



## KETS DE VRIES INSTITUTE

### COACHING THE NARCISSISTIC EXECUTIVE

ORIANE KETS DE VRIES & MANFRED KETS DE VRIES, KDVI

Jean-Marie Messier cut a Napoleon-like figure in the business world in France. In the 1980s, Messier had held a number of senior roles in the Ministry of Economy, Finance and Industry, and went into investment banking in 1989. In 1994, he took over as head of the 150-year-old utility group, Compagnie Generale des Eaux. Messier was seen as an intelligent, flamboyant leader, who had no lack of vision. Within six years of becoming CEO at Compagnie Generale des Eaux, he had spent more than \$100 billion on acquisitions, renaming the company Vivendi Universal. It was later said that his ambition to build a French media empire that would surpass the giants of the American entertainment industry had blinded him. By then, Vivendi Universal was facing the threat of bankruptcy as well as criminal charges.

According to the authors of *The Man Who Tried to Buy the World*, Messier had two contrasting sides. In public, Messier played the role of a modern, approachable chief executive who believed in collegial management. Inside the company, he could appear authoritarian, sometimes cutting (Johnson & Orange, 2003). His brusque, high-handed management style alienated company employees. In 2002, his firing of Pierre Lescure, the head of Canal Plus, prompted staff to disrupt work in protest. He was also known to undermine the credibility of those around him in order to strengthen his own position, and to use his charismatic vision to circumvent rational decision-making and influence the opinions of the board.

In 2002, Vivendi Universal posted the largest loss in French history. The company had accumulated €35 billion in debt and its shares lost more than 80% of their value. The board forced Messier to resign – the public announcement of his departure led to a surge in the stock price. Subsequently, his vision of a French media empire was shattered as parts of Vivendi Universal were dismantled and sold off.

Can executive coaching be a means for containing and hopefully helping narcissistic individuals to thrive in the organisations rather than destroying them? How would a leadership coach approach a coaching engagement with an executive with narcissistic tendencies?

Based on our research and coaching practice, we found that, when preparing for the coaching engagement, the following three aspects are important to pay attention to:

First, it is important to have an in-depth understanding of narcissism, the most probable causes for narcissistic personality disorder (Millon, Grossman, Millon, Meagher, & Ramnath, 2004), and the various strains of the disorder. A leadership coach should be able to identify a narcissistic individual, distinguish healthy from unhealthy narcissism, and know when narcissistic tendencies

have turned into a personality disorder. A basic knowledge of narcissism will allow a coach to assess whether the issues go beyond the scope of coaching work and when a client is in need of a different approach, i.e., needs to be referred to their GP or psychotherapist.

Second, it is helpful to be aware of the most common manifestations of narcissistic tendencies within an organisational context. Very generally, how do individuals with narcissistic tendencies behave at work and how does this affect their professional environment? To what extent does the organisational environment contribute to narcissistic behaviour? This knowledge will allow the coach to more easily identify current issues or problems that could occur in the future.

Third, a coach should assess and be aware of his or her personal sensitivity to narcissistic behaviour. *Know thyself*. How do *you* relate to people with narcissistic tendencies? How will that affect *your* ability to work with such people? The coach should be attuned to his or her responses vis-à-vis the client and use any counter-transferential feelings<sup>1</sup> as a source of information.

When coaching executives with narcissistic tendencies, the following aspects are important to keep in mind:

First, creating commitment is difficult. People with narcissistic tendencies rarely seek help of their own accord. Typically, they only ask for help when faced with a major life crisis or when their grandiose perceptions of themselves are shaken or shattered in some way. Indeed, these individuals “often do not realise that their behaviour is a problem for others and are not concerned about their behaviour’s detrimental impact on others if they are aware” (Lubit, 2002, p. 128).

The following situations may push someone with narcissistic tendencies to seek help:

- Their performance or their pattern of behaviour is becoming a notable problem at work.
- They have lost their job, position, or have failed in an important task.
- They have (severe) interpersonal issues, either at work or in their private life, that become a roadblock to achieving their goals.
- Their supervisor or team has requested the coaching.
- Their spouse or other significant person has requested the coaching.
- They are experiencing illness or physical symptoms of stress or exhaustion.
- They are suffering from depression.
- They are going through a mid-life crisis or are having difficulty coping with aging.

Second, the change might not be achieved that easily. The prognosis for coaching individuals with narcissistic tendencies depends on the severity of narcissistic characteristics and the client’s motivation to change - be it psychological pain (i.e., separation, divorce, estrangement in the family), negative physical symptoms, aging, a desire to improve performance, or a way to avoid a threat to status, position or influence.

Third, the safe transitional space and working alliance (trust) are particularly important when coaching leaders with narcissistic tendencies due to their often fragile sense of self. Any strong form of disagreement is quickly perceived as a personal attack. Therefore, trust, as a basis for a safe working alliance, has to be established by acknowledging the client's needs and by showing empathy.

Fourth, generating interpersonal awareness is useful; education and feedback about the negative effects of their narcissistic behaviour on others and how emotional distancing can affect their career is key to helping the executive address difficult interpersonal relationships. The coach can then help them to devise strategies for managing their destructive narcissistic tendencies.

Through coaching, a deeper interpersonal awareness will develop and hopefully reduce the client's tendency to see the world in black and white, soften their suspicious nature, take constructive feedback on board and learn how to use narcissistic tendencies in a productive rather than in a destructive manner.

## References

*Johnson, J., & Orange, M. (2003). The man who tried to buy the world: Jean-Marie Messier and Vivendi Universal. New York: Portfolio.*

*Lubit, R. (2002). The long-term organizational impact of destructively narcissistic managers. The Academy of Management Executive (1993-2005), 16(1), 127-138.*

Millon, T., Grossman, S., Millon, C., Meagher, S., & Ramnath, R. (2004). Personality disorders in modern life (2nd ed.). New York: John Wiley & Sons.

## Footnotes

<sup>i</sup> Countertransference happens when the coach projects his or her feelings unconsciously onto the client. Although countertransference is often interfering, it is a rich source of information for the coaching engagement as it can also be the coach's reaction towards the client's subconscious redirection of their own feelings and desires towards the coach (transference).