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### A HUMAN RESOURCES TABOO: THE NARCISSISTIC SENIOR EXECUTIVE

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Does this brief summary describe any senior executives or leaders you know of?

- They focus on their own importance. It's more about them than the work.
- They broadcast their vision, rather than talk to people in a meaningful way.
- There is only one way to do things: their way.
- They show very little curiosity about the people around them.
- They appear to be invulnerable. They never apologise.
- They can be emotionally volatile.
- Their style is trendsetting, flamboyant, or quirky.
- Their name is closely associated with the company.

Senior executives are at the top for a reason: they have powerful ideas, and they deliver. But the clues we list above are warning signs of potentially destructive narcissistic behaviour.

#### **HR directors and executive coaches are often the ones who are forced to sit on the sidelines and observe an unfolding disaster.**

In her practitioner research study, Susan Kay asked other HR directors who had been in this situation: How did your organisation deal with a narcissistic leader? She found that most organisations do one of two things. Either they recognise that there is a problem, but only try to limit damages; or, the executive team makes a conscious choice, in the interest of short-term results, not to intervene (Kay, 2014). The HR director is essentially powerless.

#### **Narcissism is a two-edged sword.**

What do we mean by narcissism in the organisational context? Fundamentally, the term describes a pattern of behaviour that includes arrogance, self-interest, lack of empathy, and excessive need for admiration. But of course, we can also think of organisational scenarios in which this kind of behaviour can be beneficial. So, the dilemma, from an HR perspective, is complex. Narcissistic behaviour can be productive, or destructive. Narcissists take risks, and that can be very good for a company. They can be charismatic, and they energise people. Not surprisingly, there is a disproportionate number of narcissists at the very top of organisations.

#### **In fact, there is a sweet spot: an ideal balance between harmful narcissistic behaviour and optimal leader effectiveness.**

Productive narcissists are a great asset to any organisation. These leaders take bold risks—but usually not on their own. They can be visionary strategists who like taking credit for a job well done, but they also understand the significance of leaving a worthy legacy. A list of positive narcissists might include any number of FANG (Facebook, Amazon, Netflix, Google) senior executives. Destructive narcissists, on the other hand, demand admiration. They are envious of others. They lack empathy. They exploit people. Their visionary ability sometimes expands to include fantastical and implausible strategies (Kay, 2014).

### **How does narcissism become destructive in some senior leaders?**

Let's take an empathetic, rather than judgmental, stance for a moment. If we could look inside such a person, we might find a great deal of insecurity. Destructive narcissism may be linked to extrinsic self-esteem; that is, a sense of self-worth that is dependent on external positive reinforcement. The person craves constant attention and positive reactions to his or her actions. Without this, the person feels vulnerable and powerless. The person may not be able to calm his or her own anxieties or ask for help, and instead becomes increasingly grandiose and irrational in self-talk and behaviour. Hence, destructive narcissism could be seen as a kind of self-defence that, paradoxically, also dampens fear of failure and encourages risky behaviour.

Reaction to a perceived threat to self-esteem can be triggered in a new or untested situation, even if a person sees the change as something they desired, such as a major promotion. An explosion of heated energy and grandiose ideas from a new CEO, for example, may swiftly take an organisation to even better results, but may also trigger destructive tendencies. Ultimately, a destructive narcissist, if not controlled or removed, can cause great damage.

Here it seems useful to revisit the current emphasis on “transformational” leadership. Burnes and colleagues (2018) suggest that the concept of transformational leadership has been misinterpreted. Originally, “transformation” was meant to describe a process of moral leadership informed by followers, and not a transformation of subordinates. This misinterpretation has “allowed formal leaders an enormous degree of freedom to act as they see fit and to reward themselves for the privilege” (Burnes et al, 2018: 142). As a result, facing up to destructive narcissistic behaviour can feel like going against widely taught and accepted leadership best practices.

### **What can be done to help a star performer at the senior executive level who is perceived as a destructive narcissist?**

“Narcissism” has become a highly-overused term. High performers can have episodes of what appear to be destructive narcissistic behaviours—but they should not be immediately stigmatised. This label can be misused by people who don't like a leader, or his or her actions. People who are not mental health professionals—and this includes coaches—should never make a diagnosis. However, even without a formal diagnosis, there are several areas in which other people in the organisation do have scope to take action.

**First of all, HR directors and coaches can increase awareness of the triggers and effects of destructive narcissistic behaviour.**

This may include an adaptation period for talented people as they move into senior roles. It could take the form of coaching for executives who are showing signs of grandiose behaviour. This type of intervention must be done by very experienced executive coaches, with the full support of the board of directors. There should be a mechanism for supporting and equipping subordinates to manage upward, so they can get the best out of productive narcissists, or protect themselves from the destructive ones. On the other hand, some people may actually dampen their own productive narcissistic behaviour, and they could be encouraged to let some of that energy loose.

**Most importantly, the chair of the board of directors, the directors, and the executive teams must explicitly address organisational bias that fosters destructive narcissism.**

Boards have accountability for stewardship, and therefore have more scope for action than HR directors, coaches or consultants. Susan Kay outlines in her research that the board can:

- Extend time horizon of long term incentive plans (e.g. from 3 to 5 years plus)
- Use bonus claw back mechanisms linked to longer term performance
- Shift from a focus on pay, to other conditions linked to performance

If the organisation is all about short-term results and profits, then the board should have the courage to say so—but prepare in advance to take action quickly if narcissistic behaviour threatens profit. On the other hand, if such behaviour is not aligned with an organisation's values and objectives, then the board should have the courage to force the destructive narcissist to change or leave, before the culture becomes toxic.

The key point, Burnes and colleagues argue, is that all stakeholders in the organisation should hold their senior executives accountable for actions or inactions that appear to have consequences of greatest benefit to the leader, not the organisation.

**Getting people to pay attention to the problem is the hard part.**

It is said that the difference between a strong ego and rampant narcissism is the person's ability to accept and act on feedback from others. Gathering incontrovertible evidence of a person's behaviour can be the first step in forcing the individual and the organisation to take notice, and then take action.

**To sum up, narcissism is essential to our mental health and development as adults.**

Some of us even need a bit more of it. But when an executive team or organisation ignores the potentially destructive behaviour of a senior executive, they are not only doing the individual a disservice, but they are also wasting the talent and energy of a valuable employee. Destructive



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narcissists often flame out and disappear. Before they go, they pollute the organisation, internally and externally, in a way that is all too easy for the world to measure: share price.

But focused feedback can be a powerful way to bring the problem to the fore. Guaranteed anonymity through a survey ensures more honest evaluations and gives less powerful employees a voice. In parallel, the organisation can evaluate the effects of perceived narcissistic behaviour, and make a decision about whether to help or sanction an individual who may be, after all, feeling quite lonely at the top.

### **References**

Kay, S. (2014). Willful Blindness - Narcissists at Work. INSEAD EMCCC Thesis.

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