



Transformational Leader or Narcissist?

How Grandiose Narcissists Can Create and Destroy Organizations and Institutions

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The traits of many confident, visionary leaders could also be dangerous signs of narcissism.

INSIGHT | EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Today's leaders face the demanding task of galvanizing broad support in a time of harsh division. The strongest leaders are often considered visionary; they clearly articulate their ideals and principles, and harbor an unshakeable confidence in the idea that the world would be improved by the fulfillment of their goals.

Steve Jobs, Travis Kalanick, Elizabeth Holmes, Adam Neumann, and Donald Trump are among the ranks of such leaders. But the very features that can make a strong leader - like confidence, charisma, and the willingness to take on risk - are also traits that strongly correlate with the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) definition of narcissism.

"Let's go invent tomorrow rather than worrying about what happened yesterday." – Steve Jobs

Narcissism

By the DSM-5 criteria, people with narcissistic personality disorder have an inflated sense of their own importance, a feeling of superiority and entitlement, a need for admiration, an extreme level of self-confidence, and a willingness to exploit others for their own ends. The two primary types of narcissists - *grandiose* and *vulnerable* - differ in their level of extraversion and self-esteem.

Because of their extraversion, confidence, and self-promotion, *grandiose narcissists* will often rise quickly to positions of authority within organizations.

And unlike transactional leaders who are content with maintaining the status quo, transformational leaders will work to amass broad support for major changes in line with their vision.

For that reason, many of those we often admire as transformational leaders may also be narcissists - and the visionary, confident qualities that attract us to these leaders could, in extreme cases, lead to situations of abuse, exploitation, and ethical misconduct.

How can we tell the difference between transformational leaders and narcissists?

Different Goals

Transformational leaders have the distinct ability to clearly articulate their vision and move people to transcend self-interest in pursuit of a common goal. Narcissistic leaders are similarly persuasive, but with a critical difference: their goals, which are often disguised, are ultimately self-serving.

Martin Luther King left an enduring impact as a transformational leader and champion of civil rights. Allan Mulally, former CEO of Ford, is credited with saving an iconic firm. Elizabeth Holmes set out to revolutionize healthcare - but her company Theranos, after attaining a valuation of \$9 billion - was exposed as fraudulent and had no viable products.

Attracting Transformational Leadership and Managing Narcissism

It can be difficult to distinguish between a legitimate transformational leader with an empathetic and idealistic vision, and a narcissistic leader with a hidden agenda.

One key approach is to cultivate an organizational culture that values teamwork and integrity more than individual achievement, rewarding contributions to the collective good. In these environments, narcissists will feel less motivated to participate as it will not be possible to take undue credit.

Another approach is to avoid hiring narcissists in the first place, by soliciting feedback from a candidate's full network (not just those contacts that he or she supplies).

In the instance where a narcissist has already been hired, it is essential to tie their compensation and reputation to a 360-degree performance evaluation. Input should be regularly gathered from a broad range of subordinates and peers to ensure that narcissistic leaders feel accountable to others and open to cooperation.

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Additional Resources



[VIDEO] Narcissistic Leadership

The same features that can make a strong leader - like confidence, charisma, and the willingness to take on risk - are also traits that strongly correlate with the DSM-5 definition of narcissism.