

The Narcissist Next Door: A Case study Analysis

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Abstract

Leadership is a broad and complex phenomenon shaped by situational factors and the personalities of leaders. While some leaders are praised for their contributions, others become adversarial, negatively influencing their followers and work processes. Leaders often bring unique personality traits to their positions, and these traits significantly impact their teams and the organisation. This study is grounded in narcissistic leadership theory and adopts a case study approach to critically examine how adversarial narcissistic traits in leadership influence organisational processes and negatively affect followers. By focusing on real-world work interactions, this study highlights how narcissistic traits fulfil a leader's need for self-satisfaction at the expense of employee well-being, morale, and productivity. Understanding these dynamics is essential to mitigating the harmful effects of narcissistic leadership and fostering healthier organisational environments. The study examines the traits and behaviours of narcissistic leaders, their impact on organisational settings, and their decision-making styles. It also proposes systematic ways for followers to address these challenges rather than adopting a flight response. The paper begins by defining narcissism and the narcissistic leadership model underpinning the study. It examines narcissistic leadership in relation to task performance, presents the case study, and concludes with strategies to mitigate the effects of narcissistic leadership.

Keywords: Narcissistic leadership, organisational behaviour, emotional intelligence, care gap, Gaslighting, power dynamics, employee well-being,

What is Narcissism?

Narcissism is a complex personality trait characterised by grandiosity, arrogance, self-absorption, and a need for admiration, and is often associated with powerful leaders (Rosenthal, 2006; Steffens et al., 2022). Research on narcissistic leadership reveals mixed outcomes: some studies identify its positive effects, while others highlight its detrimental consequences (Fatfouta, 2019; Asrar-ul-Haq and Anjum, 2020). Levy, Ellison, and Reynoso (2011) add that early studies on narcissism describe narcissistic individuals as condescending, with an inflated sense of superiority, an obsessive need for admiration, and a lack of empathy. In organisational leadership, narcissistic traits significantly shape leader behaviours and their impact on followers. While some leaders demonstrate traits that drive organisational success, others exhibit maladaptive tendencies—such as adversarial narcissism—that undermine workplace environments and harm followers. These adversarial traits often

manifest as exploitative behaviours, micromanagement, or a relentless need for personal validation, which may go unnoticed or unaddressed in hierarchical settings.

The Allure of Narcissistic Leaders

Narcissistic leaders often rise to prominence due to their charisma, confidence, and bold visions (Ong et al., 2014; Nevicka, Hoogh, & Hartog, 2018). Initially, they are perceived as capable and inspiring, likened to the "chocolate cake model" (Campbell, 2005), where the first bite is delightful, but the richness becomes overwhelming over time. Similarly, narcissistic leaders may seem effective at first, but their self-centeredness, lack of empathy, and exploitative behaviours gradually erode their appeal. Their charm and ability to craft captivating visions create strong first impressions, particularly in early stages of group formation (Nevicka, Hoogh, & Hartog, 2018). However, over time, these positive perceptions fade, revealing their self-serving tendencies. Studies show that in unfamiliar groups, individuals high in narcissism are initially perceived as leaders, but this perception diminishes as their negative traits become apparent (Ong et al., 2014).

The Positive Side of Narcissistic Leadership

Despite its negative reputation, narcissism can contribute positively to leadership, especially in the short term. Narcissists' charisma and confidence can lead to favourable outcomes, such as bold decision-making and inspiring others toward a shared vision (Fatfouta, 2019). Productive narcissism, as described by Maccoby (2004), includes traits like risk-taking and the ability to see the big picture. Leaders with moderate levels of narcissism often balance confidence with approachability, making them more effective (Grijalva, 2013).

The Negative Side of Narcissistic Leadership

The long-term consequences of narcissistic leadership often outweigh its short-term benefits. Narcissistic leaders prioritise their own egocentric needs over the interests of their teams and organisations (Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006). They exhibit grandiose belief systems, emotionally isolated behaviours, and an inability to empathise with followers. The Key negative outcomes of narcissistic leadership include abusive supervision: Narcissistic leaders often engage in hostile and aggressive behaviours, creating toxic work environments (Nevicka et al., 2018; Fatfouta, 2019); Risky Decision-Making: Their grandiosity and need for admiration drive risky ventures that may jeopardise organizational stability; Follower Dissatisfaction: Their lack of empathy leads to decreased employee morale, job satisfaction, and trust (Ouimet, 2010); Organisational Decline: Narcissistic leadership often results in reduced organizational effectiveness and overall well-being (Ouimet, 2010).

Factors Influencing the Impact of Narcissistic Leadership

The impact of narcissistic leadership depends on factors such as the leader's level of narcissism, the specific facets they exhibit (e.g., grandiosity, entitlement), and the situational context (Choi, Ming, & Phan, 2022). Research suggests that narcissism positively predicts

perceived leadership effectiveness when leaders have limited visibility but diminishes when followers observe them more closely (Nevicka et al., 2018). Moreover, different facets of narcissism have distinct effects. Grandiose narcissism, characterised by entitlement and boldness, may inspire confidence, whereas vulnerable narcissism, marked by insecurity and hypersensitivity, may result in social withdrawal and ineffective leadership (Fatfouta, 2019). Understanding these nuances is critical to evaluating the overall impact of narcissistic leaders on organisational outcomes.

Case Setting

SlepTech Innovations, based in Dreyburge, is a mid-sized tech hub specialising in digital solutions for healthcare, education, and retail. The consultancy juggles multiple overlapping projects with tight deadlines. Magna is the Manager, charismatic but manipulative. She craves admiration, takes credit for successes, and undermines those who threaten her authority. On the other hand, Wilhelm is an employee and a member of Magna's team and skilled in project management. He becomes a target of Magna's sabotage as she isolates him and denies him recognition. Ebersbach is a new employee eager to impress. Ebersbach is manipulated by Magna to undermine Wilhelm while receiving favouritism in return.

Magna micromanages the Projects and Delivery team, creating bottlenecks and tension. She employs an "open-door policy" to monitor employees and build alliances. Wilhelm is often assigned critical projects but is systematically undermined. Meanwhile, Magna grooms Ebersbach to challenge Wilhelm. In one instance, Wilhelm leads a high-stakes project for HulseMed Healthcare Solutions, only to be sabotaged by Magna, who redirects updates to herself and publicly critiques Wilhelm during a client meeting. Ebersbach, praised as a rising star, further alienates Wilhelm. As a result, Wilhelm feels isolated and anxious, Ebersbach becomes overconfident under Magna's influence, and team morale plummets. The toxic environment, fuelled by Magna's narcissism, breeds fear and dissatisfaction among other employees.

Narcissistic Leader Influence on Followers

The Gratitude Gap

Appreciating staff for their efforts is inspirational and fosters a sense of belonging. According to Gostick and Elton (2020), every small step toward organisational goals and values is worthy of acknowledgment. A leader who frequently shows gratitude is seen as accommodating. However, this is different in Magna's leadership. Ebersbach was assigned to a project team with Wilhelm, and both worked together on the project. Midway through, Magna handed the project solely to Ebersbach and thanked him, leaving Wilhelm out of the acknowledgment.

Wilhelm: *"Ebersbach was thanked for the work we had done together, and I was completely excluded."*

Magna justified her actions, saying: *“I do not want to thank you because I want to avoid confusion and misunderstandings.”*

Leadership is about people, and failing to give credit where it is due demoralises employees. Wilhelm felt his contributions to the department were ignored. Magna’s decision to give sole credit to Ebersbach was driven by her personal motives—to position Ebersbach as her ally for future. Gratitude does not come easily to narcissistic leaders.

The Care Gap

Magna often calls for meetings disguised as checks on work processes, but they are primarily used to scrutinise staff she suspects of disloyalty. These meetings serve as a means for her to exercise control and find faults in others. Wilhelm consistently felt these meetings had ulterior motives, making him uneasy. He described the experience:

“I cannot bear any more stress at this stage, and I am requesting again to please stop this activity. I am constantly pressured to analyse market data and sign off while also completing data input for my team.”

These meetings caused Wilhelm significant stress and negatively impacted his mental health. Employees often experience stress, anxiety, or depression but may not openly share their struggles unless directly asked. On one occasion, when Wilhelm was unable to meet the demands of his role, Magna publicly reprimanded him by sending an email to all staff about his performance, followed by a meeting to address the issue. Magna threatened to remove Wilhelm from his position and replace him with Ebersbach. Wilhelm found Magna's actions demeaning and highly stressful. He expressed his frustration:

“I help make decisions within the team, but I am not informed when changes are being made within the same team.”

Magna’s behaviour deliberately sought to undermine Wilhelm’s confidence. Narcissistic leaders lack emotional intelligence. Despite knowing she was frustrating Wilhelm, Magna openly stated:

“I do not care how anyone feels as long as I meet my goals and targets”.

Jones and Figueredo (2013) observed that individuals with high levels of narcissism often lack a crucial aspect of empathy.

Respect

Every employee deserves respect, but Magna consistently disrespects Wilhelm. Wilhelm often steps up to take care of the team when Magna is off work. However, on one occasion when Wilhelm took time off and handed over his responsibilities to Magna, Magna threatened to have him fired and replace him, specifically mentioning Ebersbach as a potential replacement.

*"I am not surprised to get this from you, as you are incapable of getting things done."
"It's about taking the work from you and giving it to Ebersbach".*

Narcissistic leaders often see themselves as infallible. While they may help organisations thrive in some areas, they lack respect, empathy, promote questionable behaviour, and engage in unjustified credit-taking (Graham and Cooper, 2013).

Absolute Authority

Narcissistic leaders assert their authority and create an environment where employees feel powerless. Wilhelm often raised questions but rarely received clear answers. Decisions were made unilaterally, leaving him in the dark:

"Within my work area, I have been carefully cut off from key staff, who now report directly to Magna instead of me. When I asked about structural changes, I received vague answers or responses like, 'I will run my department the way I want'".

This lack of transparency left Wilhelm feeling excluded and creatively stifled, making it difficult for him to fully embrace and take ownership of his responsibilities.

Bullying

Magna frequently treated Wilhelm differently from other staff members. On several occasions, she reassigned his projects to others, giving them credit for his work. Wilhelm lamented:

"I complained about the differential treatment, but Magna told me that it is my responsibility to sort myself out. I suggested at the meeting on a way forward in the recent project, she tagged this "backward induction", a very vague dismissal of my suggestion. She asked all other employees to direct any information for me through her. Some of my projects cancelled mid-execution and given to someone else, who then received the credit."

Suskind (2020) argues that narcissistic leaders are skilled at twisting reality, circumventing blame, and engaging in manipulative discourse. Magna's actions discouraged Wilhelm from collaborating with his colleagues, further isolating him.

Loyalty and Weaponising Simple Mistakes

Magna sought loyalty from her staff by creating an environment of fear and criticism. She magnified minor errors and used them as tools to undermine Wilhelm's credibility. For instance, she sent emails to the entire team highlighting spelling errors in Wilhelm's messages:

"Errors are counting against you, but I have no issues with your teaching or other tasks."

Her goal was to humiliate Wilhelm and portray him as incompetent. She once stated:

"To make things right, I need to take you out of that position and put someone else there. I do not train anyone; it's not something I like to do".

This approach discouraged staff from learning or growing, forcing them to rely on Magna for direction.

Gaslighting

Gaslighting refers to undermining another person's reality by denying facts or misrepresenting their character. Magna engaged in this behaviour to isolate Wilhelm and turn colleagues against him. She spread rumours, claiming Wilhelm was untrustworthy:

"I do not trust Wilhelm. He doesn't have the skills. You need to watch your back. I need you (Ebersbach) to monitor him and ensure you're included in all his emails."

This created an environment of distrust, further alienating Wilhelm.

Discussion

This study improves our understanding of how followers in organisations respond when leaders exhibit behaviours that cause them to question their perception of leadership. It can be difficult for employees to recognise that their leader may be a narcissist. Many may seek other job opportunities if they feel uncomfortable with their leader's attitude, showcasing a "flight response," where they choose to leave rather than confront the issue.

However, through close and prolonged observation, followers can identify patterns of narcissistic behaviour in their leaders. The qualitative data gathered in this study indicates that employees place a high value on gratitude, respect, and recognition within organisations. Solomon et al. (2016) emphasise that individuals with high levels of narcissism tend to believe they are superior and therefore entitled to benefits from others. This sense of entitlement can obstruct their ability to appreciate others' gestures of gratitude. Narcissistic leaders often withhold gratitude due to a fundamental lack of respect for certain employees, viewing everyone as expendable while simultaneously seeking a trusted ally.

The "care gap" exhibited by Magna suggests a deficiency in emotional intelligence. She frequently alters her responses to various tasks, even when her staff is experiencing high levels of stress. Instead of using meetings as a chance to support her team, she transforms them into sessions focused on finding faults. Doe et al. (2015) highlight that leaders in decision-making roles often encounter situations where recognising, understanding, and managing emotions both in themselves and others, as well as the ability to empathise and connect with others are crucial. Magna's lack of empathy undermines trust among her staff, particularly when they are stressed or unaware of their mistakes.

Held (2006) argues that those who genuinely care for others do not seek to advance their interests but recognise that their interests are interconnected with those they care for. This sense of responsibility is expected from a leader. Staff members deserve respect; however, Magna is noticeably self-centred. Thomas (2015) asserts that respect is the regard one receives from others, often due to the skills, achievements, or other qualities one brings to a job. This perspective sharply contrasts with Magna's dismissive attitude toward the qualities and abilities of her staff.

Rather than showing respect for her team, Magna exhibits power and control, often using her associate, Ebersbach, to undermine others. This behaviour aligns with her use of gaslighting tactics. Sudha and Shanawaz (2020) found that narcissistic personality traits are associated with authoritarian leadership styles, negatively impacting task-oriented leadership, task performance, and teamwork. Magna consistently displays a sense of self-importance and insists on unnecessary control. For instance, she demands to review all emails from Wilhelm and assigns him tasks while appointing a sidekick to monitor his activities and report back. O'Reilly (2020) argues that such leaders are self-serving and lack integrity; they regard themselves as superior and above the rules. They seek loyalty by belittling others, weaponising minor mistakes, and coercing staff to comply with their demands, as seen in the case of Wilhelm.

Overcoming the Influence of Narcissistic Leaders

Rather than adopting a flight response, followers can apply the following six strategies: Firstly, use Emergent Strategy and Journaling by setting up a journaling system to document unethical behaviours and interactions with the narcissistic leader. Use the "NELE method": Narrate what happened, explain your thoughts, link it to previous or future events, and express your emotions. Journaling serves as a tool for self-reflection and helps track patterns of narcissistic behaviour.

Secondly, submit evidence by compiling written documentation (e.g., journal entries, emails) and presenting it to senior management; this helps identify patterns and exposes the leader's tactics.

Thirdly, assert Self-Confidence; once evidence has been submitted, use the skills and confidence developed during the documentation phase to assert yourself and push back against the leader's behaviour.

Fourthly, employ Systematic Review by assessing the impact of your actions, such as how management responds to your evidence and any changes in workplace dynamics.

Fifthly, claim Final Ascendancy by submitting additional evidence, particularly documenting the narcissistic leader's reactions to earlier submissions. This raises awareness among colleagues and management, leading to a redefined work structure.

Finally, rebuild Workplace Dynamics; as the narcissistic leader's influence diminishes, work collaboratively to establish a healthier and more respectful workplace environment.

By stepping back to observe and document, then stepping in to reclaim control and confidence, followers can effectively mitigate the negative impacts of narcissistic leadership.

Conclusion

This study contributes to an in-depth application of leadership theory to everyday work situations. It demonstrates how to face adversity without turning against adversaries. Additionally, the study advances personality trait theory in leadership by applying it in a novel context. The researcher has contributed to the theory's specific application, offering insights into how it can be used in other contexts.

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