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Narcissism and Leadership

Anna Z. Czarna[1] and Barbara Nevicka[2]
[1]Institute of Applied Psychology, Faculty of
Management and Social Communication,
Jagiellonian University, Krakow, Poland
[2]Department of Psychology, Faculty of Social and
Behavioural Sciences, University of Amsterdam,
Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Synonyms

Dark triad and leadership; Destructive leadership;
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Definition

Close your eyes and imagine an ideal leader. What
would that image look like? What kind of charac-
teristics come to mind? Dominance, confidence,
high self-esteem, and extraversion are character-
istics that are most commonly associated with
people's image of a leader. Interestingly, narcis-
sistic individuals fit this leader image fairly well,
which might explain why they tend to emerge as
leaders in groups. However, merely rising to a
leadership position is not enough – it matters
whether narcissists are effective as leaders. Impor-
tantly, in addition to their leader-like characteris-
tics, narcissists possess a host of negative
characteristics, such as lack of empathy,
exploitativeness, arrogance, inability to deal with
criticism, and aggressive tendencies. It is because
of these characteristics that the behavior of narcis-
sistic leaders can have negative ramifications for
their subordinates, their organizations, or even
society at large. In this chapter, we argue that in
order to determine whether and when narcissistic
leaders are a positive or negative force for those
they lead it is imperative to consider contextual
factors such as time in leadership position, con-
textual uncertainty, type of industry, leader's vis-
ibility and ethical climate in the organization, and
characteristics of the followers.

Introduction

Narcissism as a personality trait constitutes a self-
centered, self-aggrandizing, dominant, and
manipulative interpersonal orientation (Sedikides
et al. 2004). It is characterized by a grandiose, yet
fragile, sense of self, a preoccupation with suc-
cess, a demand for admiration, and engagement in
self-enhancement and by difficulties in
maintaining interpersonal relationships due to a
lack of empathy, trust, and care for others (Morf
and Rhodewalt 2001). Narcissistic individuals
perceive themselves to be special and unique.
They tend to overestimate their abilities in the
agentic domain, for example, by believing that
they are more intelligent, more creative, and
more attractive and have better leadership poten-
tial than others. In their quest for power, attention,

and a desire to show-off their abilities, narcissistic individuals have a natural propensity to seek out leadership positions (Morf and Rhodewalt 2001). In fact, they dislike being followers unless they are confident that they can rise through the ranks (Zitek and Jordan 2016). Research shows that they succeed in emerging as leaders in groups (Grijalva et al. 2015), particularly in times of uncertainty (Nevicka et al. 2013). The question is what prompts people to choose narcissists as leaders and what kind of leaders are they once they have attained a leadership position.

We should note that this chapter will focus on the grandiose rather than vulnerable dimension of narcissism. Grandiose narcissism is identified by externalizing features such as confidence, dominance, and extraversion. In contrast, vulnerable narcissism is identified by internalizing features such as introversion, low self-esteem, and high emotional distress (Miller et al. 2017). Given the commonality between characteristics related to grandiose narcissism and those associated with prototypical leaders, grandiose narcissism is more relevant for leadership. For example, prior research found that past US presidents had above average grandiose but not vulnerable narcissism in comparison to the general population (Watts et al. 2013). Additionally, grandiose but not vulnerable narcissism was related to leadership effectiveness indicators.

Narcissism and Leadership Emergence

Theory on the leadership outcomes of narcissism (e.g., Campbell et al. 2011; Padilla et al. 2007; Sedikides and Campbell 2017) has clearly differentiated between narcissistic leadership *emergence* and narcissistic leadership *effectiveness*. One reason why narcissistic individuals might often be chosen as leaders is because they appear to personify people's implicit ideas of what constitutes a leader. The implicit leadership theory (Lord and Maher 1991) posits that the greater the overlap between someone's characteristics and people's implicit leadership schemas (i.e., leader prototypes), the more likely that person will be perceived as a leader. In other words,

because narcissistic characteristics such as dominance, confidence, extraversion, and high self-esteem match well onto prototypical leadership schemas, narcissists are perceived as having leader-like qualities and thus emerge as leaders (Sedikides and Campbell 2017).

Another reason that could explain why people prefer narcissists in leadership positions is that narcissists tend to make positive first impressions (Ong et al. 2016), which may be especially helpful in short-term evaluative contexts such as interviews. Narcissists' positive initial impressions may be driven by others' perceptions that they have high self-esteem (Giacomin and Jordan 2018). This can happen because of the self-broadcasting function of self-esteem: others tend to accept the self-evaluations expressed in people's social behavior as valid and reliable sources of information. Thus, increases in self-esteem lead to increases in a person's popularity as judged by others (Zeigler-Hill et al. 2013). These positive initial impressions could enable narcissists to obtain overly favorable hireability ratings despite lacking adequate qualifications and despite their many negative characteristics. Indeed, prior research found that at the time of being hired as managers, narcissistic individuals had less organizational experience, an important criterion for that job (Nevicka et al. 2018b). Therefore, what seems to spur narcissists' rise to leadership positions is their own determination to attain such positions of power, the overlap between their own and prototypical leader characteristics, and the positive impressions that they tend to engender in the short term.

Whereas the rise of narcissists as leaders has been well documented and understood, research on the impact of narcissists in leadership positions on those they lead has shown mixed findings. In the next section, we focus on what kind of leaders narcissists are, once they attain positions of power.

Narcissism and Leadership Effectiveness

Narcissistic individuals have both potentially positive (e.g., charisma, bold vision, motivation to

perform, risk-taking) and potentially negative characteristics (e.g., lack of empathy, exploitativeness, egocentrism, hostility, unethical tendencies, risk-taking), and this mixed palette of characteristics might differentially determine whether they are effective or ineffective as leaders. Researchers argue that narcissism can, in some cases, benefit not only the narcissistic person themselves but the organization as a whole (Chatterjee and Hambrick 2007; Sedikides and Campbell 2017). For instance, if narcissists are satisfied with their job and feel secure in their position of authority, they are capable of excelling in job performance (Campbell et al. 2011), especially when they perceive the context as an opportunity to show off their superior skills (Wallace and Baumeister 2002). Such contexts need to encompass pressure, challenge, and an evaluative audience in order to motivate narcissistic individuals to perform, and these are exactly the ingredients that can be found in leadership positions. Additionally, there is some evidence that following an ego threat (e.g., being told that one is average rather than unique) narcissism can actually fuel performance because narcissists want to demonstrate their superior qualities as a means of countering the ego threat (Nevicka et al. 2016). Therefore, narcissists need to showcase their uniqueness, and their superior abilities might actually motivate them to perform well. In turn this achievement focus could help galvanize their employees in their performance.

Another potential advantage to having narcissistic leaders lies in narcissists' social network centrality and penchant for social media use. Narcissistic leaders seem to amass social capital (Liu et al. 2016) and may, thus, be well suited for the creation and expansion of social network opportunities that are likely to benefit the organization (e.g., linking organizational interests to those of other organizations, introducing key staff to peers from other organizations). Their networking ability may help revitalize the organization and set the stage for showcasing transformational leadership. Narcissists have been found to project bold visions and are perceived as charismatic (Nevicka et al. 2018b), which could inspire subordinates and motivate them to work toward common goals. Narcissists' charisma and enthusiasm may even help advocate successful organizational change by allowing them to act as change agents and idea champions (Campbell et al. 2011). There is some empirical support for these proposals.

For instance, CEO narcissism was positively related to strategic dynamism and to the number or size of acquisitions (Chatterjee and Hambrick 2007), which is indicative of narcissists' bold and risky decision-making and early successes (Sedikides and Campbell 2017). While risk-taking could be advantageous in terms of preventing organizational stagnation and promoting innovation, it can also lead to more volatility. Indeed, Chatterjee and Hambrick (2007) found that CEO narcissism was also positively related to unpredictable and irregular company performance (i.e., big wins, big losses) as measured by financial outcomes, such as return on investment and shareholder returns. Due to the extreme fluctuations in performance, overall, companies under narcissistic CEOs did not do better than companies under less narcissistic CEOs. In terms of innovation, companies led by narcissistic CEOs exhibited a higher rate of new product introductions and a greater proportion of radical innovations in their new product portfolios, but they were also more likely to encounter product harm crises, such as product recall (Kashmiri et al. 2017). The impact of CEO narcissism on these innovation outcomes was partially explained by firms' higher competitive aggressiveness.

In terms of the potential negative impact of narcissistic leaders, narcissists' particular weak point is their difficulty in maintaining positive interpersonal relationships over time. For example, supervisors of narcissistic employees rated them negatively on the interpersonal components of leadership but not on task-specific aspects of leadership (Blair et al. 2008). Given that the most toxic characteristics of narcissistic individuals pertain to the interpersonal domain, the manifestation of these characteristics will probably disproportionately affect those they lead. Narcissistic leaders can cause employee distress because they lack empathy (e.g., Böckler et al. 2017), expect others to strive for perfection and be perfect, and

are highly critical of others (but not of themselves; Stoeber et al. 2015). Further, narcissists derogate others and may react with rage when insulted or threatened (Bushman and Baumeister 1998), while also lashing out at innocent others (i.e., displaced aggression) when rejected (Twenge and Campbell 2003, Study 4). Consistent with this, narcissists show a preference for using an autocratic leadership style particularly in ego-threatening circumstances (Schoel et al. 2015) by means of which they attempt to solidify their power and control over others. Remarkably, narcissists disparage others even in the absence of self-threat (Park and Colvin 2015). Such mistreatment may lead to employee feelings of humiliation or hopelessness (Herschcovis and Barling 2010), stress or job dissatisfaction, job burnout (Fox and Stallworth 2010), and turnover intentions (Tepper et al. 2009; Sedikides and Campbell 2017). Indeed, narcissists have been found to constitute poor mentors, with protégés opting for shorter-term relationships with them and reporting less psychosocial or career support as well as more negative mentoring experiences (Allen et al. 2009).

In addition to affecting the well-being of followers, narcissists' pattern of resisting and devaluing others' input and advice and shutting down employee voice can have direct negative consequences on organizational performance (Kausel et al. 2015; Maccoby 2000; Rosenthal and Pittinsky 2006). For example, in a decision-making task, narcissistic leaders were found to inhibit group-level information exchange, which in turn reduced the quality of team decision-making (Nevicka et al. 2011).

Another negative aspect of narcissistic individuals includes their propensity to behave unethically. Prior research has linked narcissistic leaders to unethical behavior (Amernic and Craig 2010; Blickle et al. 2006; Sedikides and Campbell 2017; Watts et al. 2013). Furthermore, their unethical behavior has a demoralizing effect on other employees. Narcissists rely on unfair inequitable exchanges to achieve desired outcomes, and because in an organizational context they are embedded in a network and interconnected with other employees, their unethical tendencies can

have a ripple effect on others (O'Boyle et al. 2012). Therefore, their low ethics might have extended detrimental influence: it can contaminate others if left unchecked. Unethical employees tend to create an organizational culture where unethical behavior becomes the norm, especially when leaders or authority figures are misbehaving (Kish-Gephart et al. 2010).

Indeed, narcissists often seem to derail in terms of ethics when in position of authority (Judge et al. 2009; O'Boyle et al. 2012). Results of a meta-analysis show that for individuals in positions of authority, such as managers, leaders, police, and correctional officers, the higher their level of narcissism, the worse their job performance (O'Boyle et al. 2012), and researchers argue that this is because of narcissists' unethical, self-serving, arrogant, and impulsive behaviors. Thus, this relationship might be explained by poor quality of interpersonal relationships and poor decision-making. The functioning of subordinates might also suffer due to narcissistic leaders' unethical tendencies. As leaders, narcissists seem to direct interpersonal deviance toward their subordinates as means to achieving their goals: they regularly belittled their subordinates and exploited their insecurities in an attempt to minimize negative feedback and create dependencies (Grijalva and Harms 2014; House and Howell 1992). For instance, using a sample of athletes and accredited coaches, Matosic et al. (2016) showed that coach narcissism was directly and positively associated with athletes' perceptions of controlling behaviors and more positive attitudes toward doping and was indirectly and positively associated with athletes' reports of frustration of needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Moreover, leaders' narcissism was associated with the frustration of followers' psychological needs such as needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Matosic et al. 2016).

Narcissistic Leaders and the Importance of Context

Given the aforementioned mixture of potentially positive as well as potentially negative

characteristics inherent in narcissistic leaders, in order to determine whether and when narcissistic leaders are a positive or negative force for those they lead, it is important to consider contextual factors. One such factor is the progression of time. According to the contextual reinforcement model (Campbell et al. 2011), leader narcissism is beneficial in the "emerging zone" (i.e., in new leadership positions, short-term contexts) and harmful in the "enduring zone" (i.e., long-held leadership positions, long-term contexts). The problem, however, is that emerging situations become enduring, and over time the more toxic aspects of narcissistic leaders may overshadow their charisma and confidence that seemed so alluring in the short term. For example, narcissists' overconfidence can lead to reckless risk-taking, which in the long term could have negative financial ramifications for the organization.

The more recent Sedikides and Campbell (2017) Energy Clash Model (ECM) further refines the dynamics of interplay between narcissistic leaders and organizations. It outlines the narcissistic organizational trajectory using phase/state physics metaphor. Narcissism is conceptualized as a force that enters into or emerges in a stable system (i.e., organization) as a leader, destabilizes it through waves of excitement, proposed reforms, and an inspiring vision for organization's future (*perturbation*). Next, with the passage of time, as organizational costs – in terms of human resources and monetary losses due to their risky financial and unethical decisions – accrue and systemic awareness and alertness intensify, it meets resistance and clashes directly with the organization (*conflict*) and stabilizes it at a different state (when the leader is accommodated) or is expelled (*resolution*). Thus, the idea is that over time those who are led by the narcissistic leader as well as other members of the organization become aware of narcissistic leader's toxic characteristics, such as their lack of empathy, hostility, dismissal of expert advice, and inability to deal with criticism and their unethical inclinations. Research has indeed shown that while narcissists make positive first impressions because of their charm and humor, these evaluations deteriorate over time as others become aware of narcissists' negative characteristics. Consequently, narcissists' popularity as well as leadership status decreases (Czarna et al. 2016; Leckelt et al. 2015; Ong et al. 2016). In turn the organization is then required to deal with such a leader and can either try to accommodate their presence (e.g., enhancing accountability measures, trying to ensure goal-congruency between the leader's and organizational interests) or get rid of the narcissistic leader altogether. Narcissists' impulsivity might even mean that they leave of their own accord when they get bored.

In both of these theoretical models, time played a crucial role in the typical "trajectory" of a narcissistic leader, initially accompanying him/her to heights of popularity and effectiveness and then back to the bottom. Research examining other contextual factors has further distilled the circumstances that are most favorable (or unfavorable) to the effectiveness of narcissistic leaders. In particular, times of uncertainty appeared to be convenient to narcissistic individuals, serving as a catalyst in their emergence to leadership positions and as a reinforcement of their effectiveness. Narcissistic leaders bring confidence, toughness, boldness, vision, and innovation into the decision-making process, which might be especially valued in times of organizational uncertainty, i.e., lost market share, unpredictable work environment, and high employee stress (Campbell et al. 2011; Nevicka et al. 2013; Sedikides and Campbell 2017). In times of uncertainty or crises, narcissists might be perceived as suitable leaders because they seem capable of reducing the uncertainty.

It is also possible that narcissistic leaders are more effective in specific types of industries but ineffective in others. For example, they may be effective in dynamic, high-discretion industries as fashion, media, or entertainment but may be ineffective in stable, low-discretion industries such as insurance or utilities (Chatterjee and Hambrick 2007). They may likewise be effective in domains where confidence, persuasiveness, extraversion, and self-absorption are highly relevant (e.g., sales and academia; Sedikides and Campbell 2017) but ineffective in domains that require relationship building and trust (e.g., life-saving,

nursing; Rosenthal and Pittinsky 2006). Finally, they may be effective in domains that reward self-promotion and manipulativeness (e.g., politics; Watts et al. 2013).

Ethical climate of an organization is another contextual factor crucial for the effectiveness of narcissistic leaders. As mentioned before, narcissistic leaders' unethical behavior might have an extended detrimental influence on the organization via role modeling. By setting a poor example, narcissistic leaders may negatively impact the culture of an organization by changing its ethical climate. Thus, unsurprisingly, organizations with a lower ethical climate become more hospitable for narcissistic leaders. Research found that the deleterious effects of narcissism on ethical leadership became more pronounced and salient in highly ethical contexts but remained undetectable in unethical contexts (Hoffman et al. 2013). Although the presence of an ethical climate does not prevent unscrupulous behaviors of narcissistic leaders from occurring, it does make them more visible and, therefore, detectable to other group members. With regard to visibility of narcissistic leaders' behavior, prior research similarly found that leader distance influenced the perceived effectiveness of narcissistic leaders (Nevicka et al. 2018b). When followers had fewer opportunities to observe their leader's behavior and thus had less exposure to their toxic characteristics, for example, due to a greater number of hierarchical levels between the leader and the follower, they perceived narcissistic leaders as effective and reported positive job attitudes. However, this positive relationship disappeared when the leader was more visible to the followers. Related to this, organizations with narcissistic CEOs have been found to have a higher manager turnover (Resick et al. 2009). This again could stem from the fact that narcissists' toxic characteristics would be especially potent for those who are most proximal to them in the workplace, namely, their direct subordinates.

Interestingly, recent research suggests that despite these toxic behaviors, leaders' narcissism might actually benefit the objective and subjective career success of certain subordinates and might have no adverse effects on their well-being (Volmer et al. 2016). It is plausible that by promoting their subordinates' careers narcissistic leaders attempt to retain loyal subordinates in order to obtain continuing admiration and gratitude from them, essentially using them as "narcissistic supplies." These followers would then benefit indirectly from the narcissistic leaders' insatiable desire for constant adoration and ego boosts. Nevertheless, these benefits would be reserved exclusively for the most loyal and sufficiently submissive, admiring subordinates whose devotion to the leader might at the same time leave them defenseless and vulnerable to his/her whims and changing moods (Czarna et al. 2018). In a similar vein, Grijalva and Harms (2014) developed their Narcissistic Leaders and Dominance Complementarity Model to better understand what kind of followers would work most effectively with narcissistic leaders. They predicted that submissive (rather than dominant) followers would work more harmoniously with narcissistic leaders and that the leader-follower relationship would be more satisfying and productive for both parties. However, other scholars (Padilla et al. 2007) suggested that these submissive individuals might be vulnerable to narcissists' exploitative tendencies. Recent research showed that followers low on self-esteem or low on core self-evaluations suffered most from narcissistic leaders as they perceived them to be abusive and, in turn, these followers showed reduced performance and more burnout symptoms when working for such leaders. Followers low on self-esteem are more insecure and more in need of approval from their supervisor and thus also make for "easier targets" (Nevicka et al. 2018a). Thus, despite the fact that collaboration with more submissive followers might be preferable for narcissistic leaders as they do not need to experience power conflict with dominant subordinates, this may come at a cost to the followers themselves. Thus, how follower characteristics fit with those of a narcissistic leader might require further investigation: when and under what circumstances

follower's loyalty and submission to a leader work synergistically with the leader's narcissism to bring benefits to both parties and when it becomes a hindrance and a hazard to the well-being of the followers.

Conclusion

So how can we best harness the positive side of narcissistic leaders, while curbing their negative side? In the above we have provided some examples of contextual factors that could serve as a switch between the adaptive and maladaptive influence of narcissistic leaders. Additionally, organizational safeguards such as checks and balances and executive training can be used to keep narcissistic leaders under control (Grijalva and Harms 2014). According to the Energy Clash Model, narcissistic energy, when managed and directed properly either at structural or systemic level (through implementing systemic checks and balances via accountability, instituting synergistic leadership, increasing leader-organization identification) or at an individual or interpersonal level (introducing micro-interventions, initiating personal development through coaching, strengthening the leader-employee fit) may contribute to organizational innovation and evolution (Sedikides and Campbell 2017). Under these conditions, with checks and balances securing the ethical culture, mutual respect, and civility in the workplace, narcissistic leaders could achieve an optimal level of functioning and significantly contribute to their organizations. Thus, in a well-controlled environment and in the right context a leader characterized by this apparently aversive trait can become an asset rather than a liability to the organization.

Cross-References

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