COPING WITH INEFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP

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IACCM 2011, June, 29 – July 1, Ruse, Bulgaria

Purpose:

The behavior of executives can have negative consequences on the motivation or the trust of employees as well on the long-term business development of the company. This paper investigates into how organizational members perceive ineffective leadership and which coping strategies individuals develop to encounter such behavior of superiors.

Design:

A qualitative research approach was applied to investigate in coping strategies of individuals. Narrative interviews with German employees, middle and top managers were conducted. This paper presents first empirical results of 20 interviews, which were chosen based on theoretical sampling and were analyzed via open, axial and selective coding as commonly applied in Grounded Theory.

Findings:

Seven major coping strategies were identified in the collected data: (1) coping through learning, (2) coping through resistance, (3) coping through communication (4) coping through comparison, (5) coping through adaptation, (6) coping through isolation, (7) coping through distraction. While some coping strategies reflect more passive behavior, other forms relate to open revolt and proactive interaction between subordinate and superior. It is further shown that coping strategies are related to each other, indicating that individuals pursue several coping strategies simultaneously.

Research limitations/implications:

This paper focuses on the individual level and organizational aspects are not considered. The sample is further limited to German employees and managers, thus might not be representative for other cultural contexts. Nevertheless, findings can serve as a solid base to continue research in this direction and provides some new paths towards researching coping strategies related to ineffective leadership.

Practical implications:

Understanding what ineffective leadership is and how it affects individuals is crucial for managing human resources in an organization. Knowledge about how people react to inappropriate behavior of superiors can help to better understand why employees change their patterns of behavior towards a less effective and productive manner. This paper provides seven strategies to cope with ineffective leadership in a practial context and might serve as a reference for superiors and subordinates to better manage the mechanisms behind this phenomenon.

Keywords: ineffective leadership, coping strategies, supervision, communication, resistance, stress

INTRODUCTION

A lot of research concentrated on what makes a good leader a good leader. Far fewer research has been conducted to reveal the dark sides of being an ineffective leader. In particular, research on how individuals cope with ineffective leaders and how they are related to consequences of inappropriate leadership behavior remains a black spot in this field. However, bad leaders can considerably reduce motivation, productivity and might even lead to a higher fluctuation of competent employees. Therefore this paper addresses this issue through a qualitative approach. Based on 20 interviews, the authors present 7 different coping strategies and their relationships to identified symptoms of ineffective leadership in German companies.

In a first step, we present a review of literature dedicated to ineffective leadership, consequences of ineffective leadership and coping strategies. In a second step, we explain the methodological approach taken to investigate into this phenomenon. After this, the major empirical findings are presented, especially explaining the seven coping strategies identified in the data. The paper closes with limitations and conclusions.

INEFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP: A REVIEW

The following section provides a short overview of existing research on ineffective leadership. First, this section describes different constructs of ineffective leadership. Second, the different effects of ineffective leadership on superiors, subordinates and the organization will be discussed. Table 1 lists common definitions of ineffective leadership. As can be seen there exists no common terminology for ineffective leadership. Nevertheless, all of them stress the negative effects such patterns of behavior can cause.

Table 1: Common definitions of 'ineffective leadership' according to Bardes & Piccolo (2010)

Name	Description
Abusive Supervision (Tepper, 2000, p. 178)	Subordinates perceptions of the extent to which their supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and non-verbal behaviors, excluding physical contact.
Destructive leadership (Einarsen et al.. 2007)	'Behavior by a leader […] that violate[s] the […] interest of the organization by undermining and/or sabotaging the organizations goals, tasks, resources, and effectiveness and/or the motivation, well-being, or job satisfaction of subordinates'
Bad Leadership (Kellermann, 2004)	Effective (e.g. the inability to produce the desired change) and unethical (e.g. acting in self interest, failing to distinguish between right and wrong) actions by a manager or individual in a position of formal or informal power
Negative Leadership (Schilling, 2008)	Behaviors by supervisors and managers ranging from ineffective to destructive aspects.
Leadership Bullying (Ferris et al. 2007, p. 197.)	'Represents strategically selected tactics of influence by leaders designed to convey a particular image and place targets in a submissive, powerless position whereby they are more easily influenced and controlled, in order to achieve personal and/or organizational objectives.'
Toxic Leaders (Lipman-Bluman, 2005, p.18)	'Leaders who engage in numerous destructive behaviors and who exhibit certain dysfunctional personal characteristics.' The actions of these individuals may or may not be intentional, but result in serious and enduring harm on subordinates and organizations.

Studies on ineffective leadership have taken different routes and perspectives. Streams of research include the perspective of executives on ineffective leadership and/or the effects on employees and organizational goals as well as basic concepts of integration. Of particular importance in this paper is research on negative attributes and personality features of executives. As an example, Lombardo et al. (1988) present negative characteristics and behavior by executives. Among these are strong emotionality of the executive, incompetence in assembling teams, a poor relationship with employees, and the lack of support of employees. Ashfort (1997) concentrated on behavior of executives and identified abuse of power as the origin of poor leadership. Other influencing factors, such as the relationship between executives and employees or the organizational framework conditions, also need to be taken into account. Tepper (2000) extends this focus to the characteristics and behavior of executives and includes the perception of employees into their definition of 'abusive

leadership'. Bardes and Picollo (2010) support this perspective and emphasize that most concepts concentrate on negative behavior of leadership and their relationship with employees. Einarsen et al. (2007) call the systematic and repeated violation of organizational goals or the demotivation of subordinates "destructive leadership". They developed a model based on this definition that presents both the perspective of the employees and of the organization. It is illustrated that negative behavior by executives has negative effects on employees and organizational goals. It becomes clear that leadership, employees and organizational goals are linked to each other. Padilla et al. (2007) provide a comprehensive perspective by their model called 'toxic triangle'. This model embraces both destructive executives and destructive employees and also poor organizational framework conditions. Destructive executives distinguish themselves by charisma or negative experiences in their own lives. Employees either have low self-confidence and follow the executive, or they share the same negative value system as the executive and therefore reinforce the effects of negative leadership. Poor organizational framework conditions are found, for example, in bad economic framework conditions that lead to increased insecurity.

Higgs (2003) points out that the presented models also share certain commonalities. These commonalities are (1) the abuse of power to achieve personal goals or the hiding of personal shortcomings, (2) the concentration on the negative consequences for the subordinates, such as mobbing or coercion, (3) the exertion of strong control by the superior towards his subordinates, and by that a limited scope for creative activity for the subordinates, and (4) the application of corrupt or unethical rules for the achievement of personal advantages.

In light of the above it is demonstrated that the research area of negative leadership is characterized by numerous differing concepts, the focus being the characteristics of executives, as well as the effects on their employees.

CONSEQUENCES OF INEFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP

Derived from the three dimensions of the Toxic Triangle by Padilla et al. (2007), Table 2 now presents possible effects of destructive leadership and 'over-sensitive' employees, as well as poor organizational framework conditions.

Table 2: Effects of ineffective leadership on the superior, subordinate and the organization

Effects on superior	Improved reputation and power (Schillig, 2007, Ferris et al., 2007) Trait anger (Hershcovis et al., 2007) Threatened egoism (Baumeister, Smart and Boden, 1996)
Effects on subordinate	Job and life dissatisfaction (Tepper, 2000), Psychological distress (Tepper et al., 2007), Deviant behavior (Mitchell and Ambrose 2007), Lower subordinate performance (Hariss et al., 2007) Lower expectation concerning career development and life development (Tepper, 2000)
Effects on organization	Fraudulent accounting (Carpenter and Reimers, 2005) Lower firm performance (Hnieleski and Ensley, 2007) Increase in absenteeism and health care costs (Tepper et al., 2007)

On the one hand, ineffective leadership can have destructive effects on the superior him- or herself. On the other hand, it can have impact on employees and organizational framework conditions. Destructive executives may improve their own reputation or their own position of power (Ferris, Zinko, Brouer, Buckley, & Harvey, 2007). Ferris et al. (2007) point out that destructive leadership does not acknowledge the power held by employees based on their task-specific knowledge and that they strengthen their own position of power beyond their actual position. An explanatory approach for this lack of appreciation of different perspectives can be found in syndromes, such as the borderline syndrome, or in a pronounced narcissistic personality (Higgs, 2009;Goldmann, 2006). The effects of destructive leadership on other persons can lie in a change regarding the qualitative and quantitative performance or the modified employee behavior regarding motivation, confidence, or identification with leadership (Ferris et al., 2007;Schillig, 2007). Higgs (2009) points out that there is a link between narcissistic executives, strategic company development and the number and size of company acquisitions. Furthermore, there is a link between narcissistic executives and the

performance of the organization as well as employee turnover (Higgs, 2009). Long-term negative consequences can be found in the corporate culture, employee satisfaction, or the long-term development of the company (Aasland et al., 2008). The market research institute Gallup elaborated an index of commitment regarding the emotional attachment of German employees to their employer. According to their research in 2008, only 13% of all surveyed employees reported a strong emotional attachment to their company. According to Gallup, the cost, just from work absences accruing to the German economy amounts to 16.2 billion Euro each year Gallup (2008).

The effects of ineffective leadership from the employee perspective on the individual person could be lower motivation, lower self-confidence, satisfaction with leadership, or their own, increasing insecurity or lower self-confidence (Schillig, 2007). Effects regarding performance and rising stress are seen in the working relationship between leadership and employee (Ferris et al., 2007). Offermann (2004) explains that even those who are managed can become dangerous for leadership. If they point out risks and dangers for corporate development, employees can prevent wrong decisions. Executives featuring narcissistic behavior have a hard time accepting employee opinions and promote delegation (Offermann, 2004). Employees withdraw and do not express their points of view. Employees that observe simpler tasks in the firms, tend to perceive personality features such as hostility and negative emotions of executives more strongly (Schaubroeck, Walumba, Ganster, & Kepes, 2007). The effects of this enhanced perception are, for example, depression, personal dissatisfaction or physical complaints. Thus, every fourth EU citizen gets depressed in their life, at least temporarily. One third of those affected undertakes a suicide attempt eventually. The effects at the organizational level include the development of key company economic figures, such as sales trends or sick rates, or a worsening of the framework conditions, such as work climate or free workspaces (Schillig, 2007). Employees whose superiors tend to be abusive in their personal relations, achieve higher sales volume, and have lower expectations regarding career

development, life development, and corporate development as well as larger conflict between work and family life (Tepper, 2000). Executives whose personal views regarding anger are negatively skewed achieve lower team and work results, compared to those executives that hold more positive views (van Kleef, Homan, Beersma, van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, & Damen, 2009).

In view of the above, understanding the nature of ineffective leadership is crucial for the analysis of coping strategies on the individual level. Besides, contextual factors might play an important role how and when ineffective leadership takes place and how and when coping strategies unfold. Finally, focusing on executives only as the primary source of data collection seems insufficient. The perception of bad leadership and its effects by subordinates might provide interesting insights into this issue. Therefore we decided to collect data from individuals working at different hierarchical levels to provide a more comprehensive picture of ineffective leadership and coping strategies.

COPING STRATEGIES: AN INTRODUCTION

There exist various models which aim at classifying coping strategies used to overcome consequences of ineffective leadership. Table 3 presents an overview of some of the most prominent approaches and shows that there exist two-, three- and four-dimensional models, which will now be discussed shortly.

The two-dimensional model is the most common approach in research to classify coping strategies (Duhachek & Oakley, 2007). The model by Lazarus and Folkmann (1984) plays a central role. In their model they distinguish between problem-focused coping strategies that solve the problem at its origin, while emotional coping strategies are supposed to cushion the emotional effects. Three to four stage models show that problem-focused coping strategies can be found in all the other models. At the same time, emotional coping strategies are increasingly presented in a nuanced way, and context factors are included. A meta-analysis by Skinner et al. (2003) examined over 400 coping inventories and they conclude that coping

strategies still do not have a unified conception. They criticize that the definition of the concept of coping is still vague, and that the various coping inventories cannot be compared, since they were developed in differing context situations. Skinner et al. (2003) state that the core problem with identifying the coping categories lies in the fact that specific behavior cannot be unambiguously linked to its origin. They propose the creation of a hierarchical structure of coping patterns. In this they distinguish between 'lower order categories', which concentrate on specific activities, while coping families are presented at a higher level. Overall it is obvious that the classification of coping strategies cannot take place in isolation from the subject area and the respective context. Developing a classification of individual coping strategies should be a particular research focus (Duhachek & Oakley, 2007). Coping with stress and burnout features have quite frequently been researched (e.g. Yip, Rowlinson, & Ling Siu, 2008; Lewin & Sager, 2008). In the field of leadership research, coping strategies are often investigated in connection with organizational changes, varying role expectations or job loss. Armstrong-Strassen (2006) researched how middle managers were dealing with organizational changes, and found various coping strategies, before and after the organizational changes. Mendenhall et al. (2008) describe how managers deal with job loss. They ascertain that job loss was attributed to framework conditions such as globalization or the coping strategies used. Marginson/Bui (2009) conducted research on role conflict in middle management and found that high-performing managers use more comprehensive coping strategies, compared to managers with a lower performance.

However, less research has been conducted to investigate into coping strategies related to bad leadership. Instead, single aspects of the subject area are presented, executives being the main research focus.

Table 3: Models related to coping strategies according to Skinner et al. (2003, p. 221)

	developed by	description of dimensions
two dimensional model	*Lazarus and Folman (1984)*	Problem-Focused: Coping aimed at managing the problem causing the stress Emotion-focused: Coping aimed at regulating emotional responses to the stress
	Krohne (1993)	Approach: Cognitive and emotional activity oriented toward the source of stress Avoidance: Cognitive and emotional activity oriented away from the source of stress
	Bradstadter & Renner (1990)	Assimilation: Transforming circumstances in accordance with preferences Helplessness: Adjusting personal preferences to situational constraints
three dimensional model	*Heckhausen & Schulz (1995)*	Primary control: Effort to influence objective events Secondary control: Efforts to maximize ones fit with the current situation Relinquishment of control: Forfeiture of control
	Skinner, Edge, Altmann & Sherwood (2003)	Autonomy: Coping efforts directed at coordinating actions directly within the environment Competence: Coping efforts directed at coordinating ones own preferences, flexibility adjusting preferences to match available options and situational constraints Others: Coping efforts that coordinate individuals reliance on others with the social resources available in the environments
four dimensional model	*Carver, Scheier & Weintraub (1989)*	Problem- focused: Coping aimed at directly changing the stressful condition Distraction: Coping aimed at avoiding the stressor by engaging in alternate activities Avoidant: Coping aimed at avoiding the stressor by physically or mentally distancing oneself Support: Seeking instrumental aid or emotional comfort from others

METHODOLOGY

In order to investigate into coping strategies a qualitative research design was selected. Regarding data collection and data analysis we followed major principles of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The following sections will outline the data collection and analysis in greater detail.

Data collection: Narrative interviews and theoretical sampling

The presented findings in this paper refer to 20 narrative interviews conducted with employees (n = 12), middle managers (n = 5) and top-managers (n = 3) in companies located in Germany. The process was primarily driven by theoretical sampling as commonly proposed for exploratory qualitative studies (Boeije, 2002, p. 393; Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 537; Flick, 2002, pp. 64-66; Lueger, 2000, pp. 80-81; Strauss & Corbin, 1998, pp. 201-215). In

addition, interviewees were asked to provide names of potential future interview partners at the end of each interview to facilitate access to the field.

Narrative interviews are particularly useful if the object under investigation is less researched or if the context and the phenomenon of interest are strongly interrelated. This is the case for coping strategies, which might depend on certain characteristics of superiors, different leadership styles and the various situations in which ineffective leadership might unfold. With the help of narrative interviews it is possible to capture these influential factors without influencing the interviewee, i.e. avoid interviewer bias.

Data analysis: Open, axial and selective coding

Data was analyzed following the coding techniques suggested by Strauss & Corbin (1998): (1) open coding (p. 101), (2) axial coding (p. 123), and (3) selective coding (p. 143). The process of coding transcripts was supported by the computer software Atlas.ti V.6. in order to facilitate the management of transcripts (20), developed codes (396) and coded quotes (3148). Besides, Atlas.ti V.6. allows for several advanced analytical procedures, such as the co-occurrence analysis. The co-occurrence analysis explores qualitative data through quantitative methods by analyzing, which codes were assigned to the same quote and might, therefore, be related to each other. It has to be mentioned, that the co-occurrence analysis cannot substitute the qualitative content analysis as it depends on a proper coding procedure. However, it helps to systematically screen large amounts of coded qualitative data.

INEFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP AND ITS CONSEQUENCES: EMPIRICAL RESULTS

Before we can discuss how individuals cope with ineffective leadership it is necessary to explain how interviewees described 'bad' leadership. Table 4 illustrates those codes that where most frequently assigned to quotes related to ineffective behavior of superiors and describes common patterns of behavior perceived as ineffective leadership.

Table 4: Codes assigned to ineffective leadership (CF) (n = 3148 quotes)

	assigned codes	#of quotes
ineffective leadership	missing leadership competence	107
	characteristics of superior	79
	weak communication capabilities of superior	29
	lack of appraisal by superior	28
	missing professional competence	34
	spineless behavior of superior	26
	lack of planning	18
	lack of reflective power of superior	13
	lack of trust of superior	13
	lack of mutual trust between superior and subordinate	8
	technical incorrect decision	6
	arrogance of superior	3
	lack of direct communication	1
	superior feels deflated in his/her role as a leader	1
	TOTAL	*366*

Most frequently 'missing leadership competence' and 'characteristics of superior' were mentioned by the interview partners. Quite often 'ineffective leadership' was not necessarily seen only as lack of professional competencies (34 quotes), but of soft skills, such as 'weak communication capabilities of superiors', 'lack of appraisal by superior', etc. Moreover, lack of trust into one's subordinates is also a typical symptom of ineffective leadership. The following quotes provide examples of interview situations which stress this issue:

P4: '[…] and the negligence of the human part [in leading individuals] lead to an extremely bad work climate or motivation of employees.'

P6: 'That you are able to express what you want. This is very important, to be able to do that as a superior.'

P7 [about a superior]: '[he was] also very much monitoring us and trusted no one.'

P8: 'The upshot was that the colleague was offered a prolongation of his contract, although he actually didn't wanted to do the job as it was. They did not ask me. And this was the decisive event when I said: 'This is a typical wrong decision.' Superiors did not listen or care about their subordinates at all.'

Besides certain patterns of perceived negative behavior, due to a lack of competences and capabilities, several characteristics of superiors were mentioned, which commonly describe 'ineffective leaders':

P4: 'In addition, he [i.e. the superior] was a very self-confident person, and therefore appeared arrogant or pride and, of course, also as a human being, was a difficult person. The combination of technical incompetence or deficit and pride, arrogance, showing-off [...] is difficult to cope with.'

P6: 'He also was characterized by something which, to me, is the worst, that he was choleric. That you shout at people only because you got up on the wrong side. That is a no-go.'

P7: '[the superior] shaped the following saying: 'Only under pressure you can create diamonds from coals.' He said that in front of the whole team. He also introduced many young people, including me and once said [...]: 'These old ones [i.e. employees] who are left, they simply did not find anything better [i.e. another job].' He was acting like an ass-hole.'

These quotes suggest certain traits that predict ineffective leadership, thus stands in line with trait-based leadership research (for an overview see Bass et al. 1990), which argues that personality traits correlate with leadership styles and therefore with certain patterns of behavior.

Table 5 provides the ten most frequently mentioned consequences of ineffective leadership. In particular 'frustration' and a 'worse collaboration' due to misbehavior of superiors led to the emerging coping strategies described in the following section of this paper.

Table 5: Most frequently assigned codes related to consequences of ineffective leadership (n = 3148 quotes)

codes	# of quotes
worse collaboration	141
frustration	120
lack of acceptance of superior	91
lower motivation	76
high psychological stress	72
emotionally shocked	66
mistrust	63
feeling of desperation	62
ineffective working	48
lower self-esteem	26
employees leave the company	26

The following quotes provide some examples of how interviewees described the consequences of ineffective leadership:

P4: 'Frustration, due to the fact that not the best argument counted, but authority. […] And the level of frustration increased steadily in the course of time, because small things started to become bigger. That is logical. It [i.e. this frustration] increased step by step. The more situations there were [i.e. of ineffective leadership].'

P7: 'Frustration, completely. I started to look for another job. I said: 'I do no longer want that. I will not collaborate.'

P8: 'Stress. For me it was pure stress. I noticed that in the afternoons and at night.'

P11: 'I also wasn't a happy person in my private life any longer. Also together with my fellow men I wasn't that happy anymore.'

The following section will, irrespective of the causes of ineffective leadership, provide an overview of seven identified coping strategies, which were mentioned by most interviewees.

COPING STRATEGIES: RESULTS FORM 20 INTERVIEWS

In this section of the paper we will present the seven major coping strategies identified in the data: (1) coping through learning, (2) coping through resistance, (3) coping through communication (4) coping through comparison, (5) coping through adaptation, (6) coping through isolation, (7) coping through distraction. Furthermore, we will discuss how these strategies are related to consequences of ineffective leadership and to each other.

Coping through learning

The most frequently mentioned coping strategy refers to learning processes. Individuals try to understand why superiors behave in a certain way and aim at resolving the problem, which causes psychological stress and develop 'alternative behavioral strategies' to reduce tension between them and their superior in the future. Thus, subordinates learn how to adjust their behavior to their superior. This coping strategy is similar to 'coping through adaptation', however, the latter does not necessarily include a sensemaking/learning process. Table 6 shows those codes, which were assigned to 'coping through learning (CF)'.

Table 6: Codes assigned to 'coping through learning (CF)' (n = 3148 quotes)

	assigned codes	#of quotes
coping though learning (CF)	reflection	121
	problem solving	50
	developing alternative behavioral strategies	35
	learning	27
	TOTAL	*233*

The following quotes provide examples and perceptions of 'coping through learning (CF)':

P2: 'I was intensively thinking about ways to change the situation. I even made myself a plan, a tactic. I thought about how to cope with it [i.e. ineffective leadership].'

P6: 'I realized that if I react immediately to it [i.e. ineffective leadership], than I behave rather emotionally to it, which made it even worse. This I did two or three times at the beginning of my professional career. And then I realized that this doesn't work.'

P7: 'And then there was another situation and I have to say I learned a lot out of it. Nevertheless it really sucked.'

P9: 'I am thinking about it quite a long time. I am thinking about what I could do better next time. Sometimes I am also writing it down.'

In light of these quotes, 'coping through learning (CF)' results in strategically adjusted behavior of subordinates to meet requirements of the organization and the superior alike. In contrast to 'coping through adaptation (CF)' (see below), individuals who pursue a learning strategy more systematically analyze the situation and prepare for future encounters with their superior.

As Figure 1 shows, this coping strategy particularly has been mentioned by interviewees in connection with emotional shocks, frustration and high psychological stress. In light of these findings there seems to be a trend toward coping through learning if emotions take over. The values in brackets refer to the proportion of co-occurring quotes to total quotes of a code related to ineffective leadership, e.g. 15% of all quotes that have been assigned to 'emotionally shocked' are co-occurring with 'coping through learning (CF)'.

Figure 1: Relationship of consequences of ineffective leadership and coping through learning (CF) (n = 3148 quotes)
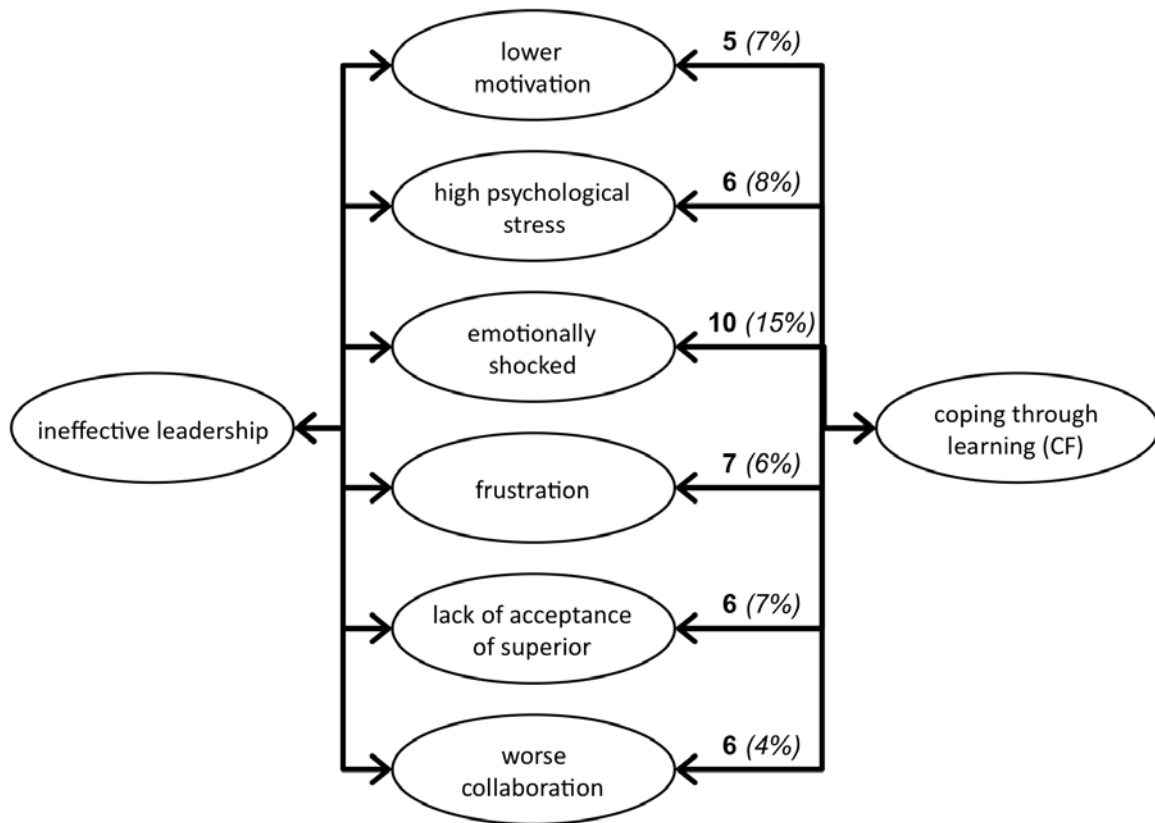
Coping through resistance

All 20 interview partners referred at least once to 'coping through resistance (CF)'. This kind of strategy evolves if subordinates feel very unfairly treated and if their respect for their superior is rather small. Coping through resistance often implies that individuals behave in ways opposed to what they are told. A similar strategy is often found in times of change, were individuals actively, but often subversively react to undesired changes imposed on them, e.g. people's twist in the context of M&As (Dauber, 2011). Table 7 shows which codes were assigned to this coping strategy.

Table 7: Codes assigned to 'coping through resistance (CF)' (n = 3148 quotes)

	assigned codes	#of quotes
coping through resistance (CF)	rejection	116
	contradiction	50
	confrontation	32
	circumvention of supervisor	17
	manipulation of supervisor	4
	TOTAL	*219*

Interviewees reported about this strategy in the following way:

> *P1: 'If I do not respect a person, I have a coping strategy by saying: 'Ok, anyway he doesn't know anything.' So it is rejection as a coping strategy.*

> *P2: 'I did not change my opinion. Although he [i.e. superior] said I should ask the other colleagues, I simply did not do so, because it seem silly to me. And I simply did what I thought is correct, and sold it as the general opinion [to others]. It did not matter, [the superior] did not have an opinion anyway.'*

> *P4: 'But he [i.e. the superior] was very open and it was easy to get him in the direction you wanted.'*

> *P7: 'My boss was of the opposite opinion than me: 'It is necessary to involve them and them and them [i.e. people from different projects].' From this perspective he is a good politician, because he always involves everyone. He is asking this person and this person and this person. And I am rather like: 'We simply do it right now.' And I was against it [i.e. the opinion of the superior] and said: 'No. I am not doing that. That's it. Basta. You can jump on your head, but I won't do it.' [superior answers:] 'But this and this and this.' [P7 repeats:] 'No. I am not doing it.' And then we discussed it during lunch. And then I continued in this manner in front of our team, this happened by accident, until he said: 'Yes, but you have one problem.' 'Which one?' 'I am your boss.' This was his final argument. And then I said: 'Yes, this is a bad thing for me.' And he said: 'Yes, but a really bad one.' Finally, he gave in that I was right, but his only argument left was: 'I am your boss. Therefore do what I want.''*

This strategy often worsens the relationship between superior and subordinate and might even result in dismissals. Also Figure 2 illustrates that this rather aggressive strategy often has been mentioned together with no acceptance of their superior, frustration and even mistrust. Due to the fact that this strategy worsens the collaboration between subordinate and superior even more over time, a higher fluctuation of employees was reported by interviewees.

Figure 2: Relationship of consequences of ineffective leadership and coping through resistance (CF) (n = 3148 quotes)
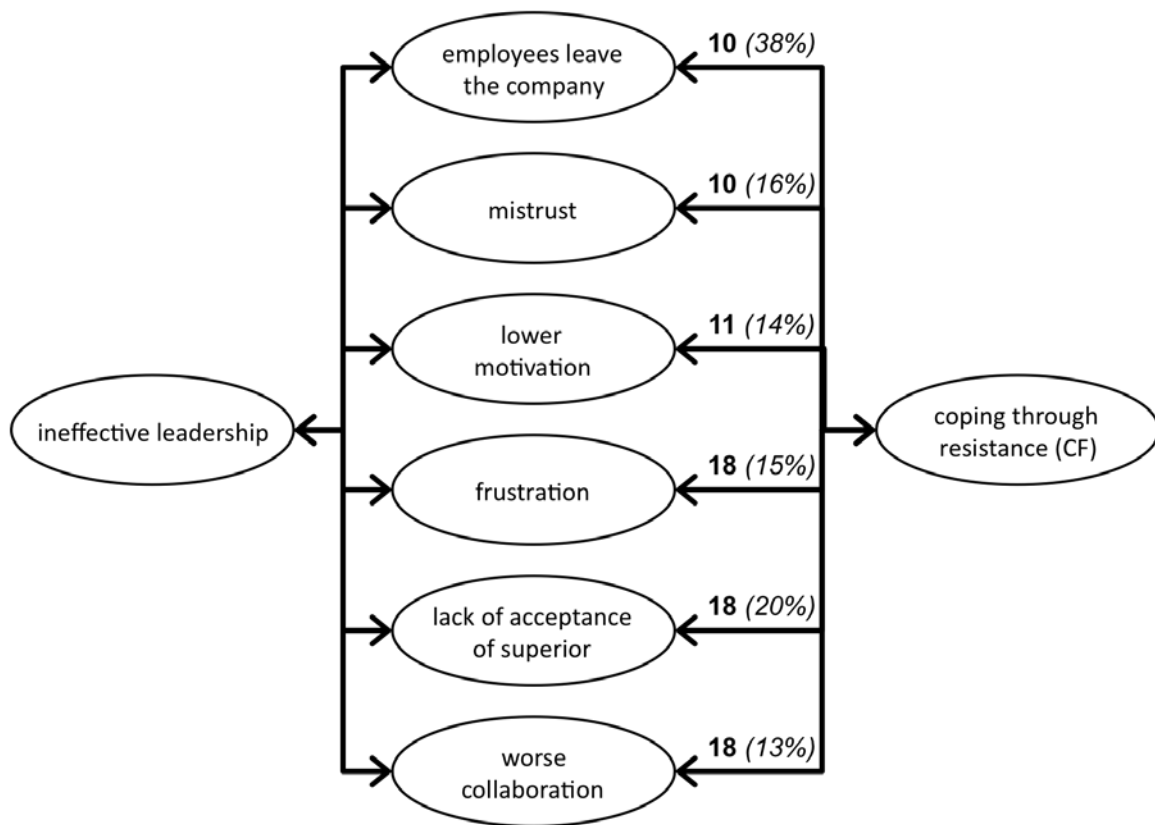
Coping through communication

Another coping strategy refers to communication, i.e. individuals see the necessity to talk about their bad experiences with ineffective leadership in order to relieve psychological stress. Table 8 illustrates the different facets of communication related to the coping strategy 'coping through communication (CF)'.

Table 8: Codes assigned to 'coping through communication (CF)' (n = 3148 quotes)

	assigned codes	#of quotes
coping through communication (CF)	intense communication	75
	communication with colleagues	36
	rational argumentation based on technical knowledge	20
	emotional communication	18
	communication with partner	17
	communication with good friends	13
	communication with parents	7
	negative communication among colleagues	1
	TOTAL	*187*

While some individuals prefer to talk to partners, good friends or parents who are not working in the same company, most of the interviewees (65%) stress that 'communication with colleagues' is crucial for them to calm down and emotionally detach themselves from stressful situations. The following exemplary quotes support this:

> P6: 'And directly after this situation I had to let of steam somewhere. […] And very often at a person of trust in my working environment.
>
> P12 [a superior]: 'Well, I think they [i.e. subordinates] are talking among them about their problems.'
>
> P15: 'I actually tried to cope with that [i.e. ineffective leadership] at home. So, I talked a lot with my friend, who has now become my husband, about it. I also talked a lot about it with my father.'

Figure 3 graphically visualizes the relationships between 'coping through communication (CF)' and different consequences of ineffective leadership. Particularly if ineffective leadership leads to frustration and mistrust, coping through communication seems of considerable importance. In contrast to coping through resistance, this strategy does not imply that individuals leave the organization due to ineffective leadership.

Figure 3: Relationship of consequences of ineffective leadership and coping through communication (CF) (n = 3148 quotes)
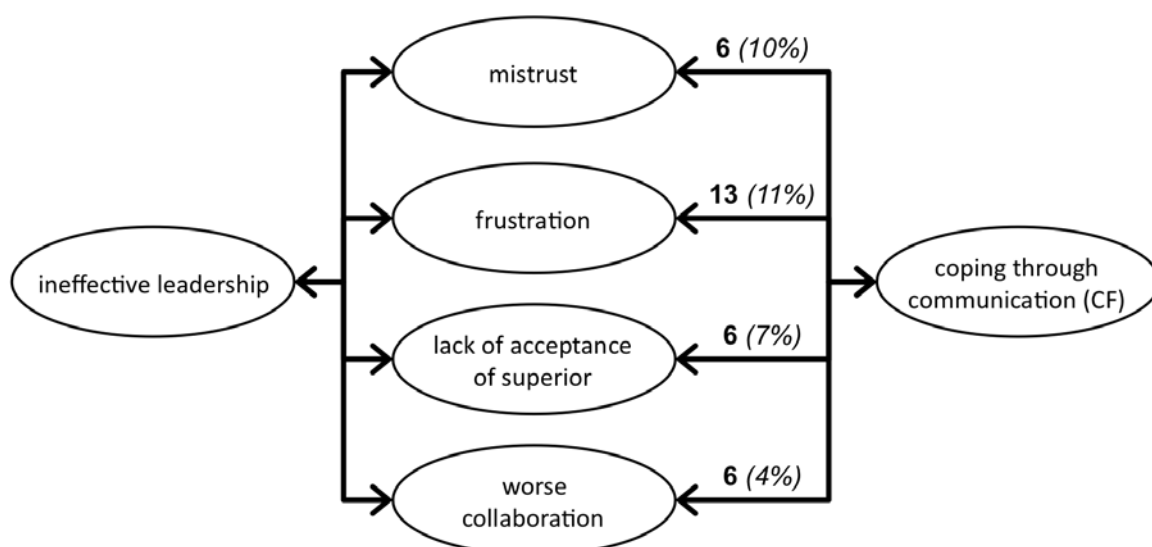
Coping through comparison

Several interviewees (95%) mentioned that comparison with other colleagues, supervisors or the past can help to better cope with the present (see also Table 9). In particular, if the present situation for subordinates has improved, it is much easier to cope with 'less impactful' ineffective leadership.

Table 9: Codes assigned to 'coping through comparison (CF)' (n = 3148 quotes)

	assigned codes	#of quotes
coping through comparison	coping through comparison with the past	51
	coping through comparison with other colleagues	47
	coping through comparison with other supervisors	44
	TOTAL	*142*

The following quotes illustrate this phenomenon:

> *P1: 'Because, when comparing with others – there were six other trainees – I saw that it was the same for them [with respect to ineffective leadership].'*

> *P7: 'But to a large extent it is resignation. I see that also among my colleagues.'*

> *P8: 'There are also some people where I would say: 'For me these are not real superiors'. […] I cannot only talk about my boss, I also know in our company about other experiences of other colleagues and how other superiors behave.'*

> *P7: 'Something I liked about my boss [in the former company is] that you are challenged and excessive demand. This you cannot find here.'*

However, if the leadership style of the current supervisor is considerably worse than of others, or employees in other organizations experience a better relationship with their boss, individuals suffering from ineffective leadership might leave the organization after evaluating their options through comparison. In 27% of times were interviewees referred to the fact that employees left the organization, they also mentioned 'coping through comparison (CF)'.

Figure 4: Relationship of consequences of ineffective leadership and coping through comparison (CF) (n = 3148 quotes)
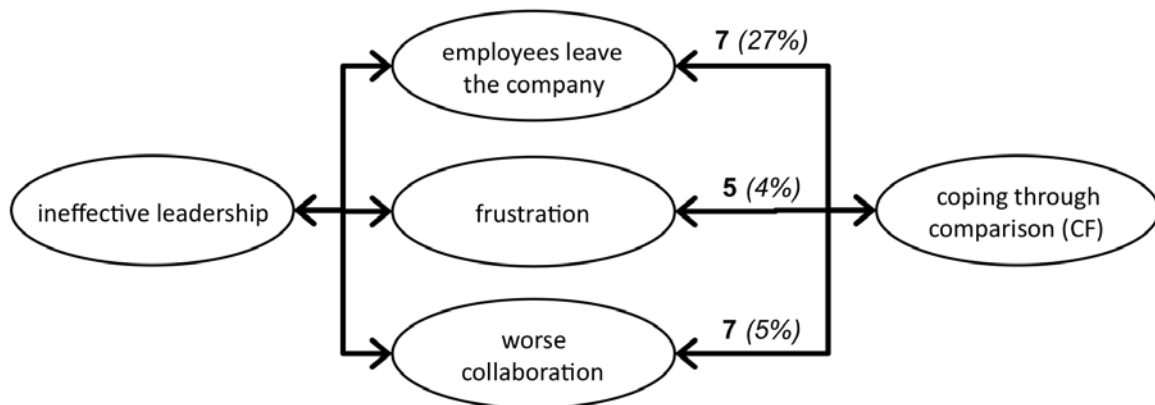
Coping through adaptation

Simply accepting the things as they are and adapting to them seems to be another strategy to deal with ineffective leadership. Codes assigned to quotes of interviewees related to 'coping through adaptation (CF)' are is shown in Table 10.

Table 10: Codes assigned to 'coping through adaptation (CF)' (n = 3148 quotes)

	assigned codes	#of quotes
coping through adaptation	coping through acceptance	119
	coping through adaptation	33
	TOTAL	*152*

The following quotes illustrate this coping strategy:

P12: 'I do not care about the way [my superior leads us]. As said before, you need to take it as it comes. The senior manager is rather the silent one, is looking at everything in patience and then decides. And the junior manager is a little bit more agile, also quickly drives into something, just to stop him later on again. But the way they lead, I do not have many problems with. As I said, you simply need to adjust a little bit.'

P1: 'At a certain point it was a silent agreement of a peaceful togetherness through not wanting anything from each other, but simply wait until the time is over [and you can retire].'

P3: 'Well, I did not resist during the daily business. But I simply said: 'Ok.''

P4: 'Of course, I had the consequences in mind, the situation, the reaction, the fact that arguments are not of much importance. That not the best argument is important, but what complied to the wishes of Dr. XY [a superior].'

As these quotes already imply, individuals who accept or adapt to the ineffective leadership also resign and abstain from trying to change the situation. This is one of the fundamental differences to 'coping through learning':

> *P8: ' So, this means that I stopped thinking about it [i.e. ineffective leadership]. Over time working days and daily business help to suppress such thoughts and you simply do not think about it anymore.'*

> *P4: 'And simply being reserved and never provide arguments in an extravert manner, but thought: 'Ok, how would you do it?' But I did not say a word aloud. On the outside I smiled, but inside me I felt sorry for this person […]. I did not take the person serious anymore.'*

According to Figure 5, employees frequently referred to this strategy when talking about frustration and stopped trusting into their superior. The co-occurrence analysis reveals a similar result as for 'coping through communication (CF)'. Due to the fact that individuals start to adapt to the new situation, they are less likely leaving the organization. Nevertheless, the collaboration between subordinate and superior is worse than in case of 'effective'/'positive' leadership behavior.

Figure 5: Relationship of consequences of ineffective leadership and coping through adaptation (CF) (n = 3148 quotes)
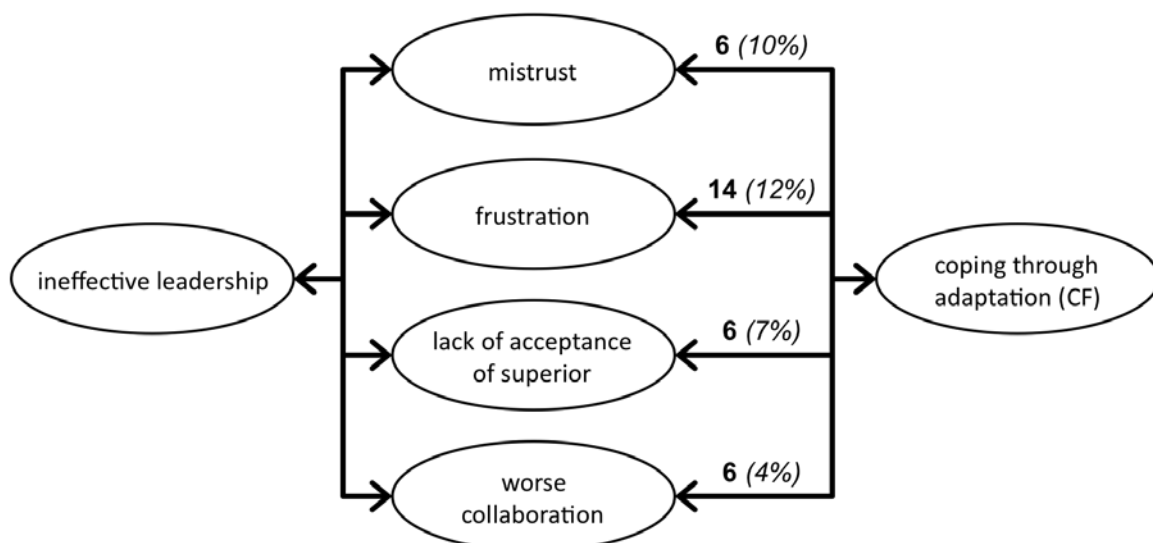
Coping through isolation

Almost all interviewees (95%) mentioned 'coping through isolation' as a frequently applied strategy. 'Isolation' in this context refers to separating oneself either emotionally or physically from the superior. The different facets of this strategy are listed in Table 11.

Table 11: Codes assigned to 'coping through isolation (CF)' (n = 3148 quotes)

	assigned codes	#of quotes
coping through isolation	emotional distance	50
	change of occupation	37
	reducing contact with supervisor	20
	isolation of supervisor	15
	change in job	5
	geographic distance	2
	contact avoidance with supervisor	1
	TOTAL	*130*

Sample quotes related to coping through isolation include:

> *P2: 'So, I did not talk about it with him anymore.'*

> *P12: 'At the moment, I am still quite relaxed. Also due to the [emotional] distance. Because you simply need to wait and see what will change.'*

With respect to physical distance, most often people indicated that they left the organization, which seems to be the ultimate step taken by subordinates:

> *P6: 'I left the company. Interestingly he [i.e. the superior] still did not want me to go. Four hours long he tried to persuade me. [It was] Psycho terror. It was interesting. [later in the interview] and this was actually the reason for me: 'Well, then I cannot stay any longer'. Because I am not only someone who simply does what he is told. Although my position , which I actually filled, would have required that I make decisions. But I was not allowed to do so. I was also not allowed to ask him [i.e. the superior]. Ok, and therefore 90% was wrong anyway. This was a situation where I said: 'No, this cannot be.''*

> *P7: And it really exploded in our department. Eight people left the organization on the same day. And in the meantime the whole department had been replaced.'*

Considering the facets of 'coping through isolation (CF)', it becomes clear that most co-occurrences can be found with 'employees leave the company'. Figure 6 further reveals that this coping strategy mainly unfolds if subordinates do not accept their superior. This coping

strategy is similarly related to consequences of ineffective leadership as 'coping through resistance (CF)'.

Figure 6: Relationship of consequences of ineffective leadership and coping through isolation (CF) (n = 3148 quotes)
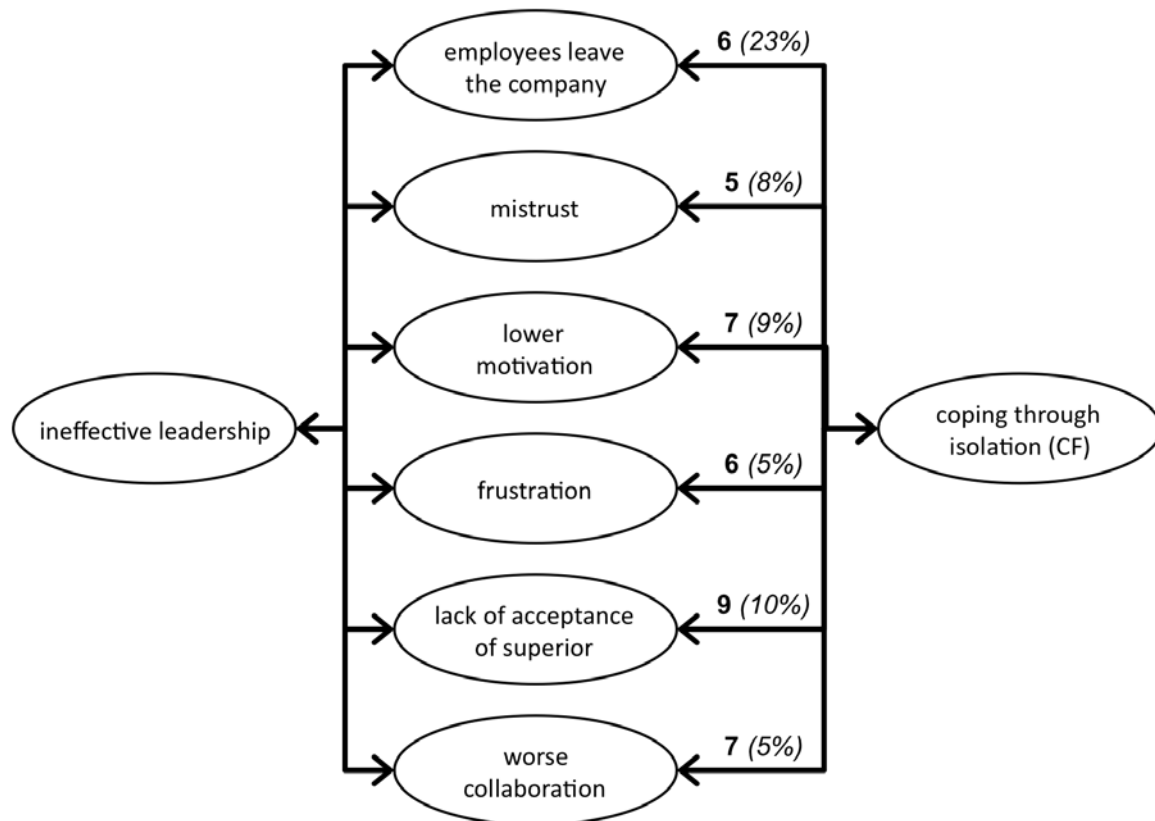
Coping through distraction

Quite a lot of interviewees (85%) referred to 'coping through distraction (CF)', i.e. individuals engage in activities that are neither related to their job nor to their supervisor and helps them to take their minds off and, at least for a short period of time, forget about their negative experiences. Table 12 shows different approaches to distraction. However, some of these might cause acute or chronic illnesses, e.g. 'alcohol' or 'additional eating' and therefore seem less effective for the individual pursuing such a strategy.

Table 12: Codes assigned to 'coping through distraction (CF)' (n = 3148 quotes)

	assigned codes	#of quotes
coping through distraction	sport	25
	compensation	19
	hobbies	15
	self-deception	14
	escape into private life	11
	hope	5
	suppression	5
	alcohol	3
	additional eating	1
	TOTAL	*98*

The following quotes provide further details:

> *P1: 'Life always consists of different facets. And if it is not working well in one of them I tried, with the several people I have contact with, to see the positive aspects of it. […] I would say, I try a lot to find compensation through my private life.'*

> *P3: 'And then I really escaped. I also was four or five times a week on the sports campus after work. […] Yes, if it got to the extremes I always tried to compensate through sports or walking the dog in the forest.'*

> *P4: 'I drank two to three beers to come to terms with it [i.e. ineffective leadership].'*

> *P6: 'And as there were many of these [situations of ineffective leadership], in particular the last six years, I needed relatively much compensation. The best way is: I like to do sports. This really helps.'*

> *P8: 'Trying to find distraction by […] doing sports, in order to sleep well.'*

> *P11: 'Coffee. Coffee and sweets.'*

Due to the fact that this strategy was only few times mentioned by interviewees less co-occurrences were identified. The most important relationship of 'coping through distraction (CF)' was found with 'worse collaboration'. Based on the collected data, this strategy seems to be of least importance, however has several different manifestations as shown in Table 12.

Figure 7: Relationship of consequences of ineffective leadership and coping through distraction (CF) (n = 3148 quotes)
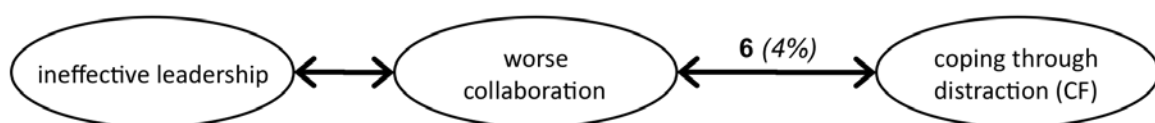
RELATIONSHIPS AMONG COPING STRATEGIES

As was shown in the former sections of this paper, seven different coping strategies were identified which are considerably related to certain consequences of ineffective leadership. However, no empirical evidence was found that individuals pursue only one of these strategies at a time. In contrast, a co-occurrence analysis reveals that coping strategies (based on different codes!) are remarkably related to each other (see Table 13). The values in brackets refer to the proportion of co-occurring quotes to the total number of quotes of both codes considered in the co-occurrence analysis. This controls for the different number of quotes assigned to each code. Except of 'coping through comparison' and 'coping through distraction', all coping strategies are, in total, strongly co-occurring with other strategies (about 40%). Thus, our interview partners often referred to several coping strategies when talking about incidents of ineffective leadership.

Table 13: Relationship between coping strategies (n = 3148)

	coping through adaptation	coping through commu-nication	coping through comparison	coping through distraction	coping through isolation	coping through learning	coping through resistance
coping through adaptation		13 (4%)	6 (2%)	15 (7%)	27 (11%)	30 (9%)	24 (7%)
coping through communication	13 (4%)		10 (3%)	10 (3%)	19 (6%)	60 (15%)	50 (13%)
coping through comparison	6 (2%)	10 (3%)		2 (1%)	2 (1%)	15 (4%)	3 (1%)
coping through distraction	15 (7%)	10 (3%)	2 (1%)		11 (5%)	7 (2%)	3 (1%)
coping through isolation	27 (11%)	19 (6%)	2 (1%)	11 (5%)		17 (5%)	31 (10%)
coping through learning	30 (9%)	60 (15%)	15 (4%)	7 (2%)	17 (5%)		29 (7%)
coping through resistance	24 (7%)	50 (13%)	3 (1%)	3 (1%)	31 (10%)	29 (7%)	
TOTAL	**115 (40%)**	**162 (44%)**	**38 (12%)**	**48 (20%)**	**107 (37%)**	**158 (42%)**	**140 (39%)**
% in brackets = # of co-occurring quotes between code 1 and 2 / (# of quotes of code 1 + # of quotes of code 2 - # of co-occurring quotes between code 1 and 2)							

LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper provided first empirical results related to coping strategies pursued by individuals who suffer from ineffective leadership in Germany. Based on the screened data, it was possible to identify seven different coping strategies: (1) coping through learning, (2) coping through resistance, (3) coping through communication (4) coping through comparison, (5) coping through adaptation, (6) coping through isolation, and (7) coping through distraction.

So far the following conclusions can been drawn from this analysis: (1) Individuals develop patterns of behavior to deal with inappropriate treatment by their superiors. However, not all coping strategies seem to be of equal helpfulness. Strategies, such as 'coping through resistance, 'coping through isolation' and 'coping through distraction' might be useful for a shorter period of time, but less meaningful in the long-run. Such strategies might not reduce the tension between subordinate and superior, or even resolve the underlying problems. The analyzed data does not provide any insights on how efficient certain coping strategies are for individuals suffering from ineffective leadership. To the interviewees all of them seemed reasonable. (2) Several coping strategies might be pursued at a time, thus making it more complex to analyze the consequences of them on subordinates, superiors and the organization as a whole. Future research might address this issue and develop certain common sets of combined coping strategies and analyze which of them turned out to be most successful.

Similar to the results presented in the literature review, consequences of ineffective leadership were most frequently described as 'frustration', 'worse collaboration', 'no acceptance of superior', 'high psychological stress', etc. These 20 interviews also show that ineffective leadership is still of relevance in practice and might account for many dissatisfied and unmotivated employees. More research will be necessary to fully understand the mechanism between ineffective leadership, consequences of ineffective leadership and the impact of coping strategies, e.g. those presented in this paper. The presented co-occurrence analyses show that not all coping strategies are related to all consequences of ineffective leadership.

While many studies in the past covered ineffective leadership, only few of them systemically explored coping strategies of individuals related to this issue. Although only German-citizens were interviewed, the findings of this study might also prove true in other contexts. Cultural differences might influence how 'ineffective leadership' is defined and perceived by employees or managers. The consequences of 'bad' leadership, however, may remain the same and lead to similar coping strategies.

Finally, it has to be mentioned that coping strategies help individuals only to alleviate negative consequences of ineffective leadership. The presented coping strategies do not lead to similar individual performance-outcomes as in contexts where 'effective' leadership styles prevail. Thus, ineffective leadership will always worsen the collaboration and motivation of subordinates until they leave the organization or the superior gets replaced.

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