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EMBRACE THE NARCISSIST WITHIN YOU! -

UNDERSTANDING THE PARADOX OF NARCISSISM TO CREATE PRODUCTIVE LEADERS

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Narcissism is often given a negative connotation; it is seen as dangerous and destructive. Narcissistic leaders—who may appear to be both high performing and ruthless—are hard to deal with but easy to “label” by the people who work for them ([see previous blog in this series](#)). On the other hand, rarely do people consider that narcissism in a leader can be a good thing. Indeed, we could argue that [one of the pillars of effective leadership is a healthy degree of narcissism](#). Should some leaders work to *increase* their levels of narcissism to improve their leadership performance?

We all possess narcissistic characteristics, as some level of narcissism is necessary to give us confidence to act and to deal with the challenges of (organisational) life: [Narcissism “... creates the foundations of self-confidence, assertiveness, self-expression and proper execution of power.”](#)

Indeed, the leadership style most frequently found at top management levels is the narcissist (Chatterjee & Hambrick, 2007). However, the relationship between leader narcissism and leader effectiveness rated by others was best described through a curvilinear function (Grijalva & Harms, 2013). That means that there is an optimal midrange of narcissism. At one extreme, driven by an inflated sense of self, pathological narcissists feel entitled and pursue power at all costs and ultimately destroy their organisation. At the other extreme, executives with very low levels of narcissism lack the confidence and assertiveness to emerge as a leader and therefore are likely to have no impact on the positive growth of the organisation at all.

Me, me, me! versus Only you!

At one extreme, a narcissistic obsession with oneself means that others become irrelevant or indeed are seen as mere tools to achieve goals. At the other extreme, we find people who are too focused on others. They typically have high levels of empathy and are extremely dependent on others. People with personalities that are characterised by extreme co-dependency are similar to narcissists, in that both have a fragile sense of self. Whereas the narcissist inflates their sense of self, individuals with a depended personality heavily rely on others to give them a sense of who they are and to receive acknowledgement of their self-worth. This reliance on others for approval or a sense of identity leads to avoidance of conflict.

Executives who fear that being in the spotlight exposes them to possible rejection or conflict, might not have the confidence to put themselves forward as leaders; make tough decisions that not everyone might agree with; or pitch innovative ideas. Even though these potential leaders do great work, they become invisible.

We can also find people on the low end of the narcissism spectrum who experience high levels of self-doubt but, despite this, perform well. The term imposter syndrome refers to the fear of being “found out” as people with imposter syndrome believe that their achieved performance and successes are purely down to luck and not actual abilities. As a result, they are overly self-critical; they hesitate to speak up; and they feel they must work extra hard. They avoid putting themselves forward for leadership positions. Ironically, fuelled by self-doubt, people with impostor syndrome often surpass work requirements and impress their colleagues. As these insecure overachievers produce work at the highest standards, one might argue that their perfectionistic tendencies contribute to organisational performance. However, they are unable to internalize their success; thoughts like “I was lucky this time. When will everyone find out that I am not up to the job?!” reoccur incessantly. Their feeling of inadequacy leads to high stress levels, which may derail their career, and could lead to burn out and depression. Their contribution is diminished in the long run.

Being seen as a leader

Letting results and achievement speak for themselves, will not suffice to create a successful (leadership) career! In the current dynamic digital age, personal brand and a social media presence seem to be a key feature of effective leadership in order to build a network with stakeholders and clients. Even though concepts such as quiet leadership highlight that people can achieve success and instigate change by humbly working behind the scenes, effective leaders also need to be seen by others as such.

This is why we argue that to a certain degree, narcissism is essential for good leaders. Confidence and assertiveness (even if it is quiet) are needed in order to increase authority and visibility in a leadership role. In fact, research has found a positive relationship between leader narcissism and leader emergence (Braun, 2017).

We encourage talent managers, HR professionals, and organisational mentors to rethink narcissism. Although it is rarely described as a trait to “develop,” we argue that, by seeking out the high potential members of the organisation who stay out of the limelight, the organisation may discover some hidden gems. In addition, an open discussion that helps people to understand the spectrum of narcissistic behaviours—the advantages and disadvantages—will help people to understand and better manage destructive narcissistic behaviour as well as get the most out of people with underdeveloped potential.



References

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