

THE ROOT OF LEADERSHIP AFFLICTION: DESTRUCTIVE NARCISSISM & POWER

NARCISSISM EXPLORED.

In popular usage, the term narcissist refers to people whose aspirations, judgments, and decisions are shaped by an unhealthy sense of self, typified by arrogance and self-absorption. Narcissists pursue their own ambition and gratification with relentless, often ruthless drive. They manifest excessive pride, hubris and vanity. They are shaped and defined by narcissism, which is a pervasive pattern of overt grandiosity, self-focus, and self-important behavior. This pattern is evidenced in the narcissist's mental life through fantasy, or in behavior and relationships by the need for admiration or adulation. Narcissists are not merely over-confident, annoying, conceited people—the kind of benign narcissism we see in the TV character Frazier. They live out of a damaged self, attempting to bolster a fragile and inadequate self with unrealistic fantasies and grandiosity.

By this definition, narcissism is inherently unhealthy and destructive. But according to researcher Heinz Kohut, some degree of narcissism is healthy and even necessary if a person is to develop core values, worthy goals and a sound personal identity. Some leadership researchers believe there is such a thing as productive or constructive narcissism.

The productive narcissist has keen insight, pursues large and risky endeavors, and is able to successfully manage their energy and creativity such that they make a constructive contribution to the organization.

On the other hand, the destructive narcissist is not able to manage their energy and creativity to serve noble ends, and instead turn their powerful personalities and considerable gifts toward self-serving ends. (Throughout this series, I will use the terms constructive and destructive narcissism to describe the positive and negative shaping influence of narcissism on leaders.)

CONSTRUCTIVE NARCISSISM.

At a foundational level narcissism deals with self-regard—how one views the self. A healthy self is the foundation of constructive narcissism. And an unhealthy self is the foundation of destructive narcissism. The healthy self has two fundamental components.

(1) Positive self-regard. We call this self-respect, self-esteem or a positive and strong sense of self. It is the deep and pervading sense that we are “somebody” and therefore a person of intrinsic value and worth. People with positive self-regard feel substantially good about themselves. They know full well that they have faults and limitations, but they are fundamentally at peace with who they are. We might say that they are “comfortable in their own skin.”

(2) Noble purpose. We could call this a sense of identity and destiny. It is the deep and pervading sense that there is something meaningful and significant outside of one's self that is worth striving for. People with noble purpose have goals and aspirations.

They engage and relate to others in healthy and constructive ways to achieve that larger purpose. They know they can't get it done on their own, and so they work with others, including other strong and talented adults, to get important things accomplished. They are creative, appropriately assertive and constructively ambitious. Guided and sustained by their identity and purpose, they adapt to change, improvise with confidence and manifest courage in the face of adversity.

THE PROBLEM.

With this in mind, I affirm that there is nothing necessarily wrong with narcissistic leaders. We need self-confident, purposeful and assertive people to help lead our organizations. But here's the problem. The positive self-regard and sense of purpose just discussed can readily drift into a prideful and grandiose orientation to life if the individual does not combine these with the restraining anchors of humility—a realistic assessment of the self as having both strengths and limitations—and realistic aspirations—the belief that they can accomplish nothing of importance apart from constructive and cooperative relationships with others.

The people who mix positive self-regard with humility, and high aspirations with grounded realism I call constructive narcissists.

Narcissism is destructive when it is shaped and fueled by a deep-seated bias toward self-centeredness—read emotional immaturity. In this case, one's sense of identity and destiny is polluted with an inadequate and/or inaccurate sense of self. The individual may feel less than positive about their self, and compensate this feeling of inadequacy with outward expressions of grandiosity. The individual's pursuit of goals and aspirations becomes a self-centered, self-aggrandizing exercise that elevates the self above the needs and concerns of others.

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