



THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

FISHER COLLEGE OF BUSINESS

The Duality of Narcissistic Leaders:

The Good,
the Bad, and
the Downright
Dangerous



Narcissism has garnered considerable public interest as of late as narcissistic tendencies such as self-serving and unethical behavior have been tied to industries (e.g., banking) and individuals (e.g., Jeff Skilling) for their proximal role in crises such as the global financial collapse and fall of Enron, respectively. Even the president of the United States has seemingly exuded a level of narcissism as to embolden 27 psychiatrists, psychologists and other experts to compile a *New York Times* bestselling book opining on Donald Trump's mental health¹. Which, for those associated with the American

Psychiatric Association, is in direct violation of the Goldwater Rule—a code of ethics that prohibits members from speculating about the mental health of those they have not personally examined. Yet, narcissists are also seen as having prototypical leader characteristics such as charisma, power, confidence, and conviction. Indeed, studies conducting leaderless group discussions have demonstrated that narcissists are more likely to be elected as leaders^{2,3}. As a result, researchers have increasingly explored how narcissistic leaders both positively and negatively influence their workplace.

Narcissism Defined

The current *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)* assesses Narcissistic Personality Disorder using diagnostic criteria such as: a grandiose sense of self-importance, exorbitant fantasies of power and brilliance, lack of empathy, ruthless interpersonal behavior, a desire for undue admiration and an arrangement of selfish behaviors and attitudes. This condition, however, is diagnosed in less than 1% of the general population. Pulling from the criteria above, researchers have studied narcissistic leaders within the realm of “normal” or subclinical narcissism, defining narcissism as a personality trait, instead of a disorder, that varies within individuals and is characterized by aggrandized self-views, grandiosity, and self-absorption⁴. While it is common to use the term *narcissism* categorically (this article does!), it is important to remember that narcissism—among the normal population—falls on a continuum. It is normally distributed and people may hold higher or lower levels. Below we detail research findings on the good, the bad and the dangerous aspects of narcissism.

Impact on Others

The Good

First Impressions.

Narcissists are masters of self-presentation, they not only engage in more impression management tactics than those lower in narcissism but also place more importance on their effectiveness. They deeply care what people think about them and

endeavor to make laudable first impressions. As narcissists are naturally outgoing, assertive, flashy and confident, they are naturally successful in materializing positive initial impressions. Consequently, at least initially, peers and followers gladly anoint narcissistic individuals as leaders, acknowledging their power and authority. This ability to charm others, combined with unwavering self-confidence, permeates the minds of followers who then become inspired to fulfill the visionary direction of narcissistic leaders.

The Bad

Lasting Impressions. Despite being initially rated by their student work groups as more entertaining, confident and warm after their first group meeting, narcissists were

subsequently seen by their peers in a much more negative light by the end of their last, seventh meeting—a mere two additional hours of group time—rated as more hostile, arrogant and cold (ratings reversed from higher to lower on warmth)³. Unfortunately, narcissists primarily care about achieving and managing impressions relevant to agentic domains—demonstrating power and superiority while craving respect and admiration—at the expense of creating and maintaining communal, meaningful relationships

(e.g., caring, trust, helpfulness, warmth)⁵. The inspirational or visionary appeal of narcissists therefore becomes quickly decoupled from their followers.



Narcissism: a grandiose sense of self-importance, exorbitant fantasies of power and brilliance, lack of empathy, ruthless interpersonal behavior, a desire for undue admiration and an arrangement of selfish behaviors and attitudes (DSM-5)

The Dangerous

Deviant Interpersonal Behavior. Perhaps the most destructive interpersonal aspect of narcissism is their proclivity toward counterproductive or deviant behavior. Meta-analyses—a statistical technique that aggregates prior individual studies to provide overall estimates—have demonstrated a robust positive relationship between narcissism and workplace deviant behavior such as theft, fraud, abuse and aggressiveness^{6,7}. These behaviors often arise out of hostility and anger in response to perceived ego threats against the narcissistic self (e.g., negative feedback, social rejection). Moreover, our research suggests that these behaviors are engrained in narcissistic individuals—they engage in deviant behavior regardless of provocations—as it may satisfy their self-views and agentic desires of superiority and special treatment. That is,

narcissists may inherently engage in destructive and abnormal behavior because (a) they serve to sustain their lofty sense of superiority and (b) believe they are above customary rules and societal norms. The end result is that narcissistic leaders render others as tools that are manipulated, exploited and discarded to serve their personal needs and goals.

Impact on Organization

The Good

Taking Necessary Risks. Narcissism is perhaps most adaptable to circumstances where competition and other influences necessitates risk. An inflated sense of confidence and self-brilliance assures that narcissists are more likely to make risky decisions, especially when threats are at their highest—when taking risks are necessary for survival. As a result, following the economic recession, companies with more narcissistic



CEOs were found to have stronger economic returns⁸. A desire for glory and lack of care toward relationships may also amplify their inclination to take risks. One study discovered that narcissistic pharmaceutical CEOs were more likely to have their firm adopt novel, risky strategic initiatives and that this relationship was more pronounced when the initiative was related to the most publicized biotech domains⁹. Their ability to generate buy-in from organizational members is also expected to enhance the efficacy of such risky endeavors. A lack of connectedness with organizational members should also help narcissistic leaders make morally tough decisions such as layoffs that are ultimately best for a company's survival. Altogether, narcissism in leaders is effective in initiating change and taking action.

The Bad

Taking Unnecessary Risks. Of course, making drastic changes and taking risks is . . . well . . . risky. Narcissists, because of their self-confidence, are more likely to underscore the risks of their own bold changes or decisions. Moreover, they may also take drastic action in the pursuit of delusional visions of glory that has the ability to undermine the organizational efforts necessary for such change. Indeed, the meta-analytic relationship between narcissism and leader effectiveness is virtually zero, no matter how performance is measured (peers, subordinates, supervisors, objective criteria, etc.) unless, of course, performance is appraised by the narcissist (there is a positive relationship between narcissism and self-ratings of performance, go figure!)¹⁰. While taking risks—both good and bad—is a likely cause for this null relationship, the researchers found that this relationship is best treated in a non-linear fashion. That is, performance is highest for leaders with moderate—not too high, not too low—levels of narcissism.

The Dangerous

Ethical Decisions. While immoral decisions may positively or negatively impact leadership performance, unethical decisions—especially in this day and age—have potentially devastating impacts. Given their propensity to exploit others for personal gain and lack of selflessness, narcissists are much more likely to engage in unethical behavior. Indeed, narcissistic leaders engage in more business and financial crimes, sexual offenses in the workplace and other aforementioned deviant behaviors¹¹. Higher levels of narcissism in presidents have even been linked to an increase in impeachment investigations¹².

Conclusion

If research on narcissistic leaders has taught us anything, it is that narcissism is wrought with many conflicts of interest. Yes, we want leaders who are charming and charismatic and that transform our views and motivations. Yet we don't want to be played liked pawns to advance one's self-serving motives and desires. Something special may occur, however, when narcissistic leader goals align with those of the company and its members.

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