

Of course I'm not a Narcissist... I'm way too amazing!

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Picture this familiar scene from a school staff room. Jason is proudly modelling the sports shoes he recently bought on-line for a bargain price. Nigel overhears the conversation and joins in rather loudly, with some one-up-manship and shows off his new, latest model, high-tech resistance training joggers, making sure he lets everyone know that he paid \$350 for them. "It's worth it for the quality", he says. Jason, somewhat embarrassed, resumes grading his Year 7 Science practical reports.

In the same lunch hour, Jessica excitedly shares that she was selected to contribute a poster presentation at a local education conference. Her story is interrupted part way through, as Natalie boasts that her academic paper was selected for publication in an esteemed educational journal, and she's heading to Aspen, Colorado in January, to deliver a keynote address at an international conference. Jessica's bubble is effectively burst, and she finishes eating her cheese sandwich.

Nigel and Natalie are displaying some tell-tale signs of classic narcissism.

Narcissists will often brag about their own achievements, focus on physical appearance, value material goods that display status and speak in a loud voice with big gestures. Narcissism is not simply having a confident attitude or healthy feeling of self-worth. Rather it typically involves over-confidence, self-admiration, and an inflated view of one's self (Twenge and Campbell, 2009).

A study of 37,000 American college students, concluded that many current trends "are all rooted in an underlying shift in psychology and the relentless rise in narcissism in our culture". According to Twenge and Campbell (2009), we are experiencing a "narcissism epidemic in an age of entitlement". Their research suggests that, from 1980's to present, narcissistic personality traits rose at the same fast rate as increases of obesity.

The Oxford English Dictionary, (2005) defines Narcissism as "excessive self-love or vanity; self-admiration, self-centredness". The word originates from the Greek myth of Narcissus, an attractive young man who was looking for someone to love. He saw his own reflection in the water and fell in love with his own image, gazing at it until he died.

This psycho-cultural affliction is a popular buzzword, gaining

much attention, yet shouldn't be used lightly. W Keith Campbell, Head of Department of Psychology at University of Georgia suggests, "people are on a continuum – there's a range of narcissism" (Twenge and Campbell, 2009). Those of us not trained in psychology, should avoid diagnosing our friends or colleagues with serious conditions such as 'Narcissistic Personality Disorder'.

Nevertheless, as a School or Department Head, and caring professional, a basic understanding of narcissism can assist you as you lead knowledge communities. How can you address the issue when you encounter narcissistic behaviours in your staff? A little self-reflection is also worthwhile.

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Many significant leaders across history have been thought to have narcissistic traits. Often their leadership was driven by their own personal egotistical needs for power and admiration (Kets de Vries & Miller, 1997). As a generalisation, teachers are frequently described as having a 'healthy dose of narcissism'. A study by Isaac Friedmann (2017) argued that altruism and narcissism co-jointly may be regarded as factors motivating people to opt for teaching as a career.

There is a myth, often espoused by school and other organisational leaders, that it is necessary to be 'at least a bit narcissistic' to succeed today. Some research supports such a view and cautiously suggests that narcissistic leadership may not necessarily be toxic. Maccoby (2000) uses the term 'productive narcissists' to describe leaders who are grand visionaries and innovators, with an ability to attract followers. Narcissistic leaders who are skilful orators, can also be quite charismatic. They need affirmation and adulation from their admirers.

While there are some potential strengths of narcissistic leaders, there are also accompanying weaknesses. Rosenthal (2006) from The Harvard Centre for Public Leadership, cites numerous studies suggesting narcissists are notoriously poor managers. They are frequently over-involved and can be quite abusive. They tend to resist advisers' suggestions and take more credit for successes than they are due, while blaming others for their own failures and shortcomings. Rosenthal concludes that the current research on narcissism and leadership suggests that narcissism is positively linked to attaining a leadership position, but not necessarily to performing well in that position.

A particular weakness of narcissists, as cited by Maccoby,

When the responses were positive, he encouraged further discussion, but if any staff member was brave enough to suggest some constructive criticisms, a stony response was received, and the **topic was quickly changed** 2000, is that they are poor listeners, especially when they feel threatened or attacked. He suggests that the very adulation that a narcissist demands can have a corrosive effect. As they expand in influence, they listen even less to words of caution and advice. They ignore others and create a sense of isolation. For example, one school principal conducted '360-degree feedback' and purported to encourage staff to provide honest responses about his leadership performance. When the responses were positive, he encouraged further discussion, but if any staff member was brave enough to suggest some constructive criticisms, a stony response was received, and the topic was quickly changed.

As a school leader, what are some traits and behaviours you should be looking for, which might indicate you have a narcissist on your staff team? Amanda Chan, (2014) includes the following suggestions:

- Narcissists tend to be great at first impressions, but in the long term they can be quite negative
- They tend to make the conversation about themselves
- In order to self-promote they will use a tactic of name-dropping
- Narcissists will often tell the same story over and over again, and it is usually regarding their own personal heroism or exploits
- They desire to display high status, material items
- They are strongly averse to criticism and externalise blame. They are also more likely to cheat if necessary, to make themselves appear better than they actually are



- Finally, a narcissistic person probably has no idea that he or she is a narcissist.

Perhaps it would be helpful to review the above list, before interviewing candidates for a new leadership position. Check the authenticity of their qualifications and seek the opinion of past employers, especially those not on their referee list. If the candidate were to flaunt their Prada handbag, overly-self promote, and respond to your question about a difficult situation in their past position, by blaming and criticising others, then perhaps steer clear of this appointment.

If you are in the unfortunate position of having a narcissistic boss, then I expect that they have a high sense of their own competence, and might perceive you as a threat, particularly if you are competent and successful. They may use all the right collaborative words but intentionally not share any relevant power with you. Narcissistic bosses often wear out their subordinates, until they eventually leave. They often micromanage and create an atmosphere of fear.

Lawrence Le Noir, 2013, suggests the following ways to look after yourself, should you be working with or leading narcissistic individuals –

- 1 Being around toxic people can affect your mental health. Take care of yourself and try activities to minimise negative thoughts to keep your brain function healthy.
- 2 You don't need to get a narcissistic

person to like you. Keep a professional distance, as their relationship with you is typically established simply for their own utility.

- 3 Be realistic in your expectations. A narcissistic person will not have the capacity to create a harmonious work environment. They expect you to meet their needs and make them look good.
- 4 Find a supportive co-worker to discuss your frustrations.
- 5 Document any problematic interactions you experience. Should you need to defend yourself at a later point, you

will have a record of the situation and your response.

Finally, what about you? If you truly are a narcissist, I expect you've read this article

with interest yet not yet recognised any of these traits in your own behaviour. Narcissism is on the increase in our society. We've been taught from a young age to 'look out for number one', surrounded by a 'me' culture and attitudes. If narcissism is a personality trait, then it cannot be 'cured'. However, if you desire to be a more effective leader, then self-reflection and willingness to change your behaviour will be welcomed by your leadership team and staff. Twenge and Campbell (2009) suggest that a good place to start overcoming your own narcissistic behaviour is by practicing gratitude. Actively acknowledge the good things that others are doing, without taking any personal credit. Seek ways to express thanks. Listen more and speak less.

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