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CAN A WOMAN LEADER BE A NARCISSIST?

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"Think narcissist, think male"? Often the answer is, yes. A case in point is the Harvard Business Review's Classic on the pro's and con's of narcissistic leaders (Maccoby 2004). This article presents 34 different examples of past and present leaders in the public and private sectors with a narcissistic trait. Only one of these 34 examples - an anonymous (!) one - concerns a woman leader.

However, just as "think manager, think male" (Schein 2001) deserves a closer look, so does narcissism and gender. While idealistically hoping for a better world through women leadership, the shadow side of women leadership is often overlooked. This does not do the development of women leaders any good, I am afraid. In this blog I will show that women leaders, too, can be narcissistic. Yet it's a different kind of narcissism with different implications for leadership development. Three types of narcissistic women leaders - the Super Woman, the Perfectionist and the Lenient Leader - will be presented. Before going further, it should be emphasised that this blog focuses on leaders, who are effective and whose narcissistic tendencies get in the way of continued growth. Individuals whose narcissism requires psychotherapy in order to be able to function are expressly excluded.

Shedding a light on female narcissism helps women leaders, who recognise themselves in one of these types, to improve their self-awareness and thus their leadership success. [Executives](#) and [Leadership Development Professionals](#) need to be aware that they may have such individuals in their talent pool. Customising leadership development to individual strengths and weaknesses gets a higher return on investment in talent (McCall 1998). Executive coaches who realise that narcissistic women leaders do exist can learn how to coach such leaders for the benefit of their clients.

Narcissism comes in different shapes and forms. Psychologists nowadays distinguish between four narcissistic personality traits (Grijalva 2014):

1. Grandiose/Exhibitionism: *"I like to be the centre of attention"*. This is the archetype of narcissism: based on the ancient god Narcissus, who fell in love with his own mirror image.
2. Exploitative/Entitlement: *"I deserve more than others and do what it takes to get it"*. People with this type of narcissism think that they are special and worth more than others. These first two traits are the ones we usually recognise as narcissistic behaviour and give it its negative connotation: the manipulative, self-serving, arrogant leader who seeks the limelight. For leaders, such behaviour in large doses is unhelpful and can lead to derailment.
3. Leadership/Authority: *"I prefer to be the boss"*. The desire for Leadership/Authority is less often associated with narcissism, because it positively correlates with self-esteem and emotional stability: [traits that come in handy for a leadership career](#). Of course this, too, is a [matter of degree](#): too much may result in dominance and insensitivity.
4. Vulnerability: *"Am I really good enough?"*. Vulnerability as a narcissistic trait is a fairly new discovery. It is marked by low self-esteem, anxiety, feelings of inadequacy, neuroticism, and introversion. In small doses, and provided the leader does not hide it, vulnerability can make it easier to be an authentic leader (Goffee 2000). But in larger doses it obviously does not contribute to leadership effectiveness.

Regarding the difference between men and women, we now have a conclusive answer. A longitudinal study, analysing 31 years of narcissism research on in total almost 500.000 individuals comes to the conclusion that, by and large, men are more narcissistic than women (Grijalva 2014): Men score significantly higher on (2) Exploitative/Entitlement and (3) Leadership/Authority. So there is some truth in "think narcissist, think male".

What about the other two traits? (1) Grandiose/Exhibitionism and (4) Vulnerability are fairly gender balanced with women scoring slightly higher on Vulnerability. Finding women leaders with a narcissistic tendency towards vanity, attention seeking and self-absorption (trait 1) should not be a surprise. Such leaders regularly appear in the stories and myths of Western Civilisation. After all, the tale of Snow White started from a narcissistic injury inflicted on a woman in a position of authority. The Trojan War, an archetypical story, was ignited by a narcissistic conflict between goddesses: Aphrodite narcissistically manipulated Paris into awarding her the prize of beauty; Hera and Athena - hurt in their narcissism - next sided with the Greeks to take revenge.

Such stories led Sigmund Freud to the false assumption that women are more narcissistic than men. Since then, we have fortunately learned a lot more about narcissism, as just mentioned.

The fourth trait is less common and more difficult to detect by only observing behaviour. At first glance, vulnerable narcissism looks like [low narcissism, which is expressed by self-doubt, imposter syndrome and perfectionism](#). The difference is that low-level narcissists believe that they are no good, whereas vulnerable narcissists do believe that they are good. They are merely highly sensitive to external criticism that threatens their positive self-image. A person with an inclination towards vulnerable narcissism will therefore develop strategies to avoid being hurt by negative feedback or disappointing results. While coaching women leaders and high potentials during the past fifteen years, I have observed that such an individual will pursue at least one of three different strategies, leading to the following typology of vulnerable narcissistic women leaders. Historic examples of successful woman leaders serve as illustration.

The Superwoman: *"I can do it all".*

A Superwoman is a woman who by working hard aims to be successful in her career, as a mother, and as a wife. Catherine the Great, Czarina of Russia 1762-1796, was such a superwoman. She managed to uplift and expand Russia from a peripheral place to a world power. Catherine controlled and decided everything: from correspondence with diplomats to the education of her son and grandson, from economic affairs to the balls held at the palace, from building the Hermitage and its art collection to writing new laws for Russia. She micro-managed rather than empowered her subordinates. Catherine's leadership style prevented her from leaving a management structure that could ensure continuity to further modernize Russia. Catherine would have been happier and even more successful if she had learned to delegate. Consequently, Catherine led a life filled with discipline, hard work, and little time for herself.

The Perfectionist: *"No one but me can do it."*

Whereas the superwoman seeks to control the outcome of her actions by taking responsibility for everything, the Perfectionist is focused on the quality of what she chooses to do, aiming to meet self-imposed performance standards. Isabella, Queen of Spain 1474-1504, was another woman leader who turned a medieval backwater into a world power. Isabella found the perfect husband, hired the best teachers to ensure a perfect education for her children, and presented herself as the perfect wife sewing her husband's shirts. She devised the perfect succession plan: central rule by one of her children. Yet when her children died before her, the perfect plan fell

apart. Isabella was at a loss and never really recovered to her old decisive self. Isabella's vulnerable narcissism shines through in her will. Rather than reflecting on her spectacular accomplishments, she fretted about all the things that were not yet perfectly in order.

The Lenient Leader: *"I cannot ask someone else to do it."*

The Lenient Leader accepts underperformance from her staff to avoid negative feedback. Elisabeth I, Queen of England 1558-1603, turned a country rigged with strife into a prosperous, stable and independent nation. Elisabeth expected her staff to be motivated by serving her and a sense of duty and admiration for the Queen. She thus had difficulty managing her generals who rather were driven by honour on the battlefield and financial gain. Elisabeth revelled in the admiration and flattery she received from the Earls of Leicester and Essex. In return and for fear of being abandoned, she time and again forgave their amateurish performance in military matters.

So, yes, a woman leader can be narcissistic, too. But not in the way we generally know it. Again this is not to say that women leaders who display the behaviour of any of these three types are necessarily narcissistic. The more so, because from the outside they can be easily confused with individuals who have low narcissism. [However, individual leaders, supervisors and development professionals alike would be advised to look beyond the obvious. Diversity of leadership is also expressed in diversity of personality.](#) To develop better leaders it is worthwhile to study the good, the bad and the unknown of the individuals who take on a leadership role.

References

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