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THE DARK SIDE OF LEADERSHIP: DEALING WITH A NARCISSISTIC BOSS

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ABSTRACT

Some of the defining characteristics of narcissists include a grandiose sense of self-importance, preoccupation with success and power, a sense of infallibility, and a supreme confidence in their ability and intelligence. Ironically, many of these characteristics are rewarded in business organizations, which may explain why there seems to be so many narcissists in management positions. Assuming we will be dealing with narcissists throughout our career, it makes sense for us to understand what makes them tick, and more importantly what we can do to work with them in a constructive manner.

INTRODUCTION

A narcissist is motivated by a continuous need to feed a grandiose conception of self. Masterson (1988) characterized this motivation as a constant need for "supplies," which he defined as those activities and relationships that reinforce this sense of grandiosity. This often leads to a narcissist being a restless person, often displaying workaholic tendencies to constantly reinforce the sense of grandeur and achievement.

The term *narcissist* is from the Greek myth about Narcissus. There are many variations, but essentially the story is about Narcissus, a young man known for his beauty, who falls in love with his own reflection in a lake and eventually dies of starvation, fulfilling a prophesy foretold at his birth. A classic version by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses* has the nymph Echo falling in love with Narcissus. When he spurns her affection, she is heartbroken. Nemesis, the goddess of revenge, punishes Narcissus by luring him to the pool where he sees his image and lays "gazing enraptured into the pool, hour after hour," where he eventually dies and changes into a flower that bears his name, the narcissus (Wikipedia, 2013).

The Greeks were very astute observers of the human condition. This simple myth encapsulates many of the characteristics of the narcissistic personality. Preoccupation with the self makes it impossible to form connections with others, the origins of the personality go back to childhood, and the characteristics of the personality inevitably lead to conflicts.

WHAT IS NARCISSISM?

Narcissism is a personality trait that encompasses grandiosity, self-absorption, a sense of entitlement, and fragile self-esteem. Often coupled with an exploitative and even hostile attitude, narcissism is a trait often found in powerful leaders (Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006). In the current literature on good and bad/destructive leadership (Padilla, et al. 2007; Peterson, et al., 2012; Shaw, et al., 2011), narcissism is often identified as a dominant cause of 'bad' leadership behaviors (Higgs, 2009). At its extreme, narcissism manifests as a diagnosable personality disorder.

Narcissistic Personality Disorder

A long-standing pattern of grandiosity (either actual or in fantasy), coupled with an overwhelming need for admiration and a complete lack of empathy, characterize narcissistic personality disorder. In order for a person to be diagnosed with narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) they must meet five or more of the following symptoms (Psych Central, 2013):

- **Has a grandiose sense of self-importance** (e.g., exaggerates achievements and talents, expects to be recognized as superior without commensurate achievements)
 - **Is preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love**
 - **Believes that he or she is "special" and unique** and can only be understood by, or should associate with, other special or high-status people (or institutions)
 - **Requires excessive admiration**
 - **Has a very strong sense of entitlement**, e.g., unreasonable expectations of especially favorable treatment or automatic compliance with his or her expectations
 - **Is exploitative of others**, e.g., takes advantage of others to achieve his or her own ends
 - **Lacks empathy**, e.g., is unwilling to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others
 - **Is often envious of others** or believes that others are envious of him or her
 - **Regularly shows arrogant, haughty behaviors or attitudes**
- (Symptom criteria summarized from: American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

THE DARK SIDE

There is no shortage of terms for the adverse side of leadership, and the frequency of narcissistic personality traits found in undesirable leaders (Chatterjee & Hambrick, 2007; Harrison & Clough, 2006). While all of the following sections discuss different terms proposed by various authors, one common thread is the prevalence of narcissist traits in each description.

'Bad' Leadership

Higgs (2009) performed a review of the literature and explored the extent to which leader narcissism explained 'bad' leadership behaviors. In addition to the term 'bad' leadership, other terms noted by Higgs found in the academic literature include:

- Leadership derailment
- Toxic leadership
- Negative leadership
- Evil leadership
- 'Dark-side' leadership
- Abusive leadership
- Destructive leadership

A number of central themes occur in these descriptions. Abuse of power occurs to serve personal goals, reinforce self-image, and to conceal personal inadequacies. Inflicting damage on subordinates includes bullying, coercion, damage to their psychological well-being, and inconsistent or arbitrary treatment of subordinates. Over-exercise of control and rule breaking to serve the leader's own purposes are also recurring themes that describe 'bad' leaders (Higgs, 2009, p. 168), and are consistent with narcissistic personality types.

Narcissistic Leadership

It is not unusual to experience narcissistic personalities in top management positions. One critical component of the orientation of leaders is the degree of intensity their narcissistic tendencies has been developed (Kets de Vries & Miller, 1985). Hostility toward any perceived rivals and a corresponding fragility of self-esteem are often hallmarks of

narcissism in a leadership context. "Indeed, it is only to be expected that many narcissistic people, with their need for power, prestige, and glamour, eventually end up in leadership positions. Their sense of drama, their ability to manipulate others, their knack for establishing quick, superficial relationships serve them well in organizational life." (Kets de Vries, 2003, p. 23). While there is often a sense of excitement from the superficial charisma of a narcissistic leader initially, the darker side of their excessively narcissistic personality is eventually revealed. Something is lacking: an integrated sense of self (ibid, p. 24).

An additional aspect of the dark side of narcissist leadership is the drive for power, often in a dysfunctional or even destructive way (Camm, 2013). Hubris is a predictable characteristic in uncontrolled narcissism. Such leaders often retreat into their own world, where they are opinionated, myopic, and unwilling to seek or accept advice from others. "Hubris is a recurring theme in leadership, for the obvious reason that excessive pride and arrogance often accompany power." (Kets de Vries, 2003, p. 60).

The Toxic Triangle

Narcissistic personalities cannot exercise power without the willingness of followers. Padilla, et al. (2007) describes the toxic triangle of destructive leaders, susceptible followers, and a conducive environment. Characteristics of destructive leaders include charisma, personalized use of power, and narcissism. Given the right environment, the willingness and desire of subordinates for direction and authority makes them particularly susceptible to the influence of charismatic, manipulative leaders. May (1972) characterizes this as pseudoinnocence, the practice of abdicating responsibility by giving power and authority to another.

POSITIVE ASPECTS OF NARCISSISTIC LEADERSHIP

There are characteristics of narcissistic leaders that tend to be rewarded in the corporate world (Harrison & Clough, 2006). When channeled in a constructive manner, they can accomplish results that are admired. Maccoby (2000), in an often cited *Harvard Business Review* article, emphasizes several potentially positive characteristics of narcissistic leaders.

The preoccupation with fantasies that characterize many narcissists can be channeled to present a vision for the future of a company. A sense of self-importance, while often seen as obnoxious, can also be a strength in having the perseverance to follow a vision through despite resistance from others.

As already mentioned, narcissistic leaders are often skillful orators and persuasive, charismatic personalities. In addition, they crave attention, even adulation, which makes them particularly adept at gathering followers. While this can often be a dysfunctional or even destructive relationship; in a positive manifestation it is necessary to follow through on a vision for the future of an organization.

FINAL THOUGHTS

All of us have a certain amount of narcissism; the desire to be admired as a unique individual is a normal human drive. However, as that desire manifests itself closer to the symptoms/characteristics of narcissistic personality disorder, it begins to have a destructive effect on others. Because many of the personality characteristics of highly-narcissistic leaders are rewarded in organizations, it is highly likely that we will encounter this personality type in our professional life. Understanding what drives them is a first step in dealing with narcissists in a constructive way.

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