Why Do Narcissists Make Such Poor Leaders?

You would most likely agree that a key component of underlineleadership is the ability to inspire others through one's own personal charismatic appeal. During times of crisis, such as during the current COVID-19 pandemic, you particularly need to be able to trust those who offer public guidelines, reassurances, and updates. It might be the head of your organization who sends out a video message, a national or regional politician, or a local religious official.

You want to believe the people in charge who deliver their words with great confidence. However, what if these are people you've come to conclude from their past behavior that they derive their self-assurance from the grandiose form of narcissism? Does it make you wonder whether they have your best interests in mind or does it seem that they just want to grab the limelight?

To be sure, a key component of leadership is the ability to inspire others so that they will follow and this can require a healthy dose of positive self-regard. Equally important to leadership is the ability to withstand criticism if not the public humiliation of losing an election. Indeed, people who run for their nation's highest offices may famously fail on their first try or two.

Those who seek promotions in the workplace, similarly, may be turned down a few times before they receive the advancement they crave. You might have even experienced the pain of losing the confidence of those you want to lead if you've ever lost a committee election in a volunteer organization. As much as you'd like to try again, though, you can't muster up the self-confidence you need to give it another go. It makes you realize just what it takes for people to repeatedly put themselves on the line.

Unfortunately, the very qualities that can contribute both to charismatic crowd-pleasing and the thick skin needed to survive psychologically after a loss can require a certain degree of narcissistic grandiosity. Johannes Gutenberg—Universität's Nina Wirtz and Thomas Rigatti (2020), studying workplace relationships, note that leaders high in grandiosity may be able to rise to the top of their organizations but at the cost of those they lead of becoming emotionally exhausted and turned off by their work under leaders who exploit and take advantage of them.

As the German authors note, "on the one hand, narcissists are perceived as charismatic and visionary, emerge more easily as leaders, possess public persuasiveness, and demonstrate good crisis management" ... but "on the other hand, narcissism has been related to low levels of integrity and contextual, interpersonal performance, as well as workplace deviance." Within the workplace their "sense of entitlement, lack of interest in personal

relationships and strong emotional reactivity are likely to cause interpersonal difficulties" (p. 1). Furthermore, for employees high in the vulnerable form of narcissism, exposure to such leaders can be particularly stressful and emotionally exhausting.

Wirtz and Regatti suggest, then, that it's necessary to look at the intersection in leader-follower relationships between the grandiose and vulnerable forms of narcissism. To test what they call this "holistic approach," the authors administered measures of both types of narcissism, work engagement, and emotional exhaustion, or burnout, on a sample of 235 leaders across 71 workplace teams in several German industries. The findings revealed that the workers most susceptible to the self-aggrandizing leadership style of grandiose narcissists were those who themselves were high in vulnerable narcissism, full of self-doubts and perceived personal weakness.

One conclusion from the German study is that not everyone will be negatively impacted by a leader high in grandiose narcissism. However, for those who are, the workplace becomes a scene of constant stress and turmoil. However, if you think about what such situations are actually like, you know that seeing narcissistic leaders prey on the weak creates an uncomfortable, if not toxic, environment for everyone else as well. According to Envisia Learning's Kenneth Nowack and Claremont Graduate School's Paul Zak (2020), this toxicity stems in large part from a lack of empathy on the part of those in charge. Again, you can probably relate to this if you've seen a coworker constantly belittled by a supervisor who seems impervious to the damaging effects of this behavior on the coworker's self-esteem.

According to what Nowack and Zak refer to as the "empathy-altruism hypothesis," a leader whose lack of empathy translates into a toxic interpersonal style creates "serious problems for employees, organizations, and society." Conversely, altruistic leaders are able to experience the distress of others, show concern for other people's feelings, and take the perspective of those under their authority. This type of altruism requires that the leader puts the goals of the group ahead of the personal need to gain acclaim. Such leaders want those they lead to do well not because it enhances their own image but because success benefits everyone. Some of the "empathy antidotes" that they recommend include supporting and practicing a culture of appreciation, enhancing an "empathy mindset," and even more radically, for organizations to "screen, select, and promote for empathy" (p. 6).

Returning to the example of your belittled coworker, an empathic leader would refrain from public shaming but instead would seek a one-on-one chat to try to help resolve the situation. Maybe that coworker forgot to set up the conference room for a scheduled meeting. An empathic leader would try to understand the reason for the memory slip from the employee's point of view. When workers feel that their superiors care about their feelings, they should be more likely to remain loyal to the organization, feel more engaged, and even experience better physical and mental health.

It's possible that such interventions could have a beneficial impact due to changes in the electrical activity of the brain. Catholic University of Milan's Michela Balconi and colleagues (2020) used EEG to measure what they call "interpersonal tuning" between managers and employers. The Italian team asked a sample of 11 managers and their employees to role-play a performance review under two conditions varying in empathy while their EEGs were recorded.

In the low-empathic condition, managers provided their employees with a numerical rating only, and in the no-rating, high empathic condition, the leaders used explanations to provide a more softened form of feedback on the employee's performance. The high empathy condition, as predicted, produced EEGs that reflected greater synchronization between the role-playing pairs as well as perceptions of greater emotional tuning and feelings of <u>cooperation</u> on the part of both team members.

If we extrapolate now from these findings in the workplace to situations involving leadership more generally, it seems clear that empathy can become a key component to ensuring that the actions of leaders have a favorable impact on those they lead. Leaders obsessed with trying to feed their narcissistic sense of self instead of understanding the plight of the average individual fail to provide the necessary reassurances to make those average individuals feel better about their situations and "interpersonally tuned up" enough to carry on despite any hardships they may be experiencing.

To sum up, because the very process of becoming a leader can attract those already high in narcissism, a strong dose may be required for an "empathy antidote" to work. It may be difficult, given the qualities needed to rise to the top, to find those leaders. Once you do, these are the people who ultimately will have your fulfillment most in mind.

References

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