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Managing Up

Why We Follow Narcissistic Leaders

by Dritjon Gruda and Paul J. Hanges

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Summary. A recent study aimed to understand narcissistic leaders and who is most likely to follow them. The results revealed a few patterns. If you are someone who is always looking out for others, empathizes with others, and seeks harmony and consensus in your team... [more](#)

Uncertainty in the business world provides a ripe opportunity for narcissists — people who have a grandiose conception of themselves, are self-obsessed, and crave authority and control — to emerge as leaders. Narcissists are great at accumulating power and influence and their confidence and charisma create the illusion of them being the best person for the job when predictability is low.

Given this, it's not surprising that narcissistic leaders can be found in multiple positions of authority throughout organizations. Not only does this fulfill their desire for power but also gives them the opportunity they seek to show off, and validate that they are at the centre of the universe.

While narcissistic leaders can be productive and accomplished, over time, their need for continual admiration, acting in their own interest and putting the needs and interests of others at risk can destroy productivity, group morale, and organizational culture.

We recently conducted a study to understand narcissistic leaders and who is most likely to follow them. We addressed this question by applying modern computing techniques to create an algorithm that helped us infer narcissism and personality traits of leaders and followers based on their Twitter posts (436 leaders with a combined 49,644 followers). Each of us reveals hints about our personality from the textual data we leave behind when we post or engage in conversations with others online.

We defined leaders as individuals who are followed online by others. Consistent with our definition, the majority of the people we called leaders actually held leadership positions in corporate America. Followers were defined as anyone who engaged with a leader's posts on a regular basis over time. We included leaders and followers who had interacted a minimum of four times from January 1, 2018 to November 15, 2019.

We then used linguistic analytics to infer people's personality traits. Linguistic analytics describes the use of software to analyze and study language, oftentimes in social media posts. In this

study, we examined leaders' and followers' word choice, word order, sentence structure, as well as expressed emotions and tone in posted tweets. These characteristics were used to create a profile of the person's personality.

Who's most susceptible to narcissistic leaders?

Our results revealed a few patterns about who is most likely to follow a narcissistic leader.

If you're someone who is always looking out for others, empathizes with others, and seeks harmony and consensus in your team (known as agreeable followers), you are more likely to be susceptible to following a narcissistic leader. Agreeable followers avoid confrontation and do not openly challenge the opinions of others, especially confident, assertive leaders. Narcissistic leaders come across as strong decision-makers, so they are perceived as assertive and even inspirational, and agreeable followers are drawn to that confidence.

If you are someone who gets anxious and worried easily, or likes to get started on work projects early on to prevent anxiety as a deadline draws closer (known as neurotic followers), you probably prefer engaging with narcissistic leaders. This result was supported by another recent study that found that narcissistic leaders project a sense of confidence when they speak, and that provides such followers with reassurance and more certainty. Neurotic followers are drawn to such leaders because they have high levels of anxiety coupled with low self-esteem and low self-confidence. It is not surprising, then, that such followers would be drawn to a reassuring and confident leader.

Who is less susceptible to narcissistic leaders?

If you're someone who is creative, curious, and always trying to discover new ways of working, you're less likely to be susceptible to narcissistic leaders. These types of followers are more likely to feel stifled and restricted by the narcissistic leader's tendency to increase their followers' dependency over time. As a consequence, such followers tend to express less commitment to

their organization or teams overall, and so they are less likely to passively accept the interpersonal exploitive nature of narcissistic leaders.

If you're someone who is conscientious and disciplined, you're also less likely to be susceptible to narcissistic leaders. Such followers tend to trust their inner voice and are sufficiently disciplined enough in accomplishing their tasks that they simply don't need an overbearing and arrogant leader to provide them with direction. By resisting the narcissistic leader's siren call, these followers allow themselves to grow and thrive at work and receive the recognition that they deserve.

Does gender matter?

Although our research didn't focus on gender, we found that the characteristics of followers attracted to narcissistic leaders changed as a function of the leader's gender. For example, agreeable and neurotic followers tended to interact more often with narcissistic male leaders than female leaders. One explanation could be that culturally endorsed gender stereotypes might affect the comfort followers feel when they follow male or female leaders with strong beliefs and personalities. Unlike the followers engaged by male narcissistic leaders, female narcissistic leaders seem to attract followers sufficiently willing to consider gender roles outside those espoused by cultural gender stereotypes.

Breaking the pattern

Following a narcissistic leader can have some advantages, but also comes with a lot of downsides. For example, they're skilled orators, one of the qualities that makes them so charismatic. But narcissists are emotionally isolated and highly distrustful. They like to surround themselves with followers who affirm their own self-esteem. Narcissistic bosses aim to retain their followers by offering salary increases and more frequent promotions. However, over time, the true nature of narcissistic leaders emerges. This includes hostile and abusive communication with followers, unethical behavior, and coercion to engage in unethical

behaviors, as well as the creation of less collaborative organizational cultures. The long-term harmful effects of abusive and narcissistic leaders can result in destroying a follower's reputation, self-esteem, and confidence.

Now that you have gained awareness about what makes narcissistic leaders tick and who is drawn to them, you will know what to watch out for and can use it to your advantage. The best advice of all is to look for signs of narcissism early on — as early as the job interview process — and avoid working with this type of leader in the first place. For example, is the interviewer overly confident or coming across arrogant? Do they become very defensive when confronted with a challenging question?

That said, if you find yourself in this position, especially in your early career when you may have less flexibility around who you work with, we recommend trying out these strategies, at least until you can get into a better situation.

1) Use their faults to move up the ladder.

If your team leader is highly narcissistic, they will want to take all the credit. Let them, or even better, share your ideas with them and let them take shared credit. Narcissistic leaders are primarily focused on themselves, their career, their promotion opportunities, etc. But if they see you as someone who can help them achieve their goals, they are likely to want to keep you close, which is oftentimes followed by salary increases and even promotions.

This is just one strategy around how to manage narcissistic leaders, and we recommend approaching it with caution. While it may get you ahead, don't expect your leader to look out for your career or care about your well-being. Importantly, if you find the relationship turns abusive in anyway, prioritize your well-being, and start looking for other options.

2) Work on your self-esteem and confidence to become less susceptible.

Another way to protect yourself from narcissists is to work on increasing your self-worth and esteem. People with low self-esteem may accept derogatory or aggressive behavior toward them because they have low perceptions of their self-worth.

One simple way to increase your self-esteem and confidence is to keep a positivity journal. List out all your positives and accomplishments. Each day, write what makes you feel good about yourself. If someone gives you a compliment (even as simple as, “I loved the comic you used in the slides today,”) write it down. If you made an effort to speak to someone new, write down how that made you feel. This is a small practice but one that will help you build confidence and be less vulnerable to a narcissistic leader’s allure.

Another way is to be intentional about making friends at work and surround yourself with a supportive community who can lift you up and reassure you when you’re questioning your self-worth. Join employee resource groups to meet like-minded individual, ask your peers to chat over a coffee, or attend company events where you can connect with others.

We’re human and we can have negative thoughts about ourselves and our behaviors from time to time, but by increasing your self-awareness, community, and focusing on the positives every day, you’ll start to see an overall shift in how you view yourself and your self-worth.

Dritjon Gruda, Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor in Organizational Behavior at the National University of Ireland Maynooth, Ireland. His research explores leadership and personality via the use of new technologies such as machine learning and artificial intelligence.

Paul J. Hanges, Ph.D. is a full professor of Industrial/Organizational Psychology at the University of Maryland, USA. His work centers on how the effects of both ethical and destructive leadership are changed by organizational and societal culture.

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