

**The Blinkers Are Still Present: Responding to the ‘Authors’ Reply to Mills and Boardley:  
“Advancing Leadership in Sport: Time To Take Off the Blinkers?”’.**

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## **The Blinkers Are Still Present: Responding to the ‘Authors’ Reply to Mills and Boardley:**

### **“Advancing Leadership in Sport: Time To Take Off the Blinkers?”**”.

My co-author and I initially wrote our response to Cruickshank and Collins (2016) in an attempt to aid the field by addressing various misconceptions presented in their paper. Despite being, in our view, fair and balanced in our presentation of the arguments, Cruickshank and Collins (2017) replied, suggesting that we had misrepresented and/or misinterpreted their words. In doing so, they again highlighted a lack of understanding on many of the points we raised and as such, we write this second response in an attempt to provide further clarification. In the spirit of collegiality that this debate has been conducted, we again invite Cruickshank and Collins to consider our responses and further respond if they consider this necessary. Unlike our previous response, here we respond chronologically based upon the order of Cruickshank and Collins’ comments.

Our second rebuttal starts on page one of Collins and Cruickshank (2017). In our response to Cruickshank and Collins (2016, p. 1201) we criticised them for making the following statement regarding the tactical use of behaviours:

“behaviour-focused work has done much to identify possible leadership ‘tools’ (i.e. behaviours) but little for how and why they may be successfully selected, combined and deployed; issues which lie at the true heart of leader effectiveness in applied settings.”

However, within Cruickshank and Collins (2017, p.1199) they state: “we also never advised that leaders should act in an inauthentic way or use a “toolbox of disingenuous behaviours.”

Although they may not have said the specific words “use a” as a prefix to the aforementioned sentence, the tone is heavily implied throughout their work and we would argue that the words do not need to be uttered for tacit support to be given:

“Dark side behaviors, on the other hand, only may be the live enactment of dark side traits (which may or may not be of high levels) but **can also be selectively developed and deployed** (Cruickshank & Collins, 2015, p. 251).”

“expert leadership requires cognitive excellence given that optimal and consistent impact requires **the conscious selection, combination and deployment of leadership behaviours** (Cruickshank & Collins, 2016, p. 1199).”

“For clarity, all references to dark side behaviors from here on thereby refer to the overt manifestation of dark side traits; these behaviors are not necessarily the result of high levels of dark side traits **but rather a conscious choice to employ such methods**, whether for socially desirable or undesirable ends (Cruickshank & Collins, 2015, p. 251).”

Somewhat confusingly they then go on to provide the following statement to explain their position:

“In contrast to the suggestions of Mills and Boardley (2017), our view is not that leaders should “present the impression of multiple competencies” and apply “scripted behaviours”. **Rather, authentic leadership is guided (in part) by the possession of interlinked short-, medium- and long-term goals that the leader believes will deliver positive outcomes for the team (and of course the leader as well;** Cruickshank & Collins, 2017, p. 1200).”

My co-author and I are unaware of any definition of authentic leadership or authenticity whereby being true to one’s self is in anyway guided by goals or positive outcomes. Being authentic is not a goal-driven behaviour, but rather a virtue (Palanski & Yammarino, 2007). Although there are many definitions of authenticity (not that any have been provided by Cruickshank & Collins, 2016, 2017), Harter, Schmidt and Hayes’s (2002, p.382) “owning one’s personal experiences, be they thoughts, emotions, needs, preferences, or beliefs, processes captured by the injunction to know oneself” is widely used within the authentic-leadership literature. Moving away from the philosophical underpinnings of authenticity as a virtue, from a leadership perspective, authentic leadership refers to:

“...a pattern of leader behavior that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate, to foster greater self-awareness, an internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency on the part of leaders working with followers, fostering positive self-development (Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2007, p. 94).

To be clear, to our knowledge neither Harter, Schmidt and Hayes (2002) or Walumbwa et al. (2008) discuss adjusting behaviour based on goals (of any length) when outlining authenticity (i.e., as a virtue) or authentic leadership, nor do they refer to authentic leadership being guided by positive outcomes for the team or leader. By definition, knowing one's self and behaving consistently is counterintuitive to the notion of selectively deploying behaviours. Unfortunately this notion seems lost on Cruickshank and Collins (2017, p. 572), who despite earlier stating that they do not condone the selective deployment of behaviour go on to state the following:

“As such, if a sport leader genuinely or truly believes use of dark side behaviour in a specific moment will facilitate greatest long-term benefit for most (which might require self-serving work in the short term), then surely they are not “disingenuous” in an absolute sense? In short, using the dark side is neither automatically appropriate nor automatically an action of inauthentic leadership: it depends.”

Authentic individuals do not selectively pick and choose behaviours to meet goals. Further, to embody authentic or true transformational leadership values, an individual cannot work towards self-serving means, regardless of the potential outcome/s. Cruickshank and Collins appear to lack understanding as to the nuanced differences between virtues (i.e., authenticity), behaviours (i.e., behaving in a consistent manner), and theoretical concepts (i.e., authentic transformational leadership). Although it is possible to be both authentic and machiavellian (e.g., Niccolò Machiavelli, was arguably authentic to his manipulative self), the concept of authentic transformational leadership is, by definition, incompatible with tactical, inauthentic behaviour. Instead, dark leadership is more akin to pseudo-transformational leadership. Although

Cruickshank and Collins indicate a leaning towards moral absolutism by suggesting that there are no absolutes (i.e., “it depends”). When dealing with moral issues such as this, we are not aware of many others who share their view that selectively and tactically using behaviour for self-serving means could be deemed desirable, regardless of any purported long-term benefits. Alas, it is unlikely in such a scenario that the long-term greater good could ever be achieved once followers become aware that their leader has manipulated them for short-term self-serving ends. Based on the above we hope it is now clear there is no “confusion” on our part - as suggested in Cruickshank and Collins (2017, p. 1201) - around the differences between authenticity, authentic behaviour, and authentic (i.e., true) transformational leadership. Whether the same is true for them, we will leave the reader to decide.

Next, Cruickshank and Collins (2017, p. 572) both mis-represent one of our further arguments and at the same time contradict themselves:

“in further contrast to Mills and Boardley’s points, we also do not see that socially undesirable actions are absolutely validated as “good or bad” or “right or wrong” by the leader’s motive or the outcome achieved (as such, the motive and outcome only might justify the means). Instead, **we suggest that dark side behaviours are qualified by the leader’s motive;** a view that is explicit in our prior work.

Although they claim that their view of dark behaviour is qualified by the leader’s motive, we see very little evidence of this in their arguments beyond vaguely mentioning the importance of cognition. In fact, the term motive was not used at all in the foundation paper, but rather intention. They also claim their philosophical position regarding morality is explicit in their prior

work. However, we disagree and would argue that it is not even explicit in the aforementioned paragraph never mind their previous work. If we infer correctly, it appears they adopt a form of consequentialist ethics within their work with the caveat that the leader's motive is identified post behaviour. If this is the case, rather than pursuing intentions, as claimed repeatedly in the foundation paper, they are actually seeking muddied rationalisations. This is an issue we raised in our original response and one that - in our opinion - remains unaddressed. As such, only the most base of individuals are likely to admit that their socially undesirable intentions were impure (Price, 2003). This is a major flaw in the research as it is arguably incompatible to marry interview data based on a socially sensitive topic with a consequentialist philosophical position. Like Graham et al. (2012), we would argue that moral behaviour is often instinctive and the reasons people offer for such actions are largely post-hoc rationalizations rather than being the true stimuli for action. As such, it is unsurprising that the participants Cruickshank and Collins (2016, 2017) refer to claim actions such as strategic sackings, derailing agendas, and undermining seniors athletes to be acceptable. Given that these are post-hoc rationalisations obtained from interviews with purposefully-selected participants, the sample seems highly skewed towards supporting elements of dark leadership. As such, practitioners, researchers, and stakeholders should bear this in mind when making inferences about the value of the findings stemming from this work.

Additionally, Cruickshank and Collins (2016, 2017) use the terms effective, optimal, and positive when describing outcomes without defining what the terms mean within the context discussed. For example, without such definitions it is hard to decipher what, exactly, Cruickshank and Collins (2017, p. 571) mean when they say "socially undesirable behaviours that are used in an intentional, intermittent and appropriate fashion could help to foster optimal

outcomes”. What is meant by ‘optimal outcomes’ and how, exactly, can socially undesirable behaviour foster them? Although a minor point by comparison to the points raised to this point, a lack of clarity in language is an issue that pervades Cruickshank and Collins (2016, 2017) writing, making their true meaning evasive. This is again demonstrated when they (2017, p. 572) suggest: “leaders are not (and certainly do not have to be) ‘nice’ all of the time ... the dark side of leadership behaviour is not inherently ‘wrong’”. Nicety is an entirely new concept to introduce and no one stated that dark behaviour was inherently wrong. Rather, it is the pre-behaviour cognitions which are important and not the explicit post-hoc rationalisations. Similarly, we still remain unclear on exactly what Cruickshank and Collins (2016, p. 1199) meant when they referred to “effective leadership”.

Next, we correct Cruickshank and Collins (2017, p. 572) error in suggesting we used the example of Machiavellianism to demonstrate behaviours are value neutral:

“Take again Mills and Boardley’s example of a leader using Machiavellianism for the greater good: the correspondents state this “should not be considered dark” given that the motive is bright.”

Aside from the fact that that they have misquoted us by replacing the term ‘manipulation’ with ‘Machiavellianism’ (we assume it is just another error and that they are not using these terms interchangeably too or worse, attempting to build a straw man), the authors seem to have totally missed the point we were making. We stated:



“Those who present Machiavellian tendencies are considered cunning and possess a willingness to deceive for their own gains. Leaders described as Machiavellian seek control over followers and are driven by a need for power. They tactically self-present and use their skill to coerce others into behaving as they desire (Mills & Boardley, 2017, p. 566).”

First and foremost, machiavellianism is not a behaviour, it is a personality trait<sup>1</sup>. As such, we do not state that Machiavellianism should not be considered dark and even if it were a behaviour, which it is not, by definition it would be counterintuitive to suggest that it could be *used* for the “greater good”. We do, however, point out that behaviours are often value neutral – inserting a knife into another can be to both end and save a life – as such understanding the motive for the behaviour is key. This key distinction between how dark and bright behaviours should be defined and differentiated is something we thought we made clear in our initial response, but alas it appears not.

Further, it still appears Cruickshank and Collins (2017, p. 573) are unclear as to the difference between leaders and leadership:

“Confusion within the theorising of Bass and Steidlmeier [6] is perhaps best shown in Mills and Boardley’s assertion that “although authentic or ‘true’ transformational leadership qualities are proposed to include integrity, moral and ethical principles and authenticity, these qualities are not requirements of transformational leadership” [1]: so

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<sup>1</sup> Machiavellianism is characterised as the manipulation and exploitation of others (Mills and Boardley 2017).

“truly transformational” and “transformational” **leaders** are different ... but neither actually exist. As we have deliberately refrained from using labels that suggest broad styles (e.g. ‘dark leader’/‘dark leadership’), the suggestion that we use terms in the same way as Bass and Steidlmeier [6] is inaccurate. Instead, we re-emphasise that (a part of) our focus has consistently been on dark side behaviours that are appropriately deployed against explicit and nested intentions”

To be clear here, there is more than a quarter of a century’s worth of evidence that strongly points to the existence of transformational leadership. However, whether anyone can be the absolute embodiment of a leadership type (i.e., a specific type of leader) is highly questionable. As we previously noted (Mills & Boardley, 2017, p. 567): “there is no such thing as a transformational leader, merely those who display transformational qualities”. We (Mills & Boardley, 2017, p. 568) said this because: “there is currently no universally accepted definition for the number of qualities or behaviours that need to be demonstrated by a leader in order to be classified as transformational.” This lack of understanding is also demonstrated when Cruickshank and Collins (2017, p. 573) discuss labels (i.e., “broad labels are unhelpful in the sense that they mask the precise nature and spectrum of leadership behaviours as used in practice”). The labels they condemn merely represent the ‘spectrum’ of behaviour they condone. Further, despite their claims to the contrary, in adopting the terms bright and dark, they are also clearly using labels. A better approach - in our opinion - would be to just state the specific behaviour they are referring to. The fact that they also apparently fail to see the difference between combining behaviours within the overarching label of an approach to leadership and assigning said label to an individual is worrying. We will say this again for clarity. For us, broad

labels are fine to describe how multiple behaviours fit together. What is inappropriate, however, is applying such labels to individuals.

Next we address Cruickshank and Collins' (2017, p. 573) claim that we misreported their views on transformational leadership:

“As well as misreporting many of our views on the dark side of leadership, Mills and Boardley (2017) also misreport elements of our views on transformational leadership. First, they recognise that we say that transformational leadership theory is “sub-optimal” for informing day-to-day practice, a point we uphold since sole adherence to any one style must be, by definition, sub-optimal at times. However, they then embellish our words, suggesting we said this approach “cannot” inform day-to-day practice. As we wrote the former but certainly not the latter, many of Mills and Boardley’s related comments on our position are redundant. Indeed, we entirely recognise the positive impact transformational behaviours can have on leadership outcomes and chose to focus on this theory in our original paper given its dominance in leadership research in sport (and the 3000-word limit of the article category in the journal).”

First, it is hypocritical to suggest embellishment when the authors do the same just a few words later in the sentence (i.e., they said “suboptimal” not as they state above “sub-optimal at times”). They go on to suggest that we fail to apply the terms leader and leadership consistently (p. 573): “Problematically, or at least incoherently, however, these authors do still go on to use general terms throughout (e.g. “transformational leadership/leader”).” Despite adding quotation marks, Cruickshank and Collins (2017) fail to reference this claim with a page number. This will

be because we have not used the term ‘transformational leader’ in any other context other than to say that it is our belief is that “there is no such thing as a transformational leader, merely those who display transformational qualities (Mills & Boardley, 2017, p.567)”. Such petty statements are not necessary; especially when they are unfounded.

Finally, in summing up, (Cruickshank & Collins, 2017, p. 573) state:

“For clarity, we still see that work on the full spectrum of leadership behaviour, including that of a socially undesirable nature, plus a consideration of the cognitive drivers of leadership behaviour, are essential routes forward if researchers are to make a significant stride in practically meaningful knowledge; in short, what leaders do. On the basis of their calls to explore attitudes, character, morality and value congruence, it seems Mills and Boardley are perhaps more focused on who leaders are. If we have taken their suggestions correctly, this work will offer an interesting perspective but one that is distinct from the expertise focus we continue to pursue.

We do not believe it is useful to make a distinction between the examination of who leaders are and what they do and achieve. Rather than creating arbitrary dichotomies, we believe it important to examine the attitudes and behaviours of both leaders (expert or otherwise) and followers holistically. Although we share the sentiment in Cruickshank and Collins’ call for “practically meaningful knowledge”, given the criticisms we have made here, we wonder if they are following their own advice. As such, we urge Cruickshank and Collins to empirically test their claim to the effectiveness of dark side behaviours, as at present, the practical value of their research is virtually nonexistent in our opinion. To do this, however, they will need to address

the range of criticisms we have outlined again here, not least by providing a definition of the behaviours in question and how they define effectiveness. We hope that Cruickshank and Collins accept this challenge and welcome the production of empirical evidence that truly advances leadership in sport.

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### **Conflict of interest**

John Mills and Ian Boardley declare that they have no conflicts of interest relevant to the content of this letter.

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