somewhat questionable. For example, athletes by nature do not tend to have low self-esteem. Most compete on the premise that they will be successful. Fans, in turn, may feed off this confidence, believing that their team or favorite athlete is going to be successful.

When looking at susceptible followers in sport, many different stakeholder groups should be taken into consideration. For example, would members of the executive council of a major sporting organization be seen as conformers if they voted the same way as everyone else in their confederation to ensure they stay in their position of power? Or would they be colluding with that voting bloc to ensure sustained levels of investment, wherever that money might end up? Moreover, do they have ambitions to gain a greater position of power within that regional body, so they collude to achieve their goal? While leadership may create negative outcomes for organizations, some members might benefit or thrive in that environment. Those who succeed would be in positions close to the destructive leader and may implement any plan or strategy the destructive leader may have. In Hitler's regime in Nazi Germany, many colluders aspired to be a part of the Nazi party and the ruling few in the new German Third Reich (US, 2025d).

In sport, destructive leaders have tended to keep their trusted colleagues close to them (Cotterill & Tibbert, 2024). A key component of building a reliable network of colluders is the notion that those colluders will have committed themselves to supporting that leader and sharing the same set of values and beliefs. Moreover, "individuals who endorse unsocialized values such as greed and selfishness are more likely to follow destructive leaders and engage in destructive behavior" (Padilla et al., 2007: p. 185).

While few studies have been conducted evaluating the role of the follower in what may be deemed toxic environments (e.g., Offerman, 2004; Weierter, 1997), it may be argued that, in all levels of sport, toxic followers may certainly facilitate and actively support a toxic leader. For example, the sport of cycling provides an interesting context to discuss this notion further—when talking about the use of PEDs in the sport, Lance Armstrong is often used as an example. He was the leader of the US Postal team, but was he the leader of the peloton as a whole? Was he responsible for the culture of the sport at the time? Was he responsible for every failed test? Or does this suggest toxic leadership by those in positions of power at the UCI? The contention here is that the latter is true—riders failed drug tests before Armstrong's dominance and have done so since. What did not change for many years was the culture of leadership of the UCI. As such, all of this is reliant

on the environment in which an organization or society operates.

3.6. Susceptible Followers (in the Sport Context): Deliberate and Reluctant

In order to represent the follower dynamic in the sports context, the vertex of susceptible followers was redesigned to be deliberate and reluctant followers. In the original Toxic Triangle, susceptible followers were contextualized as being conformers or colluders. These two types were broken down into more detail when applied to followers of sport leaders. Although athletes in amateur sports may be seen as susceptible followers, the contention is that most other followers of toxic leaders in sport (e.g., sports agents, athletic trainers, professional athletes) may be either deliberate or reluctant (see **Figure 4**).

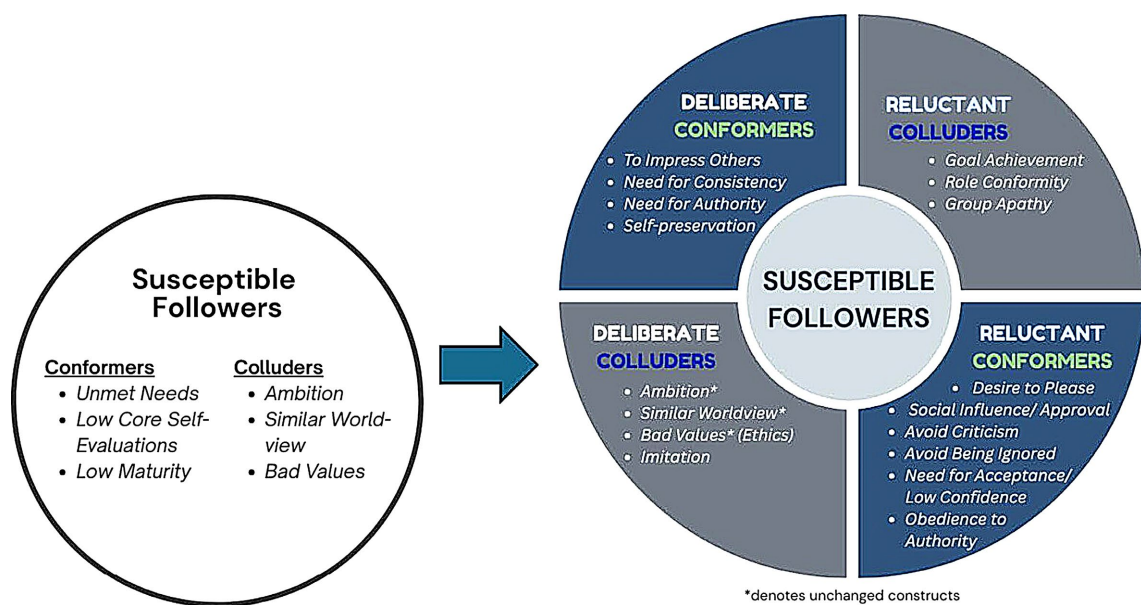


Figure 4. Changes to susceptible followers vertex from original toxic triangle.

3.6.1. Deliberate Followers

As stated previously, conformers are those who follow leaders based on fear, while colluders tend to share the views of the destructive leader. Conformity in the Toxic Triangle includes the follower aligning attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors with the toxic leader, which may be related to peer pressure. The addition of the term deliberate in this case refers to intentionality. Deliberate followers know when they are following a toxic leader and do it anyway, understanding what the result may be. Two types of conformers were added to the Susceptible Followers vertex: deliberate conformers and deliberate colluders. Deliberate conformers are well aware that they are participating in unethical practices, but follow the destructive leader out of fear of losing their jobs or being ostracized from the field for future opportunities. Characteristics of deliberate conformers include: (a) the need to impress others, especially those leaders to whom they admire; (b) the need for consistency and routine (avoidance of change); (c) the need for authority, someone to tell them

what to do; and (d) self-preservation.

Deliberate colluders are also well aware, but unlike deliberate conformers, may agree with the thoughts and methods of toxic leaders. Characteristics of deliberate colluders include: (a) ambition; (b) a similar worldview, and (c) bad values, like the original model. One addition made was the concept of imitation. Ambition precludes imitation as deliberate followers may attempt to emulate the toxic leader, hoping to be promoted (Yapp, 2016).

3.6.2. Reluctant Followers

Reluctant followers were added to the model on the other end of the deliberate follower spectrum. The term reluctant means hesitant, and as such, reluctant followers may be hesitant or even unwilling to follow one they deem unethical. Added characteristics of reluctant conformers include (a) the desire to please; (b) social influence and approval; (c) avoidance of criticism; (d) avoidance of being ignored and to be a part of a group; (e) need for acceptance and low confidence; and (f) obedience to authority. For these reasons, reluctant followers may conform even when the results may be unethical. The desire to be included and avoid conflict are driving forces behind ultimate compliance.

Reluctant colluders are focused on reaching their personal and professional goals as well as those of the organization to the “extent that immoral behavior becomes acceptable” (Vorster, 2017: p. 3). They also collude with fellow actors so that they commit to the role that they are supposed to play and sometimes exhibit apathy. When people are in groups, they are less likely to respond or “react to morally ambiguous situations” (p. 3). These reluctant colluders may think that someone else will do the right thing, absolving them of perceived responsibility.

4. The Toxic Triangle of Sport Management (TToSM)

The sports industry is a conducive environment for toxic leadership to thrive. The Toxic Triangle represents a useful model used to identify the environmental factors, as well as leader and follower characteristics, that make this type of leadership possible. Utilizing the model in the sports context, the authors contend that, for it to be a valuable resource in analyzing toxic leadership in the sports industry, several modifications are needed. As such, the Toxic Triangle of Sport Management (TToSM) is proposed in **Figure 5**.

5. Conclusions and Considerations

This paper represents the first in a program of research about toxic leadership in international sport. Thus far, only those in positions of power in sport’s governing bodies have been discussed without acknowledging any of the other individuals in sport who might be considered leaders. Additional leaders to study might include coaches, team captains, and sport icons. Further study might also include professional versus amateur sport, along with their related environments. Moreover, the different stakeholders in the sports industry may be considered leaders

**Toxic Triangle of Sport Management
(TToSM, 2025)**

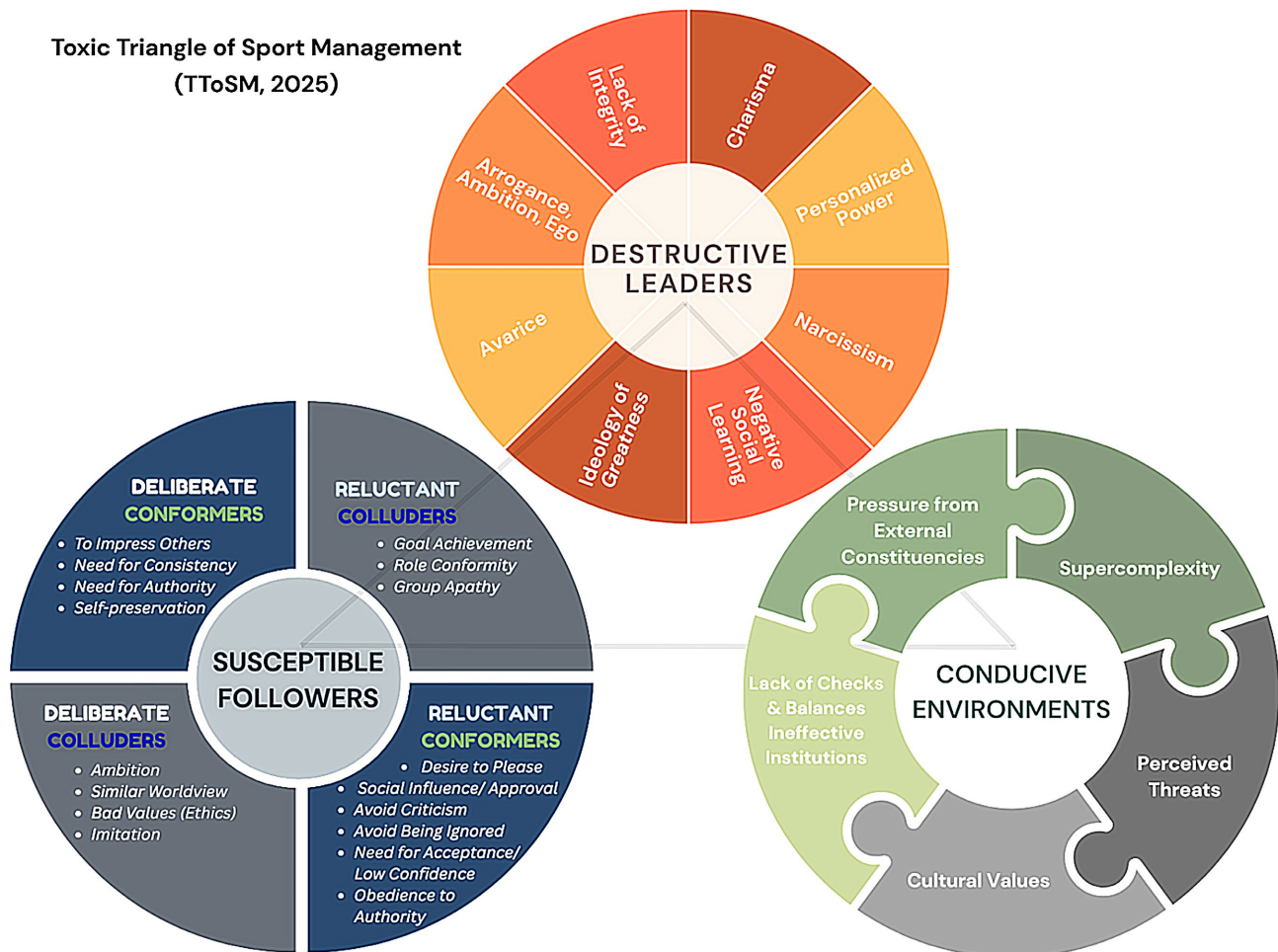


Figure 5. Toxic triangle of sport management (TToSM, 2025).

themselves in certain situations. For example, the media may be leading sports down a path of technological enhancement that will upset the status quo. International differences in toxic leadership characteristics should also be considered.

A plethora of opportunities exist for further study, including areas regarding the dynamics of followership in sport (e.g., to discern who follows whom in the sport industry and where the power lies in that relationship), the role of stakeholders in perpetuating toxic environments, and the contributions of both national and international environments. The issue of destructive or toxic leadership in sport is a rich, relatively untapped area of academic research.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to dedicate this research to Dr. Samantha Gorse Roberts. Dr. Roberts (1976-2021) passed away on September 19, 2021. She was invaluable in the development of this model.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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