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Surviving The Destructive Narcissistic Leader

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If all people who sought leadership roles were secure, then the quality of our leadership selection might not matter very much. We would always be led by confident, trusting, emotionally secure, optimistic, and positive human beings. However, some people are motivated to seek leadership roles not because of the positive things that have happened to them in their lives but by the negative. Rather than being confident, they are compensating for a deep emotional void stemming from their childhood called narcissistic deprivation.

Narcissistic Deprivation and the Motivation to Lead

Narcissism has to do with the child's development of a sense of self esteem during the first years of life. According to the theory, our psychological defense to being small, helpless, and dependent during infancy and early childhood is to view ourselves as the center of the universe and our parents, especially our mothers, as obedient servants there to satisfy all of our needs. We look to our parents' reactions, and especially our mother's reaction, to us as testimony that we are admired, valued, worthy of love and the special object we think we are. In effect, our first mirror of our selves is in our mother's eyes.

The natural reaction of most parents is to engage in constructive mirroring by reacting to us in ways that are positive, empathic, and accepting. Simultaneously, we do a little mirroring of our own. Our parents look to our reaction to their mirroring as proof of their good parenting. Such mirroring enables the child to develop a grandiose sense of self that is necessary for ambition and self-esteem and is a normal narcissistic stage of life. As time goes by, of course, most of us encounter the reality that we are not the center of the universe and that our fantasies of omnipotence and strength are just that—fantasies. Likewise, our parents cease to view us as their mirror and confirmation of their self-value.

Narcissistic deprivation occurs when the mirroring we so desperately need early in life does not occur or is inadequate. In such cases, the person is

stuck at an infantile stage of development. His sense of self is undeveloped. He is, in effect, “mirror hungry” with an insatiable desire for admiration, for exhibiting himself to the world, and for securing power. The natural outlet is to become a leader, particular a charismatic leader who can bask in the devotion of his followers.

In fact some of the world’s most famous leaders have had a narcissistic personality. For example, in his biography of President John F. Kennedy, Nigel Hamilton says that Kennedy’s emotionally crippling childhood caused him to develop a narcissistic hunger for public approval. “His narcissistic personality craved success—social, sexual, professional. Deprived of early maternal warmth,” writes Hamilton, “[Kennedy] wanted attention, adulation, affection...”¹ David Aberbach, author of *Charisma in Politics, Religion and the Media*, notes that Kennedy gained through his charismatic leadership the mirroring he missed in his childhood.

He succeeded in gaining the sort of adulation usually reserved for dictators or pop stars. Untouched in childhood and hating the touch of affection, he touched the masses. The crowds that gathered for Kennedy in 1960...were spectacular in their frenzy...Especially after Kennedy’s televised debates with Richard Nixon, he aroused immense excitement, at times bordering on worship, mainly among his female “jumpers”, “leapers”, “clutchers”, “touchers”, “squeezers”, “screamers”, and “runners.”²

Other U.S. Presidents such as Lyndon Johnson, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan have been even more narcissistic.³

The Positive Side of Narcissism

On the positive side, narcissism is an asset that enables the “mirror hungry” person to rise in organizations.⁴ It is not hard to see why such people are generally so successful. After all, they...

- Exhibit high levels of self-confidence that most people equate with competence;
- Have an infectious enthusiasm;
- Have an unrelenting drive for power;
- Are good at office politics;
- Are frequently charming;
- Build large numbers of quick, albeit superficial relationships;
- Are able to make quick decisions with seeming ease;
- Have Machiavellian “street smarts” when it comes to getting their way; and

- Are ready, willing, and able to make whatever personal sacrifices are necessary to gain prominence and position.

Taken to a certain degree, these narcissistic traits are valuable to the person and the organization. They signal “leader.” Yet, as Manfred Kets de Vries has said, “narcissism is a strange thing, a double-edged sword. Having either too much or too little of it can throw a person off balance.”⁵ The same traits that can serve the narcissistic leader well can become destructive.

- Self-confidence can become grand standing.
- The pursuit of power can become a race to be run and won at all costs.
- Relationship building can become exploitation of others.
- The easy charm can become crass manipulation.

RECOGNIZING THE NARCISSITIC LEADER

So, how can you determine if the leader you are considering following is merely narcissistic or has acquired an overdose narcissism from a highly dysfunctional childhood? Here are some signs or symptoms that you might be dealing with a destructive narcissist. You may be dealing with a destructive narcissistic leader if he:⁶

- Exaggerates his achievements and talents; is boastful and pretentious.
- Believes he is “special” and often misunderstood except by other people with special talents or high status.
- Devalues the contribution of others.
- Fantasizes about success, power and his own brilliance; compares himself with famous and/or privileged people.
- Demands constant attention and adoration.
- Expects favorable treatment in any situation.
- Expects automatic compliance with his wishes.
- Speaks frequently of himself; constantly uses the word “I.”
- Takes advantage of others to achieve his ends.
- Is unwilling or unable to empathize with the feelings and needs of others.
- Is impatient with others who talk about their problems and needs rather than his.

- Is emotionally cold and lacks interest in others needs; is oblivious to how his behavior and remarks may inflict damage on others.
- Is often envious of others and/or believes others are envious of him.
- In public presents himself as patient, congenial, and confident. In private is smug, arrogant, haughty, snobbish, disdainful, and patronizing to subordinates and servants.
- Exhibits highly exaggerated self-confidence; can do no wrong.
- Has an unrelenting demand for perfection.
- Is emotionally volatile.
- Bullies and abuses those who work for him; intimidates others to get his way.
- Exploits the organization and his power/position to achieve personal goals.
- Ignores or denies reality.
- Has difficulty adjusting to growing old or losing his former mental/physical superiority.
- Is obsessed with attaining power and influence
- Is addicted to control.
- Distrusts others.
- Becomes paranoid when he senses danger or dissent.
- Has frequently mood swings that greatly impact the quality of his decisions.
- Takes too much or too little risks when making decisions.
- Attacks those who question or criticize his decisions.
- Prefers to surround himself with an unquestioning loyal and uncritical staff.
- Exploits others; forms relationships and romantic attachment only with those he feels will advance his goals and self-esteem.
- Has trouble working in a team.
- Refuses to share credit or take blame.
- Is excessively confrontational when others deliberately or accidentally threaten his self-esteem.
- Overworks and under praises his staff.
- Has difficulty in retaining highly qualified staff.

- Refuses to pick or groom a successor.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

What can you do if you find yourself following a leader who exhibits many of the destructive traits we have just mentioned and there is no sidekick to blunt the leader's psychopathic tendencies? Here are some ideas.

- The best advice, of course, is don't work for him, vote for him or sign on to his cause. Walk, or preferably run, away. Recognize that you are dealing with an emotionally disturbed person and that you are not going to change him. Until you can get out of the relationship, the best you can do is to protect yourself from the emotional and other damage this person can cause.
- Whatever you do, don't confront the destructive narcissist directly. Confrontation can lead to paranoia, rage and a highly vindictive response. Stay calm. Even behave in an admiring manner. Above all, try to maintain your objectivity.
- Try to erect an emotional barrier between you and the narcissist. Don't take their criticism personally. Try not to react with fear, impatience, or anger when dealing with this person. The message you want to convey is that you are not intimidated. Through your reactions you should try to say: "You are not so powerful that you can manipulate me or threaten me or distract us from our goal or the issue we are attempting to address."
- Destructive narcissists won't think twice about stealing your ideas so avoid sharing your ideas with them until you have made them widely known to your peers and other superiors.
- Destructive narcissists will blame you if anything goes wrong so keep records of your exchanges. Respond in writing to requests whenever possible and get your instructions and orders from them in writing.
- Ignore the destructive narcissist's grand standing.
- Don't ask for favors and politely refuse unsolicited offers of assistance from destructive narcissists.
- Expect the destructive narcissist to lie, bluff, deceive and threaten. Keep notes and get things in writing.
- Expect the destructive narcissist to break contracts and agreements. Protect yourself emotionally and financially from betrayal. Have a back up strategy should the destructive narcissist go back on his word, which he probably will.
- Don't let the destructive narcissist draw you into anything illegal.

- The destructive narcissist may abuse alcohol or drugs. He may overindulge in food, exercise, risky behavior and/or sex in the search for thrills and instant gratification. He may entice you to join him. Keep your distance. Don't join him. Say no and walk away.
- The destructive narcissist is likely to proclaim his high moral values while freely lying, cheating, scheming, corrupting others, abusing relationships, and making every effort to control, manipulate and even torment those around him. Be suspicious of anyone who claims a saintly virtue.
- If the destructive narcissist joking says "You need to protect yourself when you're around me" or "You better watch your back, you never know what I might be up to," laugh along with him but don't take his warnings as a joke. They're real.
- Don't believe the destructive narcissist when he confesses his prior abuse and asks for forgiveness. He doesn't mean or believe what he is saying.
- Keep in mind that men don't have a monopoly on destructive narcissism. Women can be abusers also.

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NOTES

¹ Hamilton, Nigel. *JFK: Reckless Youth*. (New York: Random House, 1992): 380

² David Aberbach, *Charisma in Politics, Religion and the Media: Private Trauma, Public Ideals*, (London: Macmillan Press LTD, 1996): 14.

³ See Ronald J. Deluga, "Relationship Among American Presidential Charismatic Leadership, Narcissism, and Rated Performance," *Leadership Quarterly*, 8, No.1, (1997): 49-66.

⁴ This discussion draws upon Roy Lubit, "The Long-Term Organizational Impact of Destructively Narcissistic Managers," *Academy of Management Executive*, 16, no. 1, (2002): 127-138.

⁵ Quoted in Andrea Giampetro-Meyer, Timothy Brown, S. J M. Neil Browne, and Nancy Kubasek, "Do We Really Want More Leaders in Business?" *Journal of Business Ethics*, 17, no. 15, (November 1998): 1730.

⁶ This discussion of traits exhibited by the destructive narcissistic leader and suggestions for coping with destructive narcissists covered in the next section are derived from a variety of sources including the following: Lubit, Roy, "The Long-Term Organizational Impact of Destructively Narcissistic Managers," *Academy of Management Executive*, 16, no. 1, (2002): 127-138; Maccoby, Michael, "Narcissistic Leaders: The Incredible Pros, The Inevitable Cons," *Harvard Business Review*, (January-February, 2000): 69-77; Deluga, Ronald J., "Relationship Among American Presidential Charismatic Leadership, Narcissism, and Rated Performance," *Leadership Quarterly*, 8, no. 1, (1997): 49-66; Post, Jerrold M., "Current Concepts of the Narcissistic Personality: Implications for Political Psychology," *Political Psychology*, 14, no. 1, (1993): 99-121; DSM-IV & DSM-IV-TR: Narcissistic Personality Disorder, <http://behavenet.com/capsules/disorders/narcissisticpd.htm> (11/16/2005); Gregory, Bruce, "The Impact of Narcissism on Leadership and Sustainability," <http://ceres.ca.gov/tcsf/pathways/chapter12.html/> (11/16/2005); "20 Traits of Malignant Narcissistic Personality Disorder: How Many Does Yours Have?" <http://groups.msn.com/PSYCHOPATH/20traitsofmalignantnarcissism1.mswn> (11/16/2005); Deutschman, Alan, "Is Your Both a Psychopath?," *FastCompany*, 96 (July 2005): 44-50; Hogan, Robert, "Leadership and Dark Side Personality Traits," <http://www.swanngroup.co.nz/articles/darkside-personality-leadership.pdf> (11/16/2005); Dattner, Ben, "Narcissism at Work," <http://www.dattnerconsulting.com/presentation/narcissism.pdf> (11/16/2005); "Narcissistic Personality Disorder," <http://www.halcyon.com/jmashmun/npd/traits.html>.