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THE UNTOUCHABLES…

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Many articles have been written about bad bosses, destructive personalities, or the charismatic, narcissistic leader. But could it be that the real reason destructive personalities continue to thrive in leadership is because of conducive organizational cultures and the refusal to report bad leader behavior?

What makes the narcissistic leader untouchable? The reluctance to report abuse in the workplace stems from one's inability to trust senior leadership and leadership's failure to prevent and stop abuse. Interviews with 20 self-reported victims of workplace abuse revealed that 16/20 refused to formerly report and 20/20 stated retaliation to be the primary reason for not wanting to officially report abuse in the workplace. 12 subordinates reported that they believed senior leadership incapable of stopping the bad behavior and 8 believed that senior leadership encourages and condones bad leader behavior.

Narcissism in Leadership

Maccoby (2003) described superior visionaries such as Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Oprah Winfrey, and Jack Welch as productive healthy narcissists and explained that healthy narcissism is why these individuals have achieved enormous success. Maccoby proposes a new paradigm for modern leadership and challenges the current leadership theories and practices by concluding that today's leaders are motivating visionaries with strategic intelligence and supports the premise that healthy narcissism in management is a vital component for success.

The term "*narcissism*" stems from the Greek myth of Narcissus, which refers to self-love. To determine if one is dealing with a narcissistic personality, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, (DSM-V), defines the narcissist as possessing at least five of the following characteristics:

1. A grandiose sense of self-importance (e.g., exaggerates achievements, talents, and expects recognition as superior without commensurate achievements)
2. Preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love, believes that he or she is "special" and unique and can only be understood by or should associate with, other special or high-status people (or institutions)
3. Requires excessive admiration, has a sense of entitlement, unreasonable expectations of especially favorable treatment or automatic compliance with his or her expectations
4. Is interpersonally exploitative, takes advantage of others to achieve his or her own end
5. Lacks empathy, is unwilling to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others, is envious of others or believes that others are envious of him or her, and shows arrogant, haughty behaviors or attitudes (DSM – V, 2013)

Healthy vs. Destructive Narcissism

Maccoby advises that successful leaders and managers may appear arrogant displaying healthy narcissistic behavioral traits; over-confident with a need for power but expresses a true concern for others but will not exploit or devalue people. This type of narcissist can produce healthy productive work teams versus unhealthy narcissistic behavioral traits that consist of an unrealistic sense of superiority; a need for power regardless of outcome or

consequence and will devalue, and exploit others. This destructive type of narcissist will not produce healthy productive work teams and as such, I define destructive narcissistic behavior in the workforce as an intentional degrading and demoralizing form of intimidation detrimental to the health and well being of employees and organizational success.

Maccoby recalled that an Oracle executive once described his narcissistic Chief Executive Officer Larry Ellison, "The difference between God and Larry is that God does not believe he is Larry" (p. 2). Maccoby explained that as entertaining as Ellison's characterization may be, Ellison's high opinion of himself is troubling. Narcissists always inspired people and shaped the future. Narcissists such as Napoleon, Gandhi, and Roosevelt determined the social agendas of their time. As businesses became the change engine for social behavior this new genre introduced another generation of narcissists Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, Thomas Edison, and Henry Ford, visionaries, expert in his field, and very charismatic leaders who restructured the American industry. Currently technological social medias are the new change engines for social behavior and Maccoby believes that yet again, another genre of narcissists will emerge, indicating that perhaps the most productive and best leaders are healthy narcissists.

Establishing that a certain degree of narcissism is essential for functioning in the business world, the positive, healthy narcissist can create inspiring visions for his or her employees and the organization. As cited in an article by Giampretro-Meyer, Brown, Browne, and Kubasek (1998), according to Kets de Vries, "narcissism is a strange thing, a double-edged sword. Having either too much or too little of it can throw a person off balance. The same traits that can serve the narcissistic leader well can become destructive" (p. 1730). Kets de Vries (1985) also understands that a certain degree of narcissism is natural and even healthy, and understands that moderate levels of self-esteem can contribute to positive behaviors in the workplace, such as assertiveness, confidence, and creativity, which are desirable qualities in leadership. However, Kets de Vries has also identified that the destructive narcissists ego, self-centeredness, grandiosity, lack of empathy, and exploitation can have devastating consequences in the workplace. These narcissistic traits and disposition combined with a position of power will allow the narcissist to believe that he or she is untouchable. Also believing they were untouchable were the unhealthy narcissists such as Stalin, Hitler, and Qaddafi. Enron's Kenneth Lay and Jeffrey Skilling, and most recently Bernie Madoff. Rising to power at no cost, the take no prisoner mentality, no regard for humanity, sociopaths.

Maccoby further supported the pros and cons when dealing with narcissistic leaders, and states that even Freud realized that narcissism has a dark side. Maccoby explained that perceived threats will trigger rage. These destructive unhealthy narcissistic traits are why the greater percentage of people will always think of narcissists in a negative way. However, as discussed narcissism can be useful even necessary, and eventually, even Freud changed his opinion regarding narcissism recognizing that everyone displays some narcissistic traits. In, *The Analysis of the Self: A Systematic Analysis of the Treatment of the Narcissistic Personality Disorders,* Psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut (1971) expanded on Freud's theories so that he could develop methods to treat narcissistic behaviors. Kohut used narcissism as a model to explore his interest in how one develops a "sense of self." If a person displays narcissistic behavioral traits this therapy method and model allows the narcissist to suppress his or her feelings of low self-esteem. By allowing the narcissist the opportunity to speak highly of him or herself, the narcissists can eliminate his or her sense of worthlessness. In addition to the sense of worthlessness and insecurity that contributes toward the destructive leader abusing those around him, the narcissist has a very fragile ego. The perception of disrespect or threat to his or her self-image will provoke the narcissist to, as coined by Kohut (1971), *"rage" thus abusing and emotionally damaging anyone in his or her path.*

Subordinate Abuse

The emergence of subordinate abuse, workplace bullying, or mobbing is a serious form of nonsexual, nonracial harassment currently described legally as status-blind harassment. During the 1990s works from Gary and Ruth Namie introduced this new phenomenon, psychological abusive behaviors in the workplace. Psychological abuse directed toward subordinates is the common mistreatment of employees. Subordinate abuse can escalate into extreme emotional abuse creating severe emotional and economic consequences for victims, families, and the organization.

"How stupid can you be?" "You're an idiot." "Can't you do anything right?" "My kids could work faster than you do." The great silent secret of the American workplace is that verbal abuse is a far more pervasive problem than most people realize. While people acknowledge that workplace violence exists, no one wants to openly look at chronic verbal abuse and the toll it routinely takes. While it may be much easier to be outraged by physical violence, verbal abuse does exist in the workplace and it exacts a huge penalty" (Estrin, 1996, p. 78-79).

"Verbal abuse is considered a form of workplace violence that leaves no visible scars, however; the emotional damage to the inner core of the victim's self can be devastating" (Elgin, 1980, p. 5-7). Verbal abuse will leave a victim believing that he or she has been abused, devalued, and humiliated. Emotional abuse, verbal abuse, or bullying, regardless of the definition the affects from this form of harassment are the same. Typically the destructive leader will

repeat this abuse on a regular basis, against the one unfortunate person who is the target of the rage. The destructive leader is consciously abusing his or her victim. Gossiping, isolation, yelling, and the blatant refusal to treat this subordinate as a person becomes the leaders favorite past time.

Described forms of abuse that emerged during the interview process included verbal assaults that were constant degrading, and humiliating. The perception of the victims and witnesses is that this is the preferred tactical method that the destructive leader will execute in an effort to dominate through fear. Employees indicated that were subjected to and now perceive the following as abusive behavior:

- Sarcastic remarks, failure to address the subordinate by name, for example, him, her, them, or that one
- Name calling in a private and public setting
- Gossiping about the subordinate with other team members
- Disrespectful references about one's appearance
- Setting the subordinate up to fail by creating unrealistic goals and objectives
- Taking credit for the subordinates work
- Sabotaging the subordinates paycheck
- Refusing to approve time off
- Acting in a threatening manner, e.g., threatening body language accompanied by comments, such as "make no mistake, you work for me," "I own you," and "you will learn your place."
- Manipulating subordinates through intimidation and fear

During the interview process employees, both victims and witnesses, indicated that the constant exposure to these negative experiences created a host of emotional problems; they were anxious, afraid, and stated that they were made to believe that the perpetrator was protected by the organizations Human Resources Department. They firmly believed that the organization would not take action against a member of the leadership team.

The emergence of this new organizational belief that one can abuse those of lesser title is a learned and tolerated behavior that inspires inappropriate workplace behaviors. The victimization of those that the are considered "lesser title" or of "lesser importance" overtime becomes an accepted cultural norm in the workplace even though these bad behaviors have adverse long-term effects on the organization.

Subordinates victimized by abusive leaders experience a host of emotional problems. Prolonged abuse may cause anxiety, depression, insecurity, and in extreme circumstances cause the victim to breakdown. In addition to discussing the emotional effects of this abuse, abused subordinates are also subjected to a host of physical problems. The World Health Organization (2007), reports workplace stress, much of which is caused by bullying can lead to the employee experiencing physical effects, such as chronic fatigue syndrome, stress, a lowered resistance to colds, coughs, and flu. Other reported symptoms of stress include high blood pressure and migraine headaches.

Consequences of Subordinate Abuse

To further assess long-term effects of these abusive practices in organizations, Bush and Gilliland (1995) contended that verbal abuse fosters a negative organizational culture that threatens the organization with high turnover, lawsuits, unionization, and decreased productivity. Lubit (2000) stated that problems arise when grandiosity results in the devaluation of subordinates. The sense of entitlement and lack of values does significant damage to an organization. These destructive personalities compromise the organizations long-term performance by driving away the organizations most talented people, and that destructive leaders create and foster negative problematic cultures and are capable of reckless even unethical business decisions.

In addition, continued abuse within the workplace will take its toll on one's psychological well-being, morale, one's health and eventually will have an adverse effect on productivity and the organizations bottom line. Namie (2007) also concurs that emotional traumas are costing employers millions in stress-related illnesses, absences, and lost productivity. As cited by Rosh in the American Psychological Association (APA) workplace fact sheet, "job stress costs American businesses $300 billion a year in absenteeism, diminished productivity, employee turnover and medical and legal costs" (2001). In addition, also estimated is 50% to 70% of primary care physician's visits are for physical issues because of stress-related psychological trauma.

Dr. Charlotte Rayner (2002) described how abusive work environments affect not only those subordinates who experience subordinate abuse but also those who witness the abuse as well. Victims spend the greater percentage of their time trying to defend themselves versus time that could be spent working. Raynor concluded that 20% of those who witness subordinate abuse look for another job and that 98% remain in a constant state of distress. Rayner also concurs that the effects of subordinate abuse consist of decreased motivation and morale, greater absenteeism, and employee turnover.

Concluding that the emotional and financial ramifications of subordinate abuse is costing organizations millions of dollars, Maxxon reports for the United Nations International Labor Organization and describes the financial consequences of a stressful work environment: The physical effects of this epidemic are often emphasized but the

economic consequences also are alarming. Workplace stress costs U.S. employers an estimated $200 billion per year in absenteeism, lower productivity, staff turnover, workers' compensation, medical insurance and other stress-related expenses. Considering this stress management may be business's most important challenge of the 21st century (1999).

Failure to Report

When victims spend the greater percentage of the day agonizing over the harassment and abuse he or she is enduring at work, the narcissist has harmed both, the abused subordinate and the organization.

The Workplace Bullying Survey conducted in 2010 concluded that bullying at work is four times more prevalent than illegal harassment and 50% of workers have experienced workplace bullying; however, only 37% of workers reported it. 72% of workplace bullies are bosses, as you might expect; however, gender is not as significant an indicator as you might think. Of the bosses who are bullies, 62% are men and 58% are women; 68% of abuse is same-sex harassment and 80% of female bullies target women. When bullying behavior is brought out into the open, it becomes easier to recognize, and harder to ignore.

The primary purpose of the interviews conducted for this article was to understand why abused subordinates would be hesitant to report and stop further victimization. The interviews consisted of allowing the abused subordinate the opportunity to express their fears and concerns, asking questions such as why one would continue to be subjected to abuse in lieu of taking action, and what prevents one from seeking help within the organization. The results of these interviews suggested that the reluctance to report abuse in the workplace was primarily the inability to trust senior leadership, retaliation, and the current state of the economy.

1. *Reported episodes of abuse = 20.*

2. *Refusal to officially report abuse = 16/20 refused to formerly report.*

3. *Fear of retaliation = 20/20 stated retaliation to be the primary reason for not wanting to officially report abuse in the workplace.*

4. *Fear of the economy = 20/20 will continue to be abused for fear of the economy and lack of employment opportunities.*

5. *Opinion of Leadership = 12 subordinates reported they believe that senior leadership is incapable of stopping the leader, and 8 believe that senior leadership condones bad behavior in management.*

Subordinate abuse is an epidemic affecting the lives of employees and their families in addition to organizational productivity and success. Current research reveals that a significant factor for non-reporting, non-help seeking subordinates is the inability to trust senior leadership. These subordinates believe that leadership will fail to prevent and stop abuse. These victims firmly believe that if they report, the leader and organization will retaliate. In addition, the interviews provided insight into why these subordinates continue to tolerate the abuse. Fear of retaliation compounded with the continued economic downturn and the increased rate of unemployment contribute to employees fearing job loss. Abuse continues because these leaders maintain dominance through fear. The threat of retaliation and losing ones job is not a risk that people are willing to take during economic down-turn. Job availability is a serious concern and mitigating factor between reporting and non-reporting abused subordinates and explains why subordinates will tolerate being abused in the workplace, and the destructive narcissistic leader remains untouchable.

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1 Comment

REPLY

Darren Rozumek
MARCH 13, 2016 AT 2:45 PM

What I enjoyed about this post is it's explanation of "healthy narcissism," and how it applies to people like Steve Jobs, Oprah Winfrey, et al. I've always thought of narcissism as being something negative only, and in no way productive. But I can see how having a "healthy" narcissism can be necessary to people who are leaders, innovators, or are trying to influence large groups of people in a positive way. I imagine if someone wants to make a significant, positive mark in society, they need to have a strong enough sense of self-esteem if they expect others to follow or have faith in them. Working for years in the restaurant industry, I've seen all sorts of bosses that ran the gamut. From the ones that were so insecure in their position and needy of the staff's acceptance that everyone walked all over them, to the ones that were so abusive and egotistical in their management style that it was almost comical and ALWAYS led to high staff-turnover. However in the restaurant industry, jobs are easy to come by and people (including bosses!) are easily replaceable. I can only imagine what it must be like working for a major corporation or firm where if there's abuse of

power, you either like it or lump it. I read this posting on Quora digest this morning, and although the author doesn't mention specific abuse, he does illustrate what it's like to leave a highly stressful job for a better and happier, (though less lucrative) one. http://qr.ae/Refm9F

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