

# ARROGANCE, HUBRIS, AND NARCISSISM: **THE OVERCONFIDENT LEADER**

by Adrian Furnham

**T**here is Freudian psychological and psychiatric business literature on narcissism. We are now used to discussing our politicians as well as business leaders, movie stars, and models in these terms. PR-hungry narcissistic CEOs and politicians are clearly driven to gain power, glory, and the admiration of others. They can be visionaries and risk takers, seeing the big picture whilst downplaying the rules, laws, and conventions that handicap them. They can also be amazingly self-absorbed, deluded, and destructive.

Narcissists can be energetic, charismatic, leader-like, and willing to take the initiative to get projects moving. They can be relatively successful in management, sales, and entrepreneurship, but usually only for short periods. Although they are arrogant, vain, overbearing, demanding, self-deceived, and pompous, they can be so colourful and engaging that they often attract followers. Their self-confidence is attractive. Naively, people believe that they have to have something to be so confident about.

Narcissism, like all the personality disorders, must be understood as a spectrum, not a type. It is a matter of degree: confident, very confident, overconfident, sub-clinically narcissist, pathological narcissist. Confident – good (if an accurate assessment of talents); narcissism – bad. When they have some insight and self-awareness of their preferences and abilities and which organisational forces are in place to restrain them, they can act as great drivers for positive change and advancement. If articulate and educated as well as physically attractive, they

can become great leaders. But many are insufferably egotistical, self-absorbed, and deluded.

Several versions of the myth of Narcissus survive. They are warnings about hubris and pride. At the heart of the myth is the caution of misperception and self-love, the idea that inaccurate self-perceptions can lead to tragic and self-defeating consequences. There appears to be a moral, social, and clinical debate about narcissism. The moral issues concern the evils of hubris, the social issue the benefits or otherwise of modesty, while the clinical debate is about the consequences of misperceptions.

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## NARCISSISTIC PERSONALITY DISORDER

Many researchers list narcissism-arrogance as the first (probably major) cause of why CEOs fail. It is a case of “*I’m right and everybody else is wrong*”, a blinding belief in your own opinions. Thus, many

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have a diminished capacity to learn from others or previous experience.

They show an outright refusal (ever) to be accountable and, hence, responsible. They are resistant to change because they know that “my way” is best and always show an inability to recognise their (manifold) limitations.

Narcissists seem never to be defensive or embarrassed about their ambition and supremely confident in their ambitions. However, because they are so aware of, comfortable with, and grateful for, their strengths, they are easily and profoundly wounded by any suggestion that they might have serious weaknesses or shortcomings.

At work, they tend to be high-energy, outgoing, and competitive. They seem instinctively drawn to office politics and how to find and use power. They will charm those in authority or those from whom they believe they have something to gain.

### The psychiatric manuals list the manifestations of this disorder:

- 1 Reacts to criticism with feelings of rage, shame, or humiliation (even if not expressed)
- 2 Interpersonally exploitative; takes advantage of others to achieve their own ends
- 3 Grandiose sense of self-importance, e.g., exaggerates achievements and talents, and expects to be noticed as “special” without appropriate achievement
- 4 Believes that their problems are unique and can be understood only by other special people
- 5 Preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love
- 6 Sense of entitlement; unreasonable expectation of especially favourable treatment, e.g., assumes that he or she does not have to queue
- 7 Requires constant attention and admiration, e.g., keeps fishing for compliments
- 8 Lack of empathy; inability to recognise and experience how others feel
- 9 Preoccupied with feelings of envy

It is important to differentiate between two rather different types of narcissists: *grandiose* (e.g., manipulative, egotistical, exhibitionist, psychopathic) and *vulnerable* (e.g., craving, thin-skinned, hyper-vigilant). Grandiose narcissism is associated with immodesty, interpersonal dominance, self-absorption, callousness, and manipulateness; they are confident and suffer little stress. Vulnerable narcissists are often distressed, with low self-esteem and feelings of inferiority, yet also egocentric and hostile.

Narcissists overall are boastful, pretentious, and self-aggrandising. They overestimate their own abilities and accomplishments while simultaneously deflating others. They compare themselves favourably to famous, privileged people, believing that their own discovery as one of them is long overdue. They are surprisingly secure in their beliefs that they are gifted and unique and have special needs beyond the comprehension of ordinary people.

Paradoxically for some (the vulnerable, as opposed to the grandiose narcissist), *their self-esteem* is fragile, needing to be bolstered up by constant attention and admiration from others. They expect their demands to be met by special favourable treatment. In turn, they often exploit others, because they form relationships specifically designed to enhance their self-esteem. They need worshippers and acolytes.



They are also paradoxically *envious of others* and begrudge them their success. They are well known for their arrogance and their disdainful, patronising attitude. As managers, their difficult-to-fulfil needs can lead them to have problematic social relationships and make poor decisions.

Many are exceptionally *sensitive to setbacks*, feeling both degraded and humiliated. They mask this with defiant counterattacks and rage. They may withdraw from situations that led to failure or try to mask their grandiosity with an appearance of humility.

At work, narcissistic individuals have a grandiose sense of self-importance (for example, they exaggerate their achievements and talents, and expect to be recognised as superior without commensurate achievements). Inevitably they believe that they rightly deserve all sorts of markers of their specialness: bigger offices and salary, inflated job titles, a bigger budget dedicated to their needs, more support staff, and greater liberty to do as they wish.

Most individuals with NPD are preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, and money. They believe that they are “special” and unique and can therefore only be properly understood by, or should associate with, other special or high-status people (or institutions).

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They may try to “buy” themselves into exclusive circles. They often require excessive admiration and respect from people at work for everything they do. This is their most abiding characteristic. They usually have a sense of entitlement, that is, unreasonable expectations of especially favourable treatment or automatic compliance with their manifest needs. They are unsupportive but demand support for themselves. All are unwilling to recognise or identify with the feelings and needs of others in and out of work. They have desperately low emotional intelligence.

Essentially, narcissism is a *disorder* of self-esteem; it is essentially a cover-up. People with NPD self-destruct because their self-aggrandisement blinds their personal and business judgement and managerial behaviour. At work, they exploit others to get ahead, yet they demand special treatment. Worse, their reaction to any sort of criticism is extreme, including shame, rage, and tantrums. They aim to destroy that criticism, however well-intentioned and useful. They can be consumed with envy of, and disdain for, others, and are prone to depression as well as manipulative, demanding, and self-centred behaviours. Even therapists don't like them.

Many researchers have tried to “unpick” the essence of the paradoxical, fragile self-esteem of the narcissist. The narcissist's self-esteem is at once unstable and defensive. It seems that their self-esteem is utterly contingent on others' feedback. Further, it is dissociated between explicit (overt) and implicit (covert) views.

What is most distinctive about narcissists is their self-assurance, which often gives them charisma. They are the first to speak in a group and they hold forth with great confidence, even when they are wrong. They so completely expect to succeed, and take more credit for success than is warranted or fair, that they refuse to acknowledge failure, errors, or mistakes. *When things go right, it is because of their efforts; when things go wrong, it is someone else's fault.* This is



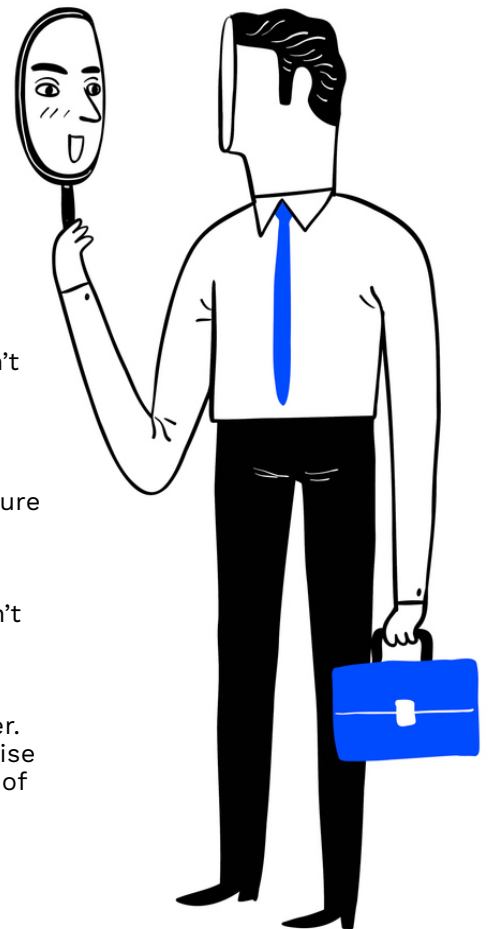


a classic attribution error and leads to problems with truth-telling, because they always rationalise and reinterpret their failures and mistakes, usually by blaming them on others.

Narcissists handle stress and heavy workloads badly, but seemingly with ease; they are also quite persistent under pressure and they refuse to acknowledge failure. They are unable to learn from experience as a result of their inability to acknowledge failure or even mistakes and the way they resist coaching and ignore negative feedback.

#### Oldham and Morris note four tips for working with narcissists:

- 1** Be absolutely loyal. Don't criticise or compete with them. Don't expect to share the limelight or to take credit. Be content to aspire to the number-two position.
- 2** Don't expect your self-confident boss to provide direction. Likely, he or she will expect you to know what to do, so be sure you are clear about the objectives before you undertake any tasks. Don't hesitate to ask.
- 3** You may be an important member of the boss's team, but don't expect your self-confident boss to be attentive to you as an individual. Don't take it personally.
- 4** Self-confident bosses expect your interest in them, however. They are susceptible to flattery, so if you're working on a raise or a promotion or are trying to sell your point of view, a bit of buttering-up may smooth the way.



This is advice for those working with narcissists. It clearly takes an optimistic perspective, never considering that a narcissistic boss could be both abusive and deeply incompetent.

## THERE ARE MANY MARKERS OF NARCISSISM. HERE IS A CHECKLIST FOR SOMEONE YOU MIGHT SUSPECT OF NPD:

- 1 REACTIVE ANGER**  
Concerning anger and rage in response to perceived slights, criticism, failure, or rebuke.
- 2 SHAME**  
Concerning shame or humiliation in response to perceived slights, criticism, failure, or rebuke.
- 3 INDIFFERENCE**  
In response to perceived slights, criticism, failure, or rebuke.
- 4 NEED FOR ADMIRATION**  
Involving a sense of inner weakness, uncertainty, and insecurity with respect to a desired or perceived greatness.
- 5 EXHIBITIONISM**  
A seeking of constant admiration, showing off when in the presence of others, and attention-seeking, without reference to feelings of insecurity.
- 6 THRILL-SEEKING**  
Expressing a tendency to engage in high-risk behaviour for the sake of thrills and excitement.
- 7 AUTHORITATIVENESS**  
Expressing a tendency to take charge of situations, to authoritatively take responsibility for making decisions, and to perceive oneself as a leader.
- 8 GRANDIOSE FANTASIES**  
Expressing fantasies of grandeur and success, preoccupation with fantasies of future glory, and a tendency to distort reality to achieve an overly positive view of past, current, or future accomplishments.
- 9 CYNICISM / MISTRUST**  
Expressing a sense of cynicism and mistrust concerning the motives, intentions, and reliability of others.
- 10 MANIPULATIVENESS**  
Expressing a tendency to skilfully and characteristically

manipulate, ply, shape, beguile, machinate, or manoeuvre the feelings or opinions of others.

**11 EXPLOITATIVENESS**  
Expressing a tendency to exploit, take advantage of, and use others for their own gain.

**12 ENTITLEMENT**  
Involving feelings and actions of entitlement, presumptuousness, not being satisfied until they get what is perceived to be deserved, or expectation of favourable treatment.

**13 ARROGANCE**  
Assessing haughty, snobbish, imperious, pretentious, conceited, pompous, and disdainful beliefs and behaviours.

**14 LACK OF EMPATHY**  
Assessing the extent to which the person fails to be aware of, appreciate, or acknowledge the feelings of others, displaying attitudes that are generally uncaring and unsympathetic.

**15 ACCLAIM-SEEKING**  
Assessing narcissistic aspirations, working toward acclaim, and an excessive driving ambition to achieve.

## THE NARCISSISTIC LEADER

It should not be assumed that narcissism is necessarily a handicap in business. Indeed, the opposite maybe true. If a manager is articulate, educated, and intelligent, as well



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as good-looking, their (moderate) narcissism may be seen to be acceptable.

*Bright-side narcissists* can be good delegators, good team builders, and good deliverers. They can be good mentors and genuinely help others. However, subordinates soon learn that things go wrong if they do not follow certain rules.

- Everyone must acknowledge who is boss and accept rank and hierarchical structure.
- They must be absolutely loyal and never complain, criticise, or compete. They should never take credit for something but acknowledge that success is primarily due to the narcissist's talent, direction, or insights.
- They should not expect the narcissist to be interested in their personality, issues, or ambitions but they must be very interested in the narcissist's issues.
- They have to be attentive, giving, and always flattering. They need to be sensitive to the whims, needs, and desires of the narcissistic manager, without expecting reciprocity.
- Narcissistic managers can be mean, angry, or petulant when crossed or slighted, and quickly express anger, so subordinates have to be careful when working with them.
- They must ask for help, directions, and clarity about objectives when they need it.
- They need to watch out that a narcissistic manager's self-preoccupation, need for approbation, and grandiosity do not impede their business judgement and decision-making.
- They need to find ways of giving critical feedback in such a way that the manager both understands it and does not get offended.

The *dark-side narcissistic* manager tends to have shallow, functional, uncommitted relationships. Because they are both needy and egocentric, they tend not to make close supportive friendship networks in the workplace. They can often feel empty and neglected as a result.

Narcissistic leaders may have short-term advantages but long-term disadvantages, because the narcissist's



consistent and persistent efforts are aimed at enhancing their self-image, which leads to group clashes.

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## FREUDIAN CONTRIBUTIONS

The business psychoanalyst Manfred Kets de Vries believes that a certain degree of narcissism is essential, a prerequisite for leadership. Narcissism is traced to childhood. It is seen as a problem associated with two related issues – how they perceive themselves, as well as salient others, and, more specifically, how they come to cope with the reality that one is neither omnipotent nor omniscient, and nor are parents all-powerful and perfect. The child's life-long quest for admiration and approbation is often a mask for self-doubt or self-hatred, or feeling that one is never properly loved for one's own sake alone.

Whilst a “touch” of narcissism can be good for leaders, it can be problematic in the long run, particularly if the problem is severe. Because of their selfishness and egocentricity, narcissistic managers are more committed to their own welfare than that of their team or, indeed, the whole organisation.

Followers of narcissistic leaders encourage two types of behaviour in their leaders that are very bad for both leader and follower. First, there is the process of *mirroring*, where followers use leaders to reflect what they want to see. Narcissists get the admiration they crave and there occurs mutual admiration. Second, there is *idealisation*, in which followers project all their



hopes and fantasies onto the leader. Thus, leaders find themselves in a classic hall of mirrors, which further reduces their grip on reality.

Where narcissistic leaders become aggressive and vindictive, Kets de Vries claims that some followers, in order to stave off their anxiety, do identify with the aggressor. Followers impersonate the aggressor, becoming the tough henchman of the narcissistic manager. Inevitably, this only exacerbates the problem and begins to explain the vicious cycle of narcissistic management failure.

The central question is how organisations can set up processes, apart from careful selection, that help prevent narcissistic-induced management failure occurrences.

Can the possibility of appointing, promoting, or encouraging narcissistic managers be reduced? Clearly, this has a great deal to do with selection policies. However, Kets de Vries offers three other strategies that may help to “downsize” the narcissist.

- Ensure distributive decision-making to ensure checks and balances. Do not combine roles like CEO and chairman.
- Educate the CEO and board to look out for signs of narcissism and to have strategies to put in place when they do spot the signs. This involves clear systems of accountability and involving stakeholders in crucial decisions.
- Offer coaching and counselling to those clearly identified as reactive narcissists, although few seem willing to accept help, because, by definition, they rarely take personal responsibility for their failure.

Perhaps certain organisations attract narcissists more than others. It is therefore highly recommended that these organisations become aware of the psychological processes associated with narcissism and be willing and able to do something about them.

## HUBRIS AND NEMESIS IN POLITICIANS

A British politician (once Foreign Secretary) and a trained doctor, Lord David Owen has paid particular interest to narcissism in politicians. Rather than use the term “narcissism” or “megalo-mania”, he used the word “hubris” (overconfidence and exaggerated pride, and a contempt for others).

He noted that the unique features of the hubris idea are fourfold. *First*, a very strong identification with a group (“my people”), be they an institution, nation, or organisation. *Second*, a related conspicuous tendency to speak in the (royal) third person. *Third*, an unrealistic, yet unshakeable, belief that any (dodgy) action will be vindicated in any court. *Fourth*, a strong assertion that their moral rectitude should and does override mundane, trivial, and often legal considerations.

In his writings, he has provided a long list of behaviours considered typical of the hubris syndrome. Think of some high-profile politicians at the moment. The behaviour is seen in a person who:

- 1 Sees the world as a place for self-glorification through the use of power
- 2 Has a tendency to take action primarily to enhance personal image
- 3 Shows disproportionate concern for image and presentation
- 4 Exhibits messianic zeal and exaltation in speech
- 5 Conflates self with nation or organisation
- 6 Uses the royal “we” in conversations
- 7 Shows excessive self-confidence
- 8 Manifestly has contempt for others
- 9 Shows accountability only to a higher court (history or God)
- 10 Displays the unshakeable belief that he or she will be vindicated in that court
- 11 Loses contact with reality
- 12 Resorts to restlessness and impulsive actions
- 13 Allows moral rectitude to obviate consideration of practicality, cost, or outcome
- 14 Displays incompetence, with disregard for the nuts and bolts of policy-making.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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## CONCLUSION

Many researchers have pointed out that the paradox of narcissism at work is that many traits and processes associated with narcissism can seem positive and beneficial, while others are the precise opposite. This paradox has been “solved” by trying to distinguish between the adaptive and maladaptive narcissist, though it is not clear whether this is merely a linguistic tautology. Can a constructive narcissist really be called a “narcissist”? In this sense, it is also an oxymoron.

Conceiving narcissism as a self-esteem trait disorder does imply, as many personality psychologists have argued, that there is a clear continuum between healthy and unhealthy. However, the issue remains where to draw the line. 

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