

Narcissism in the Workplace

Research, Opinion and Practice



ANDREW J. DuBRIN

NEW HORIZONS IN MANAGEMENT

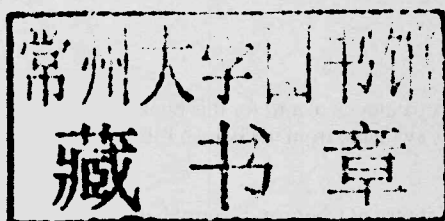
Series Editor: Cary L. Cooper

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Andrew J. DuBrin

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Preface

It is widely acknowledged that having a positive self-attitude, being self-confident, and having high self-esteem are worthwhile attributes in both work and personal life. To the chagrin of others, some people take these positive attributes to the extreme and become self-absorbed, self-adoring, self-centered, and show little empathy for the problems and concerns of others. In brief, they are narcissists.

A healthy dose of narcissism can facilitate career success, because reasonable concern with the self helps a person think of achieving important goals and being admired as a leader. The moderately narcissistic person often appears to be self-confident and charismatic. Yet extreme narcissism can hamper success because the narcissist irritates and alienates others in the workplace as well as in personal life. It is natural for work associates to want others to show some concern for them rather than being totally self-preoccupied.

PURPOSE AND GOALS OF THE BOOK

The purpose of *Narcissism in the Workplace: Research, Opinion, and Practice* is to describe both the positive and negative features of narcissism, and also present strategies and tactics for dealing constructively with narcissistic traits and behaviors in oneself and others. Ideally, this book would serve as a workplace guide to capitalizing on the positive aspects of narcissism, and minimizing its potential negative effects.

Another key purpose of this book is to present information about narcissism in the workplace that is based on empirical research when possible, as well as opinion derived from systematic observation. Our aim is to take an objective look at the positive and negative aspects of narcissism within members of the workforce. In contrast, considerable writing about narcissism is simply a rant about the self-centeredness, lack of consideration, and low empathy of narcissists. Our emphasis with respect to the negative features of narcissism is to present coping tactics and strategies rather than simply condemning workers with strong narcissistic tendencies.

To help illustrate the presence of workplace narcissism, we present many examples and case histories of people whose activities are presented in the

media, such as Donald Trump and Martha Stewart. Our labeling of these public figures as having narcissistic tendencies is based on their characteristics as reported in the media and occasionally by bloggers. In no instance do we pretend to have diagnosed the public figure based on a personal interview.

As a consequence of the purposes and goals of this book, it has several potential audiences. First among these are organizational professionals and managers curious about narcissism and its impact on work relationships and career advancement. Included in this group are people who are interested in learning more about factually based information on the subject of narcissism as this subject grows in interest. Second are students in such subjects as organizational behavior, organizational psychology, human relations, and leadership who would like in-depth knowledge about narcissism – a topic probably given no more than a passing reference in the subject fields just mentioned.

Third, scholars in the field of narcissism, self-esteem and leadership might find the integration of research and opinion about narcissism useful for their research. At the same time, some of the suggestions made in the book might serve as hypotheses for conducting more research. One example among dozens of possibilities is whether an optimum degree of narcissism predicts leadership effectiveness and career success.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

To achieve its purposes and goals the book is divided into ten chapters. Chapter 1 explains the meaning of narcissism as a personality trait, including its components and associated behaviors. Also included is a discussion of the narcissistic personality disorder. (Although it is now dropped as an official personality disorder by the American Psychiatric Association, the disorder is still widely recognized by mental health professionals.) Chapter 2 closely examines the behaviors and demands of workplace narcissists, such as uncivil treatment of others, arrogance, and a feeling of entitlement. Also explained is how strongly narcissistic workers attempt to manipulate others to accomplish their ends. Chapter 3 examines the roots of workplace narcissism, and therefore focuses more on personal life and early-life influences than do other chapters. The chapter includes a discussion of how generational values and personal branding contribute to narcissism.

Chapter 4 shifts attention to the healthy, productive narcissist – a category of worker that seems to have gone under-recognized in writings about narcissists. The role of healthy self-esteem in contributing to productive narcissism is emphasized, as well as the contribution of narcissism to workplace creativity. Chapter 5 again emphasizes the positive side of narcissism with an explanation of how this personality trait contributes to leadership effectiveness. For

example, narcissism often contributes to vision formation. Chapter 6 shifts to how narcissism can often contribute to dysfunctional leadership through such means as an excessive desire for power, wealth, and admiration. Also, the narcissistic leader will sometimes promote a vision that fits his or her need for grandiosity.

Chapter 7 describes strategies and tactics for dealing with the many potential problems created by narcissistic coworkers. Emphasis is placed on such communication tactics as giving ample feedback and offering constructive criticism. Chapter 8 is about the delicate problem of dealing with a narcissistic manager, including the technique of using good emotional intelligence, maintaining your professionalism, and flattering him or her. Chapter 9 describes tactics and strategies for dealing with the narcissistic subordinate, including focusing on the relationship with the subordinate as well as the tasks performed. This chapter also explores the issue of how a narcissistic organization can trigger workers into behaving narcissistically.

Chapter 10 describes how social media, mobile phones, and email are forces for encouraging narcissistic behavior among their users. Emphasis is placed on how negative mobile phone behavior often includes an element of narcissism, such as accepting a call during a work conversation.

All chapters include several features in addition to a description of the subject material: a checklist in the form of a self-quiz; a chapter summary; a section about guidelines for application and practice in relation to the chapter topic; and a case history of a workplace narcissist that includes a brief analysis of the narcissism displayed.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A project as complicated as a scholarly book requires the cooperation of a group of dedicated and talented people. First, I thank the many people working in organizations as well as public figures whose behavior has given me an opportunity to observe both the positive and negative aspects of narcissism. Second, I thank the anonymous manuscript reviewer who saw the merit in this project.

Thank you also to the editorial and production staff at Edward Elgar who helped make this book possible, as follows: Alan Sturmer, Executive Editor; Alexandra Mandzak, Assistant Editor; and Tom Fryer, Project Manager at Sparks Publishing Services Ltd.

Writing without loved ones would be a lonely task. My thanks therefore go to my family members: Drew, Douglas and Gizella, Melanie and Will, Drake, Rosie, Clare, Camila, Sofia, Eliana, Carson, Julian, and Owen.

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1. Who is a workplace narcissist?

A person's chances for success in the workplace increase when he or she has high self-confidence and self-esteem. Yet some people push these characteristics so far that they annoy and irritate many work associates. *Narcissism* is an extremely positive and inflated view of the self combined with limited empathy for others. The term narcissism derives from a Greek myth that has been widely circulated. Narcissus was the unusually handsome son of a minor god. His handsomeness prompted the nymphs who lived in woods where he hunted to fall in love with him, but Narcissus shunned them all. One of the shunned maidens prayed that Narcissus would at some time feel what it was like to love, and not have that love returned. An avenging goddess heard and granted the prayer. One day, shortly thereafter, when Narcissus was out hunting he came upon a clear fountain with water that resembled silver. As he bent down to drink some fountain water, Narcissus saw his own image in the water. Concluding that the image was a beautiful water spirit living in the water, Narcissus fell in love with himself.

When Narcissus attempted to reach in the water and embrace the image, it dispersed but returned when the water was calm again. Narcissus was transfixed with the image, and could not tear himself away. Little by little, Narcissus lost his color, vitality, and the handsomeness that had previously charmed the nymphs. Eventually Narcissus pined away and died. The nymphs mourned for Narcissus, and wanted to bury him. However, his body was nowhere to be found. In its place was a beautiful flower which bears his name and preserves the memory of Narcissus.¹

The carry over to modern life is that a narcissist is a person with intense self-love.

Quite often extreme narcissism can hamper success because the narcissist irritates and alienates others in the workplace as well as in personal life. Yet, the right amount and type of narcissism can at times facilitate success because the narcissist appears to be charismatic and self-confident.

A major purpose of this book is to describe both the positive and negative features of narcissism, and also to present strategies and tactics for dealing constructively with narcissistic traits and behaviors in oneself and others. One example is that a person might capitalize on his or her narcissism to become a successful leader. Another example is that if you better understand the traits and

behaviors of narcissistic work associates, including managers, you are likely to develop better working relationships with them.

Where possible we will base the findings and prescriptions presented in this book on scientific research and the opinion of professionals in the field of human behavior and mental health. At other places we will rely on less systematically gathered evidence and opinion to provide descriptions and recommendations to the reader.

As a starting point in our study of narcissism, you are invited to take the questionnaire, *Tendencies toward narcissism*, presented in Exhibit 1.1. As with other self-quizzes presented in this book, its purpose is to stimulate your thinking rather than to provide you with a professional diagnosis of some aspect of workplace narcissism. Nevertheless, the self-quizzes and other questionnaires are based on known traits and behaviors of narcissistic people rather than conjecture.

Exhibit 1.1 Tendencies toward narcissism

Instructions: Many narcissists exhibit some of the behaviors and hold some of the attitudes described below. To help you understand your tendencies toward narcissism, rate how strongly you agree with each of the statements below on a scale of 0–4, with 0 meaning not at all and 4 meaning very much.

1.	When I am in a gathering of people I am usually the best looking person in the room.	0	1	2	3	4
2	When I am in a gathering of people I am usually the smartest person in the room.	0	1	2	3	4
3.	I love me more than I love anybody else.	0	1	2	3	4
4.	If my stomach were upset, I would post that information on a social media website such as Twitter.	0	1	2	3	4
5.	I think it is important that my contacts receive updated photos of me.	0	1	2	3	4
6.	I don't think anybody has the right to criticize me.	0	1	2	3	4
7.	I don't think I should have to wait an entire year for a salary increase.	0	1	2	3	4
8.	If I were dating, I would expect the person I am dating to fall in love with me by at least our fourth meeting.	0	1	2	3	4
9.	I am destined for greatness.	0	1	2	3	4
10.	If I wanted a consumer product or a vacation, and I didn't have the money, I would use my credit card without a second thought.	0	1	2	3	4
11.	I get really upset when somebody criticizes me.	0	1	2	3	4
12.	When I fail on a task, it is almost always because somebody else messed up.	0	1	2	3	4
13.	I talk loudly on my cellphone or smart phone when in public places.	0	1	2	3	4

14.	During a meeting (or in a classroom) I answer my phone even if the call is not urgent.	0	1	2	3	4
15.	I would feel uncomfortable if a day went by without being admired by somebody.	0	1	2	3	4
16.	You don't find too many people as good looking and smart as me.	0	1	2	3	4
17.	I rarely worry about other people's problems.	0	1	2	3	4
18.	People who know me are readily influenced by me.	0	1	2	3	4
19.	I am a natural leader.	0	1	2	3	4
20.	I enjoy being the center of attention.	0	1	2	3	4
21.	I look at myself in the mirror almost whenever the opportunity presents itself.	0	1	2	3	4
22.	When I read about famous people, I usually realize that I am equally good or better than they are.	0	1	2	3	4
23.	I check search engines almost every day to see if there is a new mention of my name.	0	1	2	3	4
24.	I am a very special person.	0	1	2	3	4
25.	I am destined for outstanding success in career and personal life.	0	1	2	3	4
26.	Rather than discuss current events with other people, I like to talk about myself and my accomplishments.	0	1	2	3	4
27.	If I were not rated outstanding in a performance evaluation, I would regard it as an insult.	0	1	2	3	4
28.	I don't take most rules seriously because I make my own rules.	0	1	2	3	4
29.	I am hot.	0	1	2	3	4
30.	I am special and unique.	0	1	2	3	4

Scoring and interpretation:

91 or over: You have strong narcissistic tendencies to the extent that your work associates and personal contacts probably perceive you to be self-centered and preoccupied with your own importance. Some people most likely label you as a narcissist.

61–90: You have average narcissistic tendencies to the extent that you have high self-esteem and self-confidence. Some people may regard you as self-centered but not to an annoying, bothersome level.

31–60: Your narcissistic tendencies are below average to the extent that there are situations in which you appear too humble and modest. You could stand to focus attention on yourself a little more.

0–30: Your narcissistic tendencies are well below average, to the extent that your self-esteem and self-confidence could be suffering. You might develop a stronger appreciation of your good points and strengths.

Source: The idea for a few of the questions stem from Raskin, Robert and Howard Terry (1988), "A Principal-Components Analysis of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory and Further Evidence of Its Construct Validity," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 54 (5), 894.

A VARIETY OF DEFINITIONS OF NARCISSISM

As mentioned above, a general definition of narcissism focuses on a positive and inflated view of the self, combined with a lack of empathy for others. For a more complete understanding of narcissism, it is helpful to also examine a variety of definitions of narcissism. Many of these definitions imply that the narcissist has pushed a positive attitude toward the self too far, thereby experiencing a personality problem. Following are 15 definitions of narcissism, grouped into those with a positive connotation versus those with a negative connotation. Most of the definitions presented are different wordings of the same theme of self-love and self-admiration.

Definitions of Narcissism Suggesting Positive Qualities

1. A broad psychological continuum related to healthy self-esteem at one pole and maladjusted self-functioning at the other.² (As will be explained later, narcissism is regarded basically as a personality factor or trait that leads to many positive and negative behaviors in the workplace.)
2. *Primary narcissism* refers to the love of self which must precede the ability to love others (the psychoanalytic definition). The psychoanalytic perspective has prompted the belief that to love other people, you must first love yourself.
3. *Secondary narcissism* refers to identifying with and incorporating characteristics of a person into one's psyche. A *narcissistic object choice* involves identifying with another person based on that person's similarity to oneself.³
4. A normal stage in the development of a child characterized by self-absorption (from psychoanalysis). When narcissism extends into puberty, it is classified as secondary narcissism and can lead to a personality disorder. (Narcissists in the workplace are often perceived to be child-like because of their constant self-focus.)
5. A primary ingredient for the development of self-esteem (as analyzed by Freud).⁴

Definitions of Narcissism Suggesting Negative Qualities

1. A pattern of behaviors or fantasies that show a pervasive need for attention, admiration, and exhibit a lack of concern for others.⁵
2. Self-love and egoism; excessive love or admiration of oneself. (This is an everyday, useful definition.)
3. A state of looking at oneself with undue favor, self-love, conceit, pride, and vanity.

4. A psychological state characterized by preoccupation with the self, lack of empathy, and unconscious deficits in self-esteem.⁶
5. An attribute of the human psyche characterized by admiration of oneself but within normal limits.⁷ (Workers in fields where personal appearance is an asset, such as store associates in upscale stores, or models, would therefore benefit from this version of narcissism.)
6. Narcissism includes self-absorption, self-love and self-aggrandizement as attempts to gratify infantile needs (Freud). The narcissist therefore may act immaturely in order to bring attention to himself or herself, such as continually making jokes during a serious meeting.⁸
7. A pattern of behavior that emphasizes feelings of superiority, entitlement, and a constant need for attention and admiration. (A narcissist can therefore be an annoying coworker, manager, subordinate or customer because he or she demands so much.)⁹
8. *Overt narcissism* involves tendencies toward grandiosity and exhibitionism. *Covert narcissism* involves interpersonal hypersensitivity and vulnerability. (Whether overt or covert, the narcissist can come across as an annoying work associate.)¹⁰
9. A personality disorder in which a person is self-absorbed to the point that the needs and feelings of others do not matter. (This is a useful definition for classifying people who are at the high end of the continuum of narcissism.)
10. A personality disorder characterized by extreme self-absorption, an exaggerated sense of self-importance, and a strong need for attention and admiration from others. (This reflects the standard psychiatric definition of people who suffer from a *narcissistic personality disorder*, and will be explained more fully later in the chapter.)

NARCISSISM AS A PERSONALITY TRAIT

A practical approach to understanding narcissism in the workplace is to regard narcissism as a personality trait ranging from being lowly narcissistic to highly narcissistic. This conception of narcissism can be inferred from the questionnaire, *Tendencies toward Narcissism*, presented above (see Exhibit 1). Our approach is consistent with research that shows narcissism as a personality dimension, not exclusively a personality disorder. As a dimension of personality, people can be reliably arrayed on this continuum.¹¹ Being arrayed on a continuum means that individual differences in narcissism exist, just as people differ in intelligence and height.

Personality psychologist Scott Barry Kaufman reports that narcissism is a stable trait that varies in degree among people. Several aspects, including self-confidence and self-sufficiency, are healthy and adaptive. Only at the extreme

end of the continuum does narcissism become a disorder. The reason is that toxic levels of vanity, entitlement, and exploitativeness are displayed at the extreme end of the personality trait of narcissism.¹²

It is therefore more accurate to specify that a person is strongly narcissistic than simply labeling him or her as *narcissistic*. Similarly, people vary on personality traits such as conscientiousness, rather than being *conscientious* versus *not conscientious*. So when we refer in this book to a person being narcissistic, we are really referring to a high standing on the trait of narcissism.

The High and Low Ends of the Narcissism Continuum

Many people at the highest end of the personality trait of narcissism suffer from a personality disorder. A synthesis of studies about the topic suggests that those with a narcissistic disorder are unable to regulate their self-esteem. As a result they become dependent on social sources for affirmation. These high-end narcissists engage in activities and behaviors that help them maintain their inflated sense of self. At the beginning of a business meeting, the extreme narcissist may occupy five minutes describing his or her recent vacation.

Highly narcissistic people are preoccupied with receiving attention, and expect special treatment from others. They are so intent on having their needs met that they lack empathy for others. This is one reason that narcissists often interrupt others, and hog conversations.

At the low end of the continuum is healthy narcissism. People classified as healthy narcissists have a positive self-image resulting from a realistic assessment and acceptance of their strengths and weaknesses. The moderate narcissist thus has high self-esteem. The apparent high self-esteem of strongly narcissistic individuals is a façade used to cover up and compensate for an underlying sense of worthlessness and inadequacy. A false sense of self-esteem makes the person vulnerable to slights and failures.¹³ You may have noticed that highly narcissistic people become defensive and angry when criticized – providing they listen to the criticism.

The late Steve Jobs, the co-founder of Apple Inc., exemplified a person with healthy narcissistic tendencies in the sense that he is widely admired for his success, yet also noted for his egomaniacal tendencies and wanting to control others closely.¹⁴ Before his health problems forced him into the background, Jobs was at the center of every product launch and controlled intimate technical details of the presentations.

The Trait Components of Narcissism

As a personality trait, narcissism consists of both a general trait and sub-traits or components. The general trait of narcissism reflects the definition of narcissism

presented at the outset of the chapter: an extremely positive and inflated view of the self combined with limited empathy for others. Based on extensive studies with the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI), Robert Raskin and Howard Terry characterize the high NPI scorer as “being relatively dominant, extraverted, exhibitionistic, aggressive, impulsive, self-centered, subjectively self-satisfied, self-indulgent, and nonconforming.”¹⁵

The NPI has been the basis for considerable quantitative research about narcissism, based on investigations in a variety of settings, with college students the population most frequently studied. A sampling follows of 4 of the 40 items on the most widely used version of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory. The respondent essentially agrees with the item or the opposite of the item. (An *item* is a psychometric term for a question or a statement on a test.)

- *Item number 7*: I know that I am good because everybody keeps telling me so.
- *Item number 8*: If I ruled the world, it would be a much better place.
- *Item number 12*: I like to be the center of attention.
- *Item number 32*: Everybody likes to hear my stories.

Use your intuition and common sense to guess whether responding “agree” or “disagree” would be in the narcissistic direction for the four sample questions above.

Studies based on the NPI have revealed seven sub-traits or components. The components are referred to statistically as factors, as revealed by factor analysis. Each one of these sub-traits is presented next, along with a brief interpretation of what a very high score would mean in terms of the individual’s behavior.¹⁶

Authority

Authority refers to a person’s leadership skills and power. People who score high on authority like to be in charge and gain power, often for power’s sake alone. A person who scored particularly high on authority would have the self-image of a leader, and would be someone who values power.

Self-sufficiency

As implied in its label, self-sufficiency refers to how much a person relies on others versus his or her own abilities to meet his or her needs in life. A person who scores high on self-sufficiency would behave independently, such as not frequently consulting others before taking action or making a decision.

Superiority

This trait refers to whether a person feels he or she is superior to others in close contact. The higher the score the haughtier and more superior the person thinks