

Narcissism at work

In the latest of our series looking at the emotions likely to be deal with during coaching, **Gladeana McMahon** and **Adrienne Rosen** focus on narcissism

The business press is currently full of features on fallen business leaders with titles such as “The bosses who broke Britain” (*Sunday Times*). These articles criticise individuals for causing the destruction of organisations. While business errors have been made, no one appears to have considered whether narcissism could be as much to blame as poor business judgement.

Narcissists are often very successful as they are more willing take risks, have courage, push through massive transformations, can charm and convert people with their rhetoric and will push the boundaries, which, under the right conditions, enables organisations to thrive¹.

So far narcissism may not sound that bad as many of these qualities make good business sense. However, people with narcissistic tendencies often find themselves unable to accept feedback, take responsibility for mistakes and tend to vainly continue on their original quest without any remorse².

It’s when the downside of narcissism strikes and the individual holds onto his beliefs, getting rid of anyone who holds a counter belief, that narcissism causes difficulties for everyone³.

The challenge of coaching such people is to leverage their strengths and avoid the pitfalls⁴.

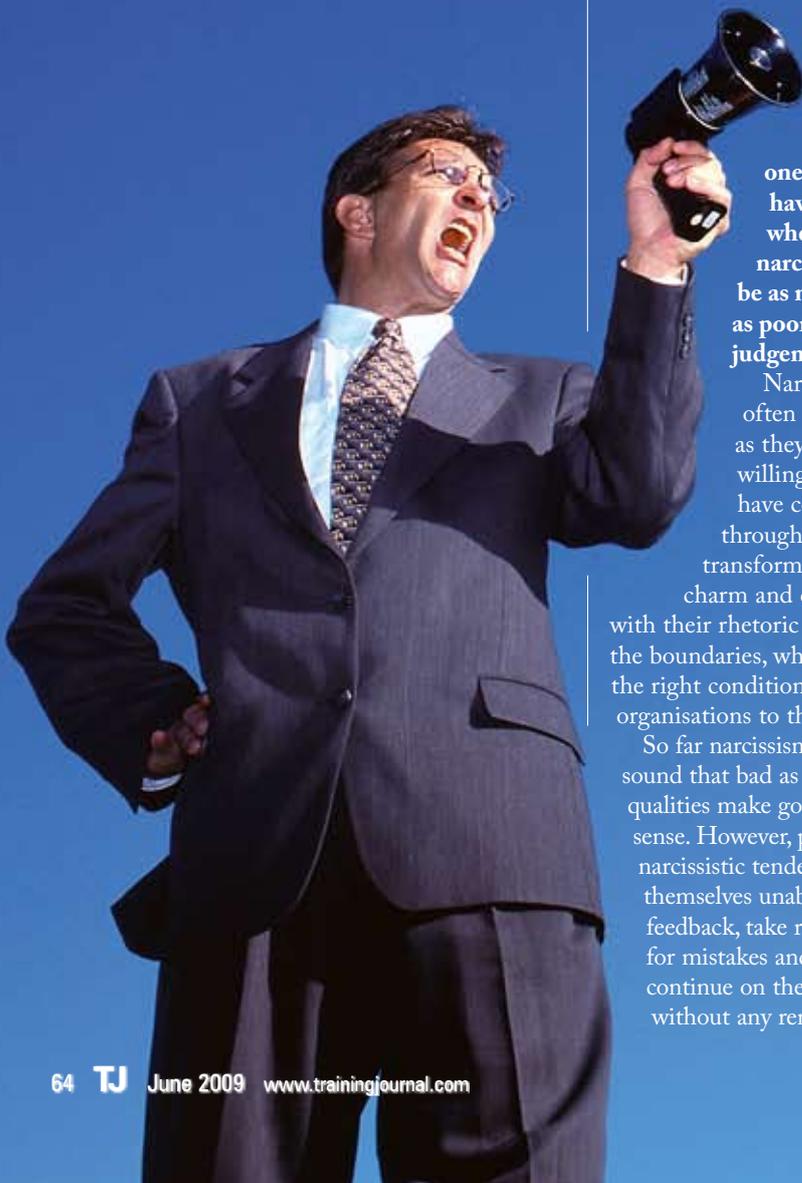
What is narcissism?

Narcissism often becomes the personality trait for individuals who have experienced a lack of genuine recognition and love in early life. The child may have been only been emotionally rewarded when he or she was perceived as succeeding. Narcissists have been made to feel inferior and ward off deep feelings of anxiety, vulnerability and fears of inferiority through their need for control and power⁵.

Sigmund Freud recognised that everyone is somewhat narcissistic. He wrote that this psychological type is especially suited “to take on the role of leaders”⁶. He also recognised the dark side of this tendency, as individuals can feel emotionally isolated and highly distrustful.

Perceived threats can trigger anger and achievement feeds feelings of grandiosity.

Psychologists have attempted to measure and distinguish narcissism from high self-esteem. The most established measure is probably the Narcissistic Personality Inventory, which highlights the four identifiable factors set out in Figure 1 top right^{7&8}.



The chief manifestations of narcissism include feelings of superiority, entitlement and a constant need for attention and admiration. Theorists suggest that a person's degree of narcissism is relatively fixed and enduring but is also susceptible to change as a result of adult life experiences and surrounding stimuli⁹.

How narcissism manifests itself in the workplace

Narcissists are typically extremely independent and self-protective and it can be difficult to get near them. They want to be admired and they are able to aggressively pursue their goals. They are often innovators, driven to gain power and glory by being experts in their field who want to learn about everything that affects the company and its success. They have vision and are gifted at attracting followers through their persuasive language¹⁰.

As the narcissist becomes self-assured, he feels free of constraints and becomes more creative. However, with this creativity come thoughts of invincibility.

Research has shown that narcissists react in a more aggressive and angry way to negative feedback. Generally, those scoring high on narcissism see little room for improvement. As a personality characteristic, narcissism comprises both cognitive (a belief in one's superior qualities) and motivational (an intense and continuous need to have one's superiority confirmed by others) elements⁹.

The narcissist is susceptible to boredom and engages in various

Factor	Meaning
Exploitativeness and entitlement	The belief that one is very good at manipulating people for one's own ends and entitled to do so.
Leadership and authority	The belief that one is extremely talented at leadership and all authority roles.
Superiority and arrogance	The belief that one is a 'born leader' and quite simply better than others.
Self-absorption and self-admiration	A belief that one is special and worth adoration and respect.

Figure 1: Narcissistic personality factors

forms of thrill seeking. If he is a senior leader, this could expose his organisation to undue risk and have an impact on organisational outcomes¹¹. Narcissism in senior leaders can be viewed as ranging from low to high¹².

Narcissists are not usually keen on assessments or 360 degree tools due to their grandiose sense of self-importance. They will tend to enhance their own ratings of self and "aggress against those that rate them less favourably"¹³. The situation becomes problematic when the narcissist is in a position of power and is able to influence colleagues' careers.

Some of the common defences are identified in Figure 2 below¹⁴.

The study by Chatterjee and Hambrick on narcissistic CEOs looked at business performance, company strategy and narcissist tendencies of CEOs in the computer industry. The authors decided that these individuals would not be willing to complete the NPI test so they used the effects on company strategy and performance instead, and considered the following five indicators to assess individuals' narcissistic tendencies:

- The prominence of the CEO's photograph in the company's annual report

- The CEO's prominence in the company's press releases
- The CEO's use of first-person singular pronouns in interviews
- The CEO's cash compensation divided by that of the firm's second highest-paid executive
- The CEO's non-cash compensation divided by that of the firm's second highest-paid executive.

The findings were that CEOs' narcissism is positively related to strategic dynamism and grandiosity as well as the number and size of acquisitions.

Even though narcissists are great speakers, they need affirmation and adulation. As they grow in confidence, they listen less to words of caution and advice and can engage in significant risk-taking. Narcissists don't learn easily from others but, rather, dominate and become more internally competitive. Narcissism is also related to extreme and irregular company performance¹⁵.

Coaching the narcissist

Michael Maccoby¹⁶, a leading expert in the area of narcissism within organisational contexts, describes the narcissist as:

- **Sensitive to criticism**, leading to abrasive communications with employees who doubt them or subordinates who are not tough enough to fight back. The coach requires a robust personality and balanced self-esteem to withstand such onslaughts, together with the understanding and sensitivity of the underlying vulnerability of the individual concerned. In addition, coaching supervision is a key element in helping the coach remain

Type	Behaviour
<i>The mathematics defence</i>	Calculating and re-calculating the numbers in an attempt to make them add up differently; questioning the validity of the norms and standard deviations.
<i>The bad-timing defence</i>	Blaming poor results on upheaval in the organisation.
<i>The negligence defence</i>	Not following up with observers to be sure they fill out their questionnaires.
<i>The scapegoat defence</i>	Attempting to guess which observer was responsible for a low score, and arguing that this individual's score skews the graph unfairly.
<i>The IT defence</i>	"I couldn't make the web platform work, so I gave up."

Figure 2: Common defences

grounded when dealing with such individuals.

- **A poor listener**, especially when he feels threatened or attacked. Positioning coaching itself is a challenge as individuals are likely to resist it when they perceive it as remedial or threatening. The skilled coach who can sell the business benefits related to personal success will be more likely to be accepted or at least given a 'try'.
- **Having a lack of empathy**, suggesting that forcing him to complete a 360 degree evaluation will not make him more empathetic. He does not want to change, especially if he is successful, because he doesn't think he will benefit from changing. Therefore, this type of endeavour has to be linked back to the idea of increased success for him.
- **Disliking mentoring**. Most prefer mentors they can control as, although they appear to be at ease with other people, they find creating a supportive and intimate relationship with others very difficult. If the individual does have a mentor, the coach needs to work closely with him on strategies that are most likely to help the mentor manage the mentee and the mentee gain the most from the process.
- **Someone who has an intense desire to compete** – he is relentless and ruthless in his pursuit of victory and getting one over on the coach could be seen as a victory, which means the coach has to be constantly aware of the coaching relationship and the impact of interventions on the client. Maccoby went on to suggest two ways of guiding narcissists to avoid the traps of their own personality:
 - To find a "trusted side-kick" who can understand them and what they are trying to achieve, and who is sensitive enough to manage the relationship. Although this could be a trusted



member of their team, the coach could play more of this role.

- To engage in analysis – on the whole, the narcissist does not want his personality explored but this can help him work through his rage, alienation and grandiosity, and overcome vital character flaws. There are productive narcissists¹⁷ who can be self-reflective and even open and good-humoured. They have perspective and can detach themselves and laugh at their irrational needs. They are aware of being a performer but maintain a sense of humour to help them keep enough perspective and humility to keep on learning.

Three hundred and sixty degree feedback given by a robust professional as part of a coaching programme can pinpoint specific behaviours and difficulties before they become a problem. What is important is that the coach has created the right climate and level of trust for this information to be considered and discussed.

The Hogan Development Survey is particularly useful when it comes to identifying problem areas. It is a psychometric tool designed to assess 11 common

dysfunctional dispositions¹⁸.

These behaviours are normally kept in check and cloaked with elements of the individual's repertoire of social skills. Typically they surface when people are under pressure, upset or preoccupied and not concerned about the impression they make.

The coach who works with a narcissist is likely to have a psychological background and will need to:

- Undertake a systemic approach to coaching that may include coaching others who come into contact with the narcissist, most notably the chairman in the case of the narcissist CEO. Using a tripartite meeting and producing a behavioural contract with clear overall objections and their associated outcomes are one of the keys to the process. Here the coach, client and corporate sponsor jointly consider the changes required. However, the coach needs to ensure that the narcissist feels he is in a safe place where confidentiality is maintained to ward off the deeply-held sense of vulnerability and the associated defensiveness likely to ensue.
- Be creative in finding ways to

encourage the individual to see the benefits of coaching. Research and articles can be of use if change is positioned as something that will help him become even more successful. As success is a key motivator for a narcissist, it is essential that the coach uses this as a way of motivating him. Setting boundaries is essential and the focus is kept on the unwanted or self-defeating behaviours.

- Be empathic to the needs of the individual, focusing on the challenges he faces. The coach needs to show empathy for the particular environment in which the narcissist works and, although not an expert, needs to be able to demonstrate understanding of the pressures and particular demands he faces. A successful coach will use his skills of support and constructive challenge to help individuals focus on alternative approaches. Often the narcissist has surrounded himself with those too frightened to challenge or who will always agree with him.
- Use skills from a cognitive-behavioural, solutions-focused or positive psychology coaching approach to help build a relationship in which the narcissist feels appreciated. In positive psychology, feedback is often most useful when three positive to each negative piece of feedback is given¹⁹. This is particularly true for individuals with fragile self-esteem. When giving 360 degree feedback, it may be better to highlight two development areas and then discuss ten areas of strength rather than pick out too many weaknesses.
- Encourage the individual to consider the needs of others. However, this needs to be done within the framework of helping him understand that doing so will increase his profile and success.
- Using the client's creativity and imagination. The narcissist is

often quite imaginative and the coach can build rapport and trust with him by being imaginative and stimulating in the use of challenging questions.

- The narcissist also requires a high degree of positive affirmation and praise throughout the process. This is especially true during the early stages of coaching. As time goes by and he becomes more aware of how the changes he

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is making are having a positive effect on his success, the skilled coach can gradually pull back from this activity, as a way of helping the client learn how to withstand internal anxiety. Anxiety management strategies feature as part of the coaching programme under the guise of 'self-care', which is positioned as providing greater energy for the individual to increase his success. Narcissism has its place and, when recognised, individuals manifesting this kind of personality trait can add value to organisations. However, left unchecked it can be a contributory reason to businesses failing. ■

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