

# **COACHING THE NARCISSISTIC EXECUTIVE**

## **Implications and Limitations**

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**ABSTRACT:**

This study examines narcissistic personality disorders, the presence of narcissism in the C-suite and the process of coaching narcissistic leaders. Is it possible to help narcissist individuals make positive changes to their behavior? How can a leadership coach undertake such a task? What are the challenges of working with such individuals? This exploratory study concerns the coaching of narcissistic executives informed by interviews with 14 seasoned European coaches (50-50% male/female, average age 60 years old, average experience 11.5 years). Their experiences of working with narcissistic executives and their related coaching recommendations form the basis of the paper's coaching suggestions. Before coaching a narcissistic executive, preliminary considerations should include an assessment of the coach's personal sensitivity to narcissistic behavior, consideration of the coaching contract, and the management of boundaries. Assessing a client for narcissistic personality characteristics requires the gathering of initial interview information, and distinguishing client's characteristics from the ones pertaining to their organization's corporate culture. Conclusions derived from this exploratory study to coach (and help change) narcissistic executives include the need for creating client commitment, setting realistic coaching goals, establishing the ground rules, fostering transitional space, paying attention to transference behavior, generating interpersonal awareness, dealing with defensive behavior, fostering reality testing, applying group coaching methodology, and adjusting client goalposts as the intervention process proceeds. Leadership coaching in organizations can help narcissistic executives obtain insight about dysfunctional behavior patterns, and help them to take preventive action before problems accumulate beyond repair.

*Keywords: Narcissism; leadership; executive; coaching; group intervention*

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*The mother gazes at the baby in her arms, and the baby gazes at his mother's face and finds himself therein provided that the mother is really looking at the unique, small, helpless being and not projecting her own expectations, fears, and plans for the child. In that case, the child would find not himself in his mother's face, but rather the mother's own projections. This child would remain without a mirror, and for the rest of his life would be seeking this mirror in vain.*

- Donald Woods Winnicott

*Without a sense of shame, he desires himself. The one approving is the person being approved, and while he is pursuing, he is being pursued. He kindles fire and burns at the same time.*

- Ovid

*Whoever loves becomes humble. Those who love have, so to speak, pawned a part of their narcissism.*

- Sigmund Freud

### THREE CAUTIONARY LEADERSHIP TALES

*People create their own glass ceilings, limiting their success and their contributions to the company. At worst, these otherwise highly competent and valuable people destroy their own careers.* (Waldroop & Butler, 2000)

Jean-Marie Messier, dubbed “J6M” (Jean-Marie Messier, Moi-Même, Maître du Monde), cut a Napoleon-like figure in the business world in France. In the 1980s, Messier had held a number of senior roles in the Ministry of Economy, Finance and Industry, and went into investment banking in



1989. In 1994, he took over as head of the 150-year-old utility group, Compagnie Generale des Eaux. The journalist Helene Pilichowski said of him: “He was someone who had an exceptional career. He rose to power very quickly. He had the reputation of someone who was a very quick thinker, someone who knew how to bring things together.” (Kampfner, 2002).

Messier was seen as an intelligent, flamboyant leader who had no lack of vision. Within six years of becoming CEO at Compagnie Generale des Eaux, he had spent more than \$100 billion on acquisitions, renaming the company Vivendi Universal. It was later said that his ambition to build a French media empire that would surpass the giants of the American entertainment industry had blinded him. By then, Vivendi Universal was facing the threat of bankruptcy as well as criminal charges.

Messier’s outsized ambitions initially inspired the French public, but were later seen as a kind of executive arrogance. Johnson and Orange (2003) described Messier as “a strange blend of French technocratic arrogance, wannabe Hollywood showmanship, and investment banker charm” (p.3). They argued that he was enamored with Hollywood and with his own celebrity, and that “his love of deal making, self-promotion, obfuscation, and risk” (p.3) ultimately led to his downfall and toppled the Vivendi empire.

According to the authors of *The Man Who Tried to Buy the World*, Messier had two

contrasting sides. In public, Messier played the role of a modern, approachable chief executive who believed in collegial management. Inside the company, he could appear authoritarian, sometimes cutting (Johnson & Orange, 2003, p. 36). His brusque, high-handed management style alienated company employees. In 2002, his firing of Pierre Lescure, the head of Canal Plus, prompted staff to disrupt work in protest. He was also known to undermine the credibility of those around him in order to strengthen his own position, and to use his charismatic vision to circumvent rational decision-making and influence the opinions of the board.

In 2002, Vivendi Universal posted the largest loss in French history. The company had accumulated €35 billion in debt and its shares lost more than 80% of their value. The board forced Messier to resign – the public announcement of his departure led to a surge in the stock price. Subsequently, his vision of a French media empire was shattered as parts of Vivendi Universal were dismantled and sold off.

Messier was accused of financial recklessness, of making misleading statements, share price manipulation, and the misappropriation of company funds. As a result he was fined \$1 million by the Securities and Exchange Commission, denied the €21 million severance package he requested, and was barred from holding directorships in the USA for 10 years. His private life also underwent turmoil as he separated from Antoinette Fleisch, his wife of 23 years and the mother of his five children.

He described the time after his resignation as a period of fear and anxiety. “Traverser une telle épreuve, c’est dur. Du jour au lendemain, le vide...” (Messier & Messarovitch, 2002, p.14) In his autobiography *Mon Vrai Journal* (My True Diary), Messier wrote that Vivendi was a victim of unstable economic times and that his strategy, arrested prematurely, was not given enough time to succeed. He reluctantly admitted that he may have developed his vision too quickly, and that he did not heed the warnings of his wife, colleagues or friends. Predominantly, however, he blamed others for Vivendi’s downfall and portrayed himself as a victim of a conspiracy: “Ceux qui voulaient ‘la peau de Messier’ l’ont eue...un vrai lynchage...” (Messier & Messarovitch, 2002, p.20).

**Martha Stewart**, the daughter of Polish immigrants who built an empire of the same name, was the embodiment of the American Dream. Her career went from fashion model to stock broker to entrepreneur to business executive to celebrity. She started her first catering business in 1976. Within a few years,



the venture had become a multi-million dollar company. Her vision for stylish living made her America's premier lifestyle authority. Martha Stewart expanded her business beyond the traditional boundaries of domestic merchandising, successfully communicating with her fans through extravagantly illustrated books, lifestyle magazines, instructional videos, branded household products and television shows. In 1997, she created "Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia" which encompassed all her projects including her work in radio, TV, print, Martha-by-mail catalogue and online at MarthaStewart.com.

The "Queen of the home" was named one of "New York's 100 Most Influential Women in Business" by Forbes 400, "50 Most Powerful Women" by Fortune, and "America's 25 Most Influential People" by Time (Lauer, 2005). As she built her business, Stewart became known for her drive, perfectionism and workaholicism: "I'm a maniacal perfectionist. And if I weren't, I wouldn't have this company." (Martins, n.d.)

Her reputation as an employer was tainted by what people described as a dictatorial leadership style. "Martha Stewart is a control freak who makes her employees cry, lives like a Bourbon monarch and fires anyone who disagrees with her" (Bercovici, 2011). By her own admission, she placed heavy demands on herself and on others, and paid exceptional attention to minute details. During an MSNBC interview, Stewart said:

"My whole life has been based on the pursuit of perfection and the pursuit of accuracy and good information and good inspiration. So if I am ever called difficult to work for, it's by people who don't really care about those qualities in work. But my whole life is based on those qualities." (*Gale encyclopedia of biography*, n.d.)

Martha Stewart holds a paradoxical position in the American media and as a female role model: she is the queen of domesticity and good taste, yet she is also a highly successful business woman. The New York Times observed that “There is a contrast between the sweet, benign ‘public’ Stewart, and the hell-on-wheels ‘private’ Stewart” (Erickson, 2003). She portrayed herself living a perfect and happy home life, an image that was shattered when, in 1987, her husband Andy Stewart left her for her former assistant. In 2011, her daughter, Alexis, wrote *Whateverland: Learning to Live Here*, a book about her mother and her childhood, in which she exposed Martha as a perfectionist but less-than-perfect mother. She wrote: “Martha does everything better! You can’t win!” and described her mother as having a “very hands-off approach to child rearing” (Hoffman, 2011).

In 2004, Stewart’s public profile was again questioned when she was convicted of conspiracy and obstruction of justice in an insider trading case. She had sold \$228,000 worth of ImClone Systems only one day before it was announced that the Food and Drug Administration had rejected ImClone’s application for approval of a cancer drug. She was sentenced to five months in prison, five months of home confinement, with two years of probation, and was barred for five years from serving as the director of the company. At the time of her conviction, her brand equity ranked worse than Enron’s. It was not until a year after her return to work that the company became profitable again.

Martha Stewart is praised for her vision, her hard work, her skill for recognizing customers’ needs, and her charismatic leadership. However, she is not known for her efforts to develop her employees and young talent. Stewart controls about 50 percent of Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia Inc. stock and about 90 percent of voting stock. Since 1999, the company has had five different CEOs and five chief financial officers. Many agree that Stewart needs to give up some control to ensure that the brand can exist separately from her as a personality, so that the company can outlast her. According to New York Magazine:

There was unusually high executive churn, and according to many executives who worked there, it was an intensely frustrating environment in which to get things done. Robin Marino, the head of merchandising until this May, was responsible for 3,000 items at Macy’s alone, but Stewart insisted on personally approving every one (Wallace, 2011).

In response to a journalist at the Wall Street Journal who enquired about her succession plans, Stewart is reported to have said, “I’m a very healthy, useful, energetic person, thriving on very little sleep,” and “I’m not dying yet” (Searcy & DeVries, 2012).

**António Horta Osório** is the Chief

Executive of Lloyds Banking Group. Dubbed ‘the special one’ and ‘the Mourinho of the banking industry’, he has been described as precocious, a charismatic leader, passionate, energetic and very focused on success. His career boasts a series of achievements and an impressive upward trajectory. Starting his



career at Citibank Portugal, where he was head of Capital Markets, he then worked for Goldman Sachs. He went on to become the youngest Portuguese president of a bank when he joined Santander Portugal as chief executive in 1993. Between 1997 and 2000 he became CEO and then chairman of Santander Brazil. In 2004, he joined Abbey National, and in 2006 became the CEO of Santander UK. In March 2011, he was poached from Santander to head Lloyds, with a promised financial package worth up to £13 million.

Arriving at Lloyds, Horta-Osório had a legacy of problems to deal with. Lloyds had posted a £3.2 billion loss (for the first three quarters of 2011) and was facing serious financial pressures. His predecessors had overseen a merger between Lloyds TSB and HBOS in 2008, which had been called “the worst corporate deal in history”. The merger, which reduced shareholder value by £14 billion, continued to be a value drain on the company. Beyond the bank’s financial worries, the culture at Lloyds was known to be bureaucratic, viciously political, and its management’s repetitive internal reorganization efforts, ever-changing initiatives and conflicting directives had seriously undermined employee morale.

Horta-Osório was seen as the great hope for retail banking in Britain. He promised to bring a “laser-like focus” to improve customer service and to ensure that small businesses would be treated with respect. During his first eight months he engaged in a restructuring of the group and oversaw a reshuffle of the management team. Very quickly, he appointed a

group of external managers (known as the *conquistadores derrotados*) who had worked with him during his previous role at Santander. This drastic change in the executive team so early on alienated many of the existing senior management and was said to have caused a 'them and us' divide in the organization.

Reputed for having exceptionally high expectations and standards, Horta-Osório was not only in charge of overarching management issues but also concerned himself with the day-to-day workings of the bank. Among other initiatives, he oversaw an EU-imposed sale of 632 branches, a revamp of the Halifax brand, and the loss of around 15,000 jobs.

Harry Wilson, a journalist for the Daily Telegraph wrote: "His relentless drive to get a handle on the details of the Lloyds business is described by one senior colleague as 'granular.'" Horta-Osorio acknowledged the accuracy of the description: "Detail is very important if you want to go in the right direction. The devil is in the detail" (2011). But employees at Lloyds complained that he was obsessed with detail beyond what might normally be expected. It was not uncommon for meetings to be scheduled during weekends. It was rumored that he regularly raised his voice to subordinates and was hostile to those who did not deliver.

Horta-Osório's micro-management style and his refusal to delegate, combined with the financial pressures facing Lloyds and the constant media attention, led him to insomnia and an accumulation of stress. In November 2011, at a critical point in his restructuring initiative, Horta-Osório went on extended leave of absence, citing extreme fatigue due to overwork. The announcement caused a £1 billion drop in the share price. It was reported that prior to taking leave, Horta-Osorio had not slept for five consecutive days.

According to the Portuguese banker, it was his wife who pushed him to get help: "I sought medical advice and went to see a specialist. He told me that, in effect, my battery was so run down that it was virtually on zero" (Goodway, 2011). After two months' leave, in an effort to regain his post at the helm of Lloyds, Horta-Osório acknowledged his need to change his leadership style and delegate more. He admitted that he had "focused too much on too many details", and that "I'd go to bed exhausted but could not sleep. I could not switch off." He also mentioned that his family was not altogether happy with his long working hours: "My family is complaining they haven't seen me very much these last few weeks" (Goodway, 2011).

Shareholders made it clear that Horta-Osorio would not be allowed to return to business

as usual, and that he would need to make substantial changes to the way he operated. Lloyds announced that they had completed a rigorous process of evaluation before allowing him to return to his post. This included an independent medical assessment and one-on-one interviews with the 16 members of the board. In an effort to dispel fears that he might revert to dysfunctional behavior and fall ill again, the board worked with him to find ways to reduce his workload. Lloyds said Horta-Osorio would change his intensive working style, delegate more, and have fewer people directly reporting to him. There was also talk of appointing a chief operating officer or deputy chief executive who could take over some of his responsibilities. Harry Wilson quoted Horta-Osório's assurance that:

I will have a balanced lifestyle going forward...With hindsight, I probably threw myself in too much. Focused too much, with too much intensity, and I should have dealt with it differently. This was a humbling experience for me and I took the proper lessons from it. I will do things differently going forward (2011).

### **What do These Three Leaders Have in Common?**

The immediate response is charisma, vision, and driving ambition. They are famous and commanding leaders. They are highly functioning and intelligent. They are serial achievers and constantly challenge themselves and others. They strive to create a personal legacy through their work. They are willing to make brash and risky management decisions. They display authoritarian management styles and seem to have difficulty admitting defeat or weakness. They have strong obsessional, perfectionistic streaks and a need for control that has led them to micro-manage others and overwork themselves. Their family lives have suffered as a consequence of their intense focus on work and they have difficulty finding balanced lifestyles. They seem to be in denial of the strain they put themselves and others under. Although their vision and charisma draws people in, their harsh management style can alienate employees. They work under the watchful gaze of the media and, in the case of Jean Marie Messier and Martha Stewart, their public and private identities seem to be at odds.

Although very talented, each of these leaders suffered a dramatic and mediatized professional failure that had a devastating impact on their company's reputation and the value

of its stock. None of them were able to manage the more destructive side of their character and leadership style before it became a real problem. Although they are very different people who have achieved quite different things, all three display strong narcissistic tendencies.

In this paper I want to challenge the concept of the invulnerable leader and the taboo surrounding the idea of leaders needing help. I discuss the reality of narcissism in the C-suite, and the effects that it can have on an organization. I explore the possibility for coaching such individuals. I address the question of whether it possible to help a narcissist (let alone a narcissistic chief executive) and make positive changes to their behavior? How does a leadership coach undertake such a task? What are the challenges of working with such individuals? What is the potential positive impact of coaching narcissistic leaders? How could leadership coaching affect them, their families and the corporations that they lead?

### **THE MYTH OF NARCISSUS**

In the early 1900s, narcissism became a subject of scientific interest in the field of psychology. In the past, excessive self-admiration had been referred to as hubris, defined as a person's unrealistic overestimation of their abilities, excessive pride and arrogance that lead to their ultimate downfall.



The term narcissism has its earliest roots in ancient Greek mythology and in the story of a young man named Narcissus. According to Ovid's narrative poem, *Metamorphoses*, Narcissus was a youth of wondrous beauty. He was the son of Liriope, who had been ravished by the river god Cephissus, his father. When Liriope asked Tiresias (the prophet of Thebes) if the boy would live to a ripe old age, the blind seer replied: 'If he ne'er know himself' (Ovid, 1984, p.149).

Narcissus was so handsome that everyone loved and desired him, but he was too proud to love anyone in return. Echo, a nymph who could only repeat the words of others, saw Narcissus as he was hunting in the woods and fell in love with him. When Narcissus heard her footsteps in the forest, he called out, "Is anyone here?" Echo answered, "Is anyone here?" Narcissus, who still could not see her, asked, "Why do you run from me?" Again Echo repeated the young man's words. Finally Narcissus said, "Here, let us meet together" and happily Echo repeated his words and came towards him to embrace him in her arms. Upon seeing her, Narcissus ran away and said "May I die before I give you power o'er me." Echo repeated "I give you power o'er me" (Ovid, 1984, p.151-153). Heartbroken and rejected, she mourned love lost and cried until all that was left of her was her voice.

Narcissus continued to leave a trail of unrequited love in his wake. Another spurned suitor turned to Nemesis, the goddess of retribution against those who succumb to hubris, and requested, "So may he himself love, and not gain the thing he loves" (Ovid, 1984, p.153). Nemesis granted this request by leading Narcissus to a still pool of water. While drinking, he caught sight of his reflection and fell in love. "While he is drinking he beholds himself reflected in the mirrored pool--and loves; loves an imagined body which contains no substance, for he deems the mirrored shade a thing of life to love" (Ovid, n.d.). The beautiful boy in the water returned his smiles and mimicked his inviting gestures, yet shied away from his advances. Trapped by self-love, Narcissus could not distinguish between illusion and reality. In time, he despaired and died. In the place of his body grew a lovely yellow-centered white flower, the narcissus, which is toxic and is known for its numbing narcotic properties. The word narcissus is associated with the Greek word *narke*, meaning sleep or numbness.

Ovid's poem describes the loneliness of a young man who causes his own isolation and demise through pride, an inflated view of himself, and the rejection of others. It is a wonderfully complex portrait of what we today call Narcissistic Personality Disorder or NPD.

## THE NARCISSISTIC CONUNDRUM

*He that is proud eats up himself: pride is his own glass, his own trumpet, his own chronicle; and whatever praises itself but in the deed, devours the deed in the praise.*

(Shakespeare, 1602)

### *Personality Disorder: Definition*

What is a personality disorder? According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR), a personality disorder is an enduring and inflexible “pattern of inner experience and behavior” (American Psychiatric Association, 2000, p.685) that is sufficiently rigid and ingrained to bring a person into repetitive conflict with his or her environment. The DSM-IV-TR states that these dysfunctional patterns “deviate from the expectations of the individual’s culture” (APA, 2000, p.689) and are the cause of significant emotional distress and difficulties in relationships and occupational performance.

### **Theories of Narcissism**

Throughout history, philosophers and thinkers have explored the concept of excessive self-admiration. Psychologists, however, have gone further in their conceptualizations. The psychoanalysts Sigmund Freud, Otto Kernberg and Heinz Kohut have developed some of the most notable theories on the subject.

In his essay *On Narcissism: An Introduction*, Sigmund Freud argues that healthy narcissism is an essential part of normal development in children, and that it is a survival technique that fuels individuals with the energy and desire for life. “Narcissism in this sense would not be a perversion, but the libidinal complement to the egoism of the instinct of self-preservation” (Freud, 2012). He reasons that young children go through a period of primary



narcissism during which they are egocentric and can only see the world from their own perspective. During this period, a child sees him or herself as the center of the universe and will view primary care-givers as all-powerful, existing only in order to fulfill their needs. He theorizes that primary narcissism is a form of protection for the child during the formation of his or her individual self.

Although Freud did not develop a formal description of narcissistic personality disorder, he wrote about the rationale for pathological narcissism as a means of self-defense:

Loving in itself, in so far as it involves longing and deprivation, lowers self-regard; whereas being loved, having one's love returned, and possessing the loved object, raises it once more. When libido is repressed, the erotic cathexis is felt as a severe depletion of the ego, the satisfaction of love is impossible, and the re-enrichment of the ego can be effected only by a withdrawal of libido from its objects (Freud, 2012).

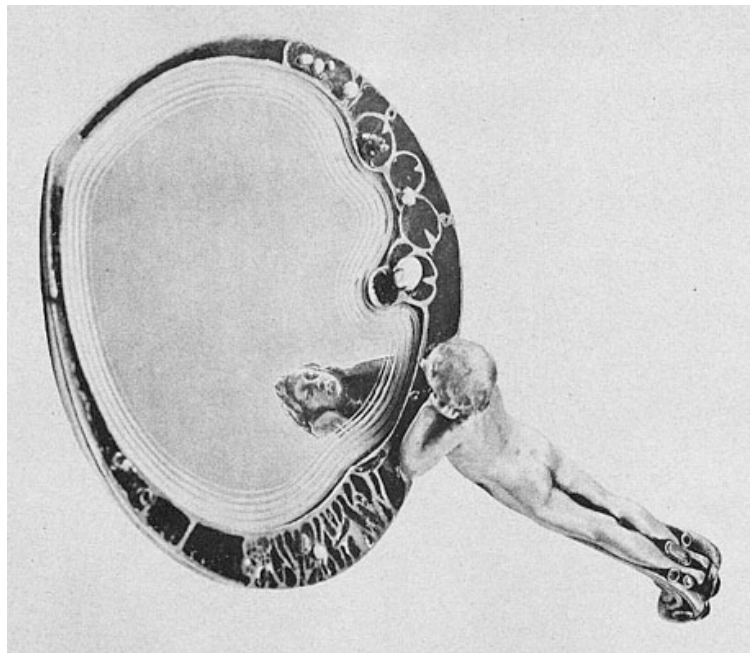
Freud argued that in healthy development, individuals depart from primary narcissism and learn to invest their libidinal energy in others, with the hope that their love might be returned. He believed that each of us has a limited amount of libidinal energy and that by investing it in others we deplete our own feelings of self-love. If love is reciprocated, the individual does not experience the departure from primary narcissism as a loss. However, if the love object is unable or unwilling to return the love, the individual will regress to what Freud calls 'secondary narcissism' in order to compensate for the lost libidinal energy. According to Freud, secondary narcissism is a magnified, extreme manifestation of primary narcissism. Freud postulated that this unhealthy state of self-gratification can prevent individuals from having meaningful relationships. In the DSM-IV, Theodore Millon describes the process by which Freud suggests that this libidinal self-centeredness as a form of self-preservation is conceived:

Rather than rely on the capriciousness of others or risk their rejection, these youngsters avoid the lasting attachment they achingly desire and decide instead that it is only themselves they can trust and therefore love (1996, p.395).

Freud suggested that narcissistic personalities may develop due to parental overvaluation or undervaluation. Alice Miller takes up this point and argues that individuals who develop narcissistic personalities have not been loved for who they are, and therefore do not develop “an authentic sense of self” (Millon, 1996, p.400). Instead they learn to play a role that fulfills their parents’ personal longing for glorification, and, by this means, find ways to attract parental affection. Miller goes on to say that:

The grandiose person is never really free; first because he is excessively dependent on admiration from others, and second, because his self-respect is dependent on qualities, functions, and achievements that can suddenly fail (Miller, p.36).

Heinz Kohut expanded upon Freud’s theory of narcissism. He upheld the idea that young children have grandiose fantasies about themselves and tend to idealize their parents, and saw the parent-child relationship as integral to development. He believed that parents act as a mirror to the child whose development is reliant on the constant approval and validation from care-givers. In his opinion, parental mirroring allows the child to overcome the disillusionment resulting from the confrontation of ideals and reality. In time, he believed that this reflection of the child’s self-worth would transform his or her illusions of grandiosity into a healthy sense of self-esteem. However, he argued, if a child had poor attachment to key care-givers at an early age and was deprived of an empathetic parental mirror, he or she would likely remain stuck in an infantile narcissistic state. According to him:



In cases of narcissistic personality disorder, it is not difficult to discern the defensive

nature ... Behind it lie low self-esteem and depression – a deep sense of uncared-for worthlessness and rejection, an incessant hunger for response, a yearning for reassurance (Kohut, 2009).

Kohut hypothesizes that a child whose parents fail to provide him or her with reliable, empathetic feedback, will not develop the capacity to regulate his or her self-esteem or be able to transform grandiosity into adult ambitions. Without a balanced sense of self-worth, the individual will tend to alternate between two extremes – an inflated sense of self on one hand, and feelings of inferiority on the other. Such a person will seek empathetic feedback from others, even in adulthood. Kohut argued that there are ‘self-disorders’, characterized by arrested narcissistic development, that result either from an individual not being ‘seen’ by the parents during childhood, or of being viewed as an extension of themselves.

While Kohut believed that the narcissist is arrested developmentally, his contemporary, Otto Kernberg, argued that the narcissist develops pathologically. Kernberg coined the term “narcissistic personality structure” and identified three types of narcissism: normal adult narcissism, normal infantile narcissism and pathological narcissism. He suggested that children, in the face of distant or overly domineering parental figures, children retreat to their private space, and find specialness in accomplishments rather than in meaningful relationships. Kernberg explained that the relationships that pathological narcissists do develop are primarily based on controlling and exploiting others. According to him, “In general, their relationships with other people are clearly exploitative and sometimes parasitic” (Kernberg, 1970, p. 52). He also suggested that people with pathological narcissism are prone to ‘splitting’ as a defense mechanism, in other words they compartmentalize others as either “good” or “bad” depending on whether the other person fulfills their needs.

Kohut and Kernberg’s diverging ideas on Narcissistic Personality Disorder led them to advocate quite different therapeutic approaches. Kohut suggested that the role of the analyst should be supportive and that empathy was the primary mechanism for change. He believed that the therapist should fully encourage narcissistic transference because this would allow the patient to make up for developmental steps lost in childhood. In contrast, Kernberg saw interpretation as the main mechanism for change and recommended that the therapist adopt a

neutral or even confrontational approach to the patient. “The analyst must be continuously focusing on the particular quality of the transference in these cases and consistently counteract the patient’s efforts toward omnipotent control and devaluation” (Kernberg, 1970, p. 70).

Kernberg argues that narcissistic transference is just another manifestation of a narcissistic patient’s personal grandiose ideas, and that by fostering transference the psychoanalyst buys into the narcissist’s system of beliefs and may perpetuate the problem. He suggests that the analyst must be prepared to confront the patient with these behavior patterns and counter his need for control. Critics of his method have argued that the therapist’s neutral approach to working with pathological narcissists may alienate patients. Conversely, others worried that Kohut’s empathic approach might encourage a patient’s exploitative behaviors rather than diminish them. The debate about effective methods of treatment is obviously more complex than illustrated here, but the comparison of these theories helps to illustrate two crucial approaches to helping people who live with narcissism.

### *Current Definition & Subtype Categorization*

Below are some of the more current definitions and discussions relating to narcissistic personality and the categorization of the disorder. This overview touches upon some of the key issues debated but is by no means exhaustive. Although a new version of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* is due to be released in May 2013 and a new definition for NPD is



being discussed, the American Psychiatric Association currently describes NPD as “a pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or behavior), need for admiration, and lack of empathy, beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts” (APA, 2000, p. 717).

The DSM-IV suggests that the diagnosis of NPD can be made when five (or more) of the following behaviors are manifested:

- Has a grandiose sense of self-importance (e.g., exaggerates achievements and talents, expects to be recognized as superior without commensurate achievements)
- Is 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)
- Requires excessive admiration
- Has a sense of entitlement, i.e., unreasonable expectations of especially favorable treatment or automatic compliance with his or her expectations
- Is interpersonally exploitative, i.e., takes advantage of others to achieve his or her own ends
- Lacks empathy: is unwilling to recognize or identify with the feelings or needs of others
- Is often envious of others or believes others are envious of him or her
- Displays arrogant, haughty behavior or attitudes (APA, 2000, p. 717).

The DSM-IV-TR describes narcissists as primarily concerned with their own welfare and perspective, giving little weight to the opinions and feelings of others. It goes on to state that narcissists tend to be very vulnerable to criticism and defeat, which can cause them to become aggressive and alienate those around them. They may resort to narcissistic rage.

In the DSM-IV, Theodore Millon categorized NPD as one of the interpersonally imbalanced personality disorders which are defined by their self-other polarities – in the case of narcissists, the personality being imbalanced in favor of the 'self'. He identified four subtypes of the narcissistic personality: unprincipled, amorous, compensatory, and elitist. The *unprincipled* subtype is a narcissist with a "deficient social conscious" and antisocial nature, who can be intimidating, deceptive, exploitative, unscrupulous and vindictive. He or she is prone to taking risky decisions and intrepidly attracts danger and punishment. The *amorous narcissist* has histrionic characteristics and is erotic, sexually seductive, exhibitionistic and indulges in hedonistic pleasures. He or she plays the role of an enticing Don Juan who, despite their seductive pursuits, avoids real intimacy with others. The *compensatory narcissist* seeks to avoid feelings of inferiority and low self-esteem by feeding an illusion of superiority and pseudo-confidence with a series of self-enhancing pursuits. If these pursuits stray from reality, the

compensatory narcissist, aware at some level of his or her illusory status, will exhibit paranoid tendencies and become hyper-sensitive to how others view them. The *elitist narcissist* is the narcissist par excellence. This individual is convinced of his or her superiority and works hard to persuade others of this specialness. According to Millon, the elitist narcissist is the most upwardly mobile subtype and the one with most distinct divide between actual-self and projected-self (Millon, 1996, pp. 409-413).

Alexander Lowen, in his book *Narcissism: Denial of the True Self* (1984), specified five subtypes of Narcissistic personality. He believed that there is a continuum of severity in terms of narcissistic behavior. At one end of the spectrum is mild narcissism or the phallic narcissist. At the other end is the paranoid narcissist who suffers from an extremely distorted perception of reality.

In 2008, Russ, Shedler, Bradley and Westen made a study of 255 patients meeting the criteria for narcissistic personality disorder. They identified three main subtypes: grandiose/malignant, fragile, and high-functioning/exhibitionistic. They characterized *grandiose narcissists* as angry, self-important,



interpersonally manipulative, in pursuit of power, and lacking empathy or remorse. Such individuals do not seem to suffer from feelings of inadequacy, display little self-awareness, and have a tendency to lay blame on others. In contrast, *fragile narcissists* experience smallness, anxiety and loneliness; for them grandiosity is a defense against these feelings of inadequacy. These individuals vacillate between superiority and inferiority. Finally, they describe *high-functioning narcissists*, who, though they also tend towards a more “exaggerated sense of self”, are generally “articulate, energetic, and outgoing,” achievement-oriented and more prone to success (p. 1475). The study implied that treatment would differ depending on the diagnosed subtype of narcissistic personality: grandiose malignant narcissists have the worst chance of

recovery as they lack the emotional pain that would motivate them to change, whereas fragile narcissists respond well to an empathetic approach that acknowledges their feelings of insecurity. High-functioning narcissists are best suited to an “interpretive, insight-oriented approach” that allows them to understand how their narcissistic defenses affect their chances for “meaningful attachments” (p. 1475).

In the forthcoming DSM-V, the APA proposes the following re-wording of the definition of NPD to include the concept of normal developmental narcissism and open up the description to include less overt forms of narcissism:

**A.** Significant impairments in personality functioning manifested by:

1. Impairments in self functioning (a or b):

a. Identity: Excessive reference to others for self-definition and self-esteem regulation; exaggerated self-appraisal may be inflated or deflated, or vacillate between extremes; emotional regulation mirrors fluctuations in self-esteem.

b. Self-direction: Goal-setting is based on gaining approval from others; personal standards are unreasonably high in order to see oneself as exceptional, or too low based on a sense of entitlement; often unaware of own motivations.

2. Impairments in interpersonal functioning (a or b):

a. Empathy: Impaired ability to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others; excessively attuned to reactions of others, but only if perceived as relevant to self; over- or underestimate of own effect on others.

b. Intimacy: Relationships largely superficial and exist to serve self-esteem regulation; mutuality constrained by little genuine interest in others' experiences and predominance of a need for personal gain

**B.** Pathological personality traits in the following domain:

Antagonism, characterized by:

a. Grandiosity: Feelings of entitlement, either overt or covert; self-centeredness; firmly holding to the belief that one is better than others; condescending toward others.

- b. Attention seeking: Excessive attempts to attract and be the focus of the attention of others; admiration seeking.
- C. The impairments in personality functioning and the individual's personality trait expression are relatively stable across time and consistent across situations.
- D. The impairments in personality functioning and the individual's personality trait expression are not better understood as normative for the individual's developmental stage or socio-cultural environment.
- E. The impairments in personality functioning and the individual's personality trait expression are not solely due to the direct physiological effects of a substance (e.g., drug abuse, medication) or a general medical condition (e.g., severe head trauma) (APA, 2011).

Interestingly, this new description of narcissism in the DSM-V addresses in more detail the underlying reasons for behavioral manifestations of narcissistic personality disorder and not just the behavioral manifestations themselves. It is clear from the DSM-V that our understanding of narcissistic personality disorder is evolving and remains subject to varying opinions and advances in therapeutic treatment, theoretical thought and statistical testing.

### *Diagnosis*

According to the DSM-IV-TR, NPD affects less than 1% of the general population. It is considered to affect men more frequently than women. However, it is generally agreed that narcissism can occur across a spectrum of severity. Almost everyone has some narcissistic traits, which makes it important to understand the difference between a personality trait and a disorder. For example, the psychiatrist Mark Unterberg mentions:



Of all the psychiatric problems that face organizations today, one of the most insidious can be the otherwise high-functioning person with a severe personality problem. These individuals create multilevel difficulties that defy easy detection and definition due to the intermingling of their health and pathology. They are usually much harder to recognize than the obvious depressive or alcoholic, and their personalities cause repeated but subtle disruption in the workforce and the decision-making processes (Unterberg, 2003, p. 1).

The multidimensional criteria outlined in the DSM-IV makes assessment of narcissism difficult. What complicates the diagnosis even further are conflicting opinions about the definition of narcissism and its varying forms (overt/grandiose vs. covert / fragile or vulnerable). Although there are different assessment tools that address narcissistic behavior, there is no clear standard. For example clinical interview-led diagnosis such as Structured Clinical Interviews (DSM-IV Axis II Personality Disorders - SCID-II) or the Diagnostic Interview for Narcissism (DIN) are time-consuming and are based on the evaluation of a clinician. Self-report measures require less clinical expertise, are easier to implement, but are subject to the individual's level of self-awareness, their interpretation of the questions, and their portrayal of themselves to the outside world. In self-reporting questionnaires, the desirability factor can create major distortions.

### An overview of the diagnostic tools to assess NPD

The *Millon Clinical Multiaxial Inventory* (MCMI), a relatively long diagnostic test developed by Theodore Millon, based on the DSM criteria for different personality disorders, includes a measure for narcissism. Although developed for clinical populations, it has been judged useful in the assessment of individuals in the general population.

More commonly used is the *Narcissistic Personality Inventory* (NPI) developed by Raskin and Hall in 1979. The NPI also measures narcissism based on the DSM-III criteria for Narcissistic Personality Disorder. Designed to identify narcissism as it occurs in the general population, the NPI identifies 'normal' narcissism, which implies that those who score high do not necessarily have NPD. In same way that the DSM criteria have been found wanting, the NPI has been

criticized for overlooking covert/vulnerable forms of narcissism in favor of measuring overt/grandiose narcissistic behavior. Despite this, over the years the NPI has become one of the most widely used measures of narcissistic behavior and has been repeatedly adapted for use.

If the NPI assesses adaptive and extraverted narcissism, the *Personality Diagnostic Questionnaire* (PDQ-4) and the *Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale* (HSNS) are considered to assess introverted and emotionally vulnerable narcissists.

And finally, in response to Russ, Shedler, Bradley, and Westen's findings, Pincus and colleagues (2009) developed the *Pathological Narcissism Inventory* (PNI) that claims to address both variants of narcissistic behavior. The PNI highlights an individual's low self-esteem, interpersonal anguish, aggression and lack of empathy. It was developed to assess more pathological narcissism, but was tested primarily on a non-clinical population.

Other tools that have been used to diagnose narcissism are the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES), the NEO Personality Inventory (NEO PI-R), the Personality Diagnostic Questionnaire, the Hogan Development Survey, and the International Classification of Diseases.

### Distinguishing narcissists from psychopaths

An additional difficulty in assessing NPD is its close correlation with other personality disorders. It is particularly important for therapists and coaches to distinguish between narcissism and psychopathy (or anti-social personality disorder) as there is an even lower prognosis for successfully treating psychopathy. Unfortunately, differentiation between the two is very difficult. Narcissists and psychopaths have very different experiences and motives, but the external manifestations of their inner worlds can look very similar. For example, when the egocentricity, lack of empathy, and sense of superiority of the narcissist cross-fertilize with the impulsivity, deceitfulness and criminal tendencies of the antisocial, the result is a psychopath, an individual who seeks the gratification of selfish impulses through any means without empathy or remorse (Millon, Millon, Meagher, Grossman & Ramnath, 2000, pp. 360-361).

Both narcissists and psychopaths tend to be charismatic, grandiose, self-absorbed, lacking in empathy, and in search of immediate gratification. However, if we dig deeper we find that narcissists depend on others for affirmation due to low underlying levels of self-esteem, which

makes them vulnerable to rejection and a lack of attention. Narcissists will rationalize their actions to abide by a code of ethics they hold dear. In contrast, psychopaths do not need attention or acceptance and do not feel the same sense of inadequacy. The psychopath's manipulation of others can be described as more conscious and therefore more predatory. Psychopaths act without restraint, do not experience feelings of remorse (do not have a 'conscience'), do not need other people, and will primarily manipulate others as a means to satisfy their desires. They do not have a sense of shame, a code of ethics and therefore do not experience the need to rationalize their behavior accordingly. From a psychoanalytic perspective, narcissists have functioning super-egos: psychopaths do not.

Although in the DSM-IV, psychopathy and narcissism are distinct, psychoanalysts Kernberg and Meloy put them on the same continuum, with narcissistic traits placed at the low end of the pathology spectrum, malignant narcissism in the middle, and psychopathy at the top. The Psychopathy Checklist Revised (PCL-R), developed by the psychologist Robert Hare, is the most commonly used assessment tool for psychopathy. It was developed based on a criminal population. The Psychopathic Personality Inventory (PPI), on the other hand, focuses more on personality traits rather than on criminal behavior. It is a self-report scale that was developed using university students.

Because the narcissist and the psychopath have widely different inner worlds, the treatment methods used and the expected results are also different. Psychopaths do not feel the psychological pain that can be a catalyst for behavioral change. They are less able to create interpersonal relationships, which further complicates the coaching exchange. According to many clinicians, psychopathy is considered untreatable. Coaches who are uncertain of the distinction between a narcissist and a psychopath may want to seek the opinion of a psychotherapist versed in personality disorders.

## ORGANIZATIONAL NARCISSISTS

People of this type impress others as being personalities; it is on them that their fellow men are specially likely to lean; they readily assume the role of leader, give a fresh stimulus to cultural development and break down existing conditions (Freud as cited in Millon, 1996, p. 395).



Within the world of business, scholars have written much about the tendency of narcissistic employees to migrate to the top of companies, the attributes of narcissistic leaders, and the effects that narcissistic personalities have on their organizations. Some scholars equate narcissism with destructive leadership. Others, such as Manfred Kets de Vries and Michael Maccoby, take a more balanced view of narcissistic leadership. “Narcissism is a strange thing, a double-edged sword. Having either too much or too little of it can throw a person off balance” (Kets de Vries, 1993, p.21). Like most people, narcissists have patterns of behavior that can positively or negatively affect their work and the people around them. Here below are the attributes that are often associated with leaders who display strong narcissistic tendencies.

Otto Fenichel and Helen Tartakoff, two psychoanalysts from the early twentieth century, both stressed the narcissistic personality’s drive for success and achievement. Fenichel referred to narcissists as the “Don Juans” of achievement, while Tartakoff proclaimed them to have a “Nobel Prize syndrome” (Millon, 1996, p. 396). Narcissists tend to strive towards an ideal self-image and find ways to endorse positive illusions about themselves. In this way narcissism is linked to ambition and dreams of success, whether success is represented by power, fame, wealth or achievement.

Narcissistic leaders tend to display a high-level of self-confidence and are more inclined to self-promote by overstating their talents and achievements. This self-assurance can be perceived as conceited or alternatively associated with competence and can contribute to their advancement at work. Their need for recognition may prompt them to seek positions that provide them with a measure of influence over others.

Narcissistic ambitions tend to foster competitive aspirations and a grueling work ethic. Narcissists will go to great lengths, work extremely hard, over-extend themselves and make personal sacrifices to attain their goals. They will often work to become experts in their fields. All of this effort is ultimately driven by a need for affirmation and attention. The charisma that they exude draws followers and may be used to boost their self-esteem and advance of their own goals.

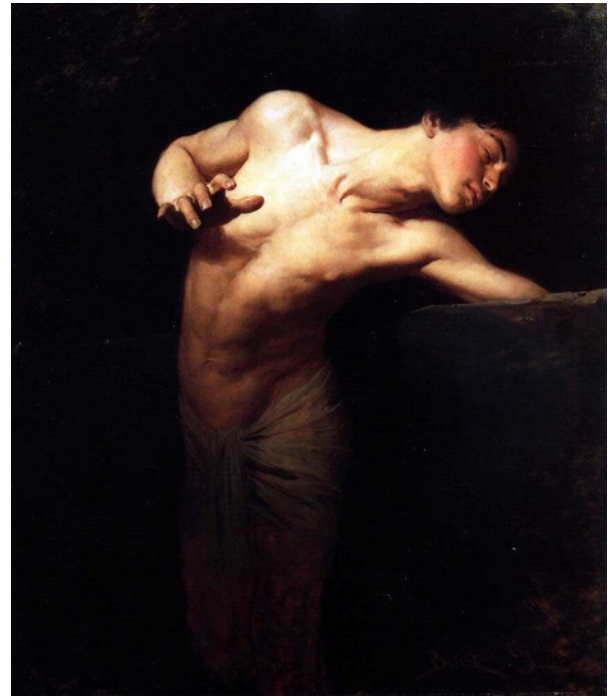


This tendency for narcissists to adopt positions of power may lead us to the assumption that top executives are more narcissistic than the general population. In 2005, psychologists Belinda Board and Katarina Fritzon interviewed and gave personality tests to senior British executives to assess for personality disorders. Their findings suggested that narcissistic traits were as prevalent in the top levels of business as in the patient population, which according to the DSM-IV can be as high as sixteen percent.

As a scholar of politics once said: "It is probably not an exaggeration to state that if individuals with significant narcissistic characteristics were stripped from the ranks of public figures, the ranks would be perilously thinned" (Post, 1993, p.99). Since narcissistic behavior exists along a continuum of severity, a high level of narcissism can be interpersonally isolating and may hamper a person's ability to perform in the workplace, therefore reducing their chances for promotion to higher levels of management.

Narcissistic leaders are often visionary. According to Maccoby: "They are gifted and creative strategists who see the big picture and find meaning in the risky challenge of changing the world and leaving behind a legacy" (Maccoby, 2000, p.2). They can be spontaneous, are able to make rapid decisions, and can be great catalysts for change. Their ability to 'think outside the box' or feel unconstrained by the rules and regulations can be both innovative, but also risky. Narcissistic leadership is often called for in times of great change or in the case of

dynamic and competitive industries where innovation is key. The ability to confidently communicate a vision of the future that inspires and motivates a group of followers, and decision-making confidence can be real assets in turbulent situations. Their lack of empathy may help narcissistic leaders to make the kinds of difficult decisions that affect other people's lives, like lay-offs due to restructuring or because of the enactment of a merger or an acquisition. Conversely, in less turbulent times, risk-taking and quick decision-making may threaten stability.



Narcissists will often believe that they are “special” (in talent or status) and will be inclined to compare themselves to famous or elite individuals. In fact, they have disdain for those they consider to be less accomplished or otherwise “unworthy”. Narcissists tend to be more successful in positions that do not require the building of trusting relationships. Their sense of superiority to, and lack of empathy for others makes it difficult for them to work in a team. “The self-enhancer’s manipulation, intimidation, and entitlement tendencies can cause resentment and lead to breakdowns in cooperation” (Morf & Rhodewalt, 1993). To them, rules are for others, not for them. They are special.

As bosses, narcissists demand perfection and have a tendency to overwork their staff. They undervalue the work of others, do not easily praise subordinates, and often take credit for their accomplishments. As quoted by Millon in the DSM-IV, Lorna Benjamin writes that “[He/She] will expect great dedication, overwork, and heroic performance from the people associated with him or her without giving any thought to the impact of this pattern on their lives” (1996, p. 402). The charm that they exude in public may not be the same persona that they show privately to their staff. They often have a rather autocratic style of management, and often have difficulty retaining talented employees. In situations of underperformance, they may deny personal responsibility and blame others for mistakes. They become defensive when

criticized, and can attack those who question their decisions. What's more the DSM-IV states, "...performance may be disrupted due to intolerance of criticism or defeat" (APA, 2000, p. 716). It makes them less able to benefit from the advice of others and are said to surround themselves with 'yes men' who simply compound their stunted view of reality.

Narcissists are prone to 'splitting' as a defense mechanism and view the world in black or white, (as good or bad). This bifurcated view can lead them to be very distrustful of others. In their inability to empathize with the feelings and the needs of others, and their difficulty forming interpersonal relationships, they are in danger of becoming emotionally isolated. This may be the source of mood swings, irrational behaviors, and volatile decision-making. Narcissistic injuries due to career setbacks and aging make them prone to bouts of depression or bouts of rage. Their inability to accept feedback poses a challenge to their self-enhancement. Their difficulty forming relationships may make it hard for them to mentor others. The former combined with their fear of aging may stop them from grooming a successor. Their autocratic style may lead organizations to be overly dependent on them, and to be more vulnerable as a result.

In their ambition to achieve greatness, such leaders may be disposed to exploit the organization (consciously or unconsciously), either by over-extending the company's resources or abilities, or by making excessively risky decisions. "[T]heir leadership is driven by their own personal needs for power and admiration, rather than by an empathetic concern for the constituents they lead" (Rosenthal, n.d., p. 42). Their decisions and performance can be tainted by their bifurcated view of the world, their consuming need for praise, their desire to maintain an image of greatness, and their tendency to inhibit the contributions of others. Since narcissistic behavior at the top serves as an example, it can set the cultural tone for the rest of the organization which can lead to further problems. In turn, it has been suggested, the cultural environment of an organization or nation can foster or inhibit the selection of narcissistic leadership.

At the same time, "[T]here can be quite a fine line between narcissists who perform badly in the workplace because of their traits, and those who achieve outrageous success because of them" (Crompton, 2007, p. 159). From a study of 111 CEOs between 1992 and 2004, Arijit Chatterjee and Donald Hambrick concluded that "narcissistic CEOs, who tend to pursue

dynamic and grandiose strategies, also tend to generate more extreme performance – more big wins and big losses – than their less narcissistic counterparts” (2006, p.33).

Narcissistic leaders are said to have rapid rise-and-fall trajectories. They are more likely to succeed when their personal goals align with those of the organization. The reason for their downfall often resides in the personal attributes that have led to their success. Their willingness to change their behavior is diminished as they progress towards their goals and their weaknesses can, in this way, be amplified by their success. According to Maccoby:

As he becomes increasingly self-assured, the narcissist becomes more spontaneous. He feels free of constraints. Ideas flow. He thinks he's invincible. This energy and confidence further inspire his followers. But the very adulation that the narcissist demands can have a corrosive effect. As he expands, he listens even less to words of caution and advice. After all, he has been right before, when others had their doubts. Rather than try to persuade those who disagree with him, he feels justified in ignoring them—creating further isolation. The result is sometimes flagrant risk-taking that can lead to catastrophe (Maccoby, 2000).

## AN EXPLORATORY STUDY: COACHING NARCISSISTIC EXECUTIVES

### Introduction

How can organizations manage the downsides of employing narcissistic executives? In this paper, we turn our attention to coaching as a means for getting the best out of narcissistic executives. Can executive (one-on-one or group) coaching be a means for containing and hopefully helping narcissistic individuals thrive within the organizations where they work? How would a leadership coach approach a coaching engagement with a narcissist?

Little information is available to the coach who seeks to help a narcissist. Most of the articles written about narcissistic executives describe their characteristics, behavior, and their effects on organizations but few authors tackle the question of how to deal with narcissistic individuals in an organizational setting. Fewer still, discuss the coaching implications of working with narcissists. Treatment suggestions for NPD are available, but they are for a patient population. Although therapeutic suggestions can inform the practice of coaching, they are, of course, less applicable to active executives.

As a result, I decided to explore the process of coaching narcissistic executives in more depth and to speak directly with people in the coaching profession for their views on the subject.



## Methodology

I opted to conduct a number of semi-structured interviews with leadership coaches in order to complement the information from the academic literature with practical observations and guidance. I interviewed fourteen executive coaches, all of whom had extensive coaching experience. Their experiences of working with narcissistic executives and their recommendations for helping such people has been the main source of information for the following coaching proposals.

I would to add that the small sample of coaches interviewed were all European with a majority of them based in Europe. On average, they work with people from all over the world, but with a greater percentage of European clients. They were between 42 and 65 years old (average 60), and had between 4 and 17 years of experience in coaching executives (average 11.5 years). The group was split fifty-fifty in terms of gender. Nine of the 14 were CCC-trained and the five who were not had some affiliation with IGLC and its methodology.

The interviews were conducted over the phone or via Skype, often from the comfort of their office or home. I conducted them alone, to ensure confidentiality having made it clear that the interviews would remain anonymous and that

specific details of discussed client cases would not be recognizably described in the resulting report. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and an hour and a half long. The interviews were semi-structured and I had a list of questions to cover during the discussion.

The coaches frequently expanded on the topic beyond the initial questions to volunteer more information, venturing into more in-depth discussions. I attempted to record the interviews verbatim, at times depending on shorthand notes when the conversation went too fast to be recorded in its entirety. Generally, the coaches had one or more specific case in mind



and would expand on the specificities of each client during our conversation. If the coach was not able to recall a specific case, we spoke more generally about their recommendations for dealing with narcissistic clients.

### Interview questions

#### *Profile of the coach:*

- What is your gender, age, and nationality?
- Where are you based? Generally, what is the nationality of your clients?
- What is your current job?
- What is your training?
- How many years have you been a practicing coach?

#### *General questions:*

- What is your understanding of narcissism?
- How would you assess whether a client has strong narcissistic tendencies?
- Do you believe that narcissistic individuals naturally migrate to the top of organizations?
- Do you have a personal sensitivity to narcissistic individuals? What countertransference issues do you need to guard against when working with a narcissistic individual?

#### *Cases & specific experiences:*

- Do you have experience working with a client who has strong narcissistic tendencies?
- Briefly describe the client - age, gender, position
- What prompted the coaching process? How was contact with the client established?
- What was the coaching contract? And with whom was it made? What were the stated objectives of the coaching process?
- How did you assess the client and the issues involved?
- What was the initial attitude of the client? Was he or her open to change?
- What was the format of the coaching process? How long did it last? Was it fulfilled? Was it cut short or extended?
- What resistant behavior did the client manifest, if any? At what point in the coaching process?
- Did the client make progress, and if so in what areas? Where did the client fail to make progress and why? If the client improved or worsened, at what point in the coaching process did the client's behavior begin to change?
- What coaching methods do you believe made a difference with the client?
- General recommendations.

I have adopted grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) as an approach to my analysis. Grounded theory encompasses different schools of thought but they all share the central idea that a paper's theory should derive from its data (not the other way around) and that the researcher should not approach a subject with a preconceived theory that they seek to prove.

The literature review and research was done prior to the interview process. "[A]ll kinds of literature can be used before a research study is begun" (Strauss & Corbin 1990, p. 56). Although informed by my reading I tried to not let my research overly direct my interpretation of the data gathered during the interviews. "An open mind not an empty head" (Dey, 1999, p. 251).

I analyzed my record of the interviews for response patterns to see if there were particularly prevalent sets of information. I compared the emerging categories from the interview data with the information that I gathered from my academic research. I then attempted to organize the information gathered into categories, to synthesize the two sources of information, and to present it in a way that is easily accessible and useful to the reader. I took an inclusive approach when sorting through coaches' comments, feeling that a wider set of information and recommendations could be beneficial to coaches. Below are the resulting recommendations for dealing with narcissistic executives.

## **Discussion of results**

### *Preliminary considerations*

One of the themes that derived from the interviews is that it is advisable to undertake a number of preliminary steps before jumping into a coaching engagement with a leader who displays NPD or possesses strong narcissistic tendencies.

Firstly, it is important to have an in-depth understanding of Narcissism, the most probable causes for NPD, and the various strains of the disorder. A leadership coach should be able to identify a narcissistic individual, distinguish healthy from unhealthy narcissism, and know when narcissism has turned into a personality disorder. A basic knowledge of narcissism will allow a coach to assess whether the issues go beyond the scope of coaching work and when a client is in need of a different approach. In such cases, the coach may take the option of referring the

client to a psychotherapist/ psychoanalyst. One coach that I interviewed said that she has a working relationship with a therapist who she felt comfortable referring clients to. She said that clients would sometimes return to coaching once they had spent some time in therapy.

Second, it is helpful to be aware of the most common manifestations of narcissism within an organizational context. Very generally, how do narcissists behave at work and how does this affect their professional environment? To what extent does the organizational environment contribute to narcissistic behavior? This knowledge will allow the coach to more easily identify current issues or problems that could occur in the future.

Third, a coach should assess

and be aware of his or her personal sensitivity to narcissistic behavior. *Know thyself*. How do you relate to narcissistic people? How will that affect your ability to work with such people? The coach should be attuned to his or her responses vis-à-vis the client and use any counter-



transferential feelings as a source

of information. As in all coaching engagements, the coach will need to guard against counter-transference and/or personal defense mechanisms will positively affect his or her ability to have an impact. Establishing emotional boundaries will be essential in dealing with NPD. Being able to do so will prevent the coach from taking the narcissist's actions too personally and from being emotionally thrown off balance. A heightened sensitivity to criticism, a tendency to be impressed by grandiose statements, and an overarching desire to please may be reasons for a coach's lack of effectiveness in the context of working with a narcissistic individual. Although the coach will need to understand and empathize with the client, he or she should retain a measure of objectivity and independence and be careful not to be drawn into the client's point of view or system of thought. Taking such a position will not always be easy, as narcissists are often charismatic, talented and accomplished people. To be effective, coaches must not allow

themselves to be seduced. “Working with narcissistic clients is good practice. You need to be able to accept failure, remain independent, and try not to be too helpful” (from one coach interview).

In response to my question “Do you have a personal sensitivity to NPD?,” a couple of the coaches that were interviewed mentioned that they had had to manage their personal need for harmony and their desire to ‘save’ the client. One coach described her frustration and emotional reaction to working with a client who was completely resistant to change: “I started to feel de-skilled as a coach.” This coach came close to putting her professional ability into question in the face of such resistance. She eventually realized (with the help of supervision) that the client was in need of more profound help, and that as a result she would need to end the coaching engagement. Because she had a real desire to help the client, it was a challenge to accept the notion of letting go and to stay within the boundaries of her profession, in other words, “The coach must accept the possibility that the client will not change.” Several of the coaches, said that supervision was an important source of support and ideas in situations when they were working with a narcissistic client. The supervisor also played an important role in helping the coach to avoid counter-transferential feelings.

Finally, as is recommended for all coaching engagements, the coach should carefully consider the coaching contract, with whom it was made, and what reasons and objectives were given for the development work. It is important to assess the client’s willingness to engage in the process and his or her desire for change. Narcissists rarely seek help unless they are prompted to do so by their organization or are experiencing considerable difficulties at work and/or personal emotional turmoil. Very often, they lack the insight to be aware of professional failings that require attention or have difficulty seeking professional help because they are afraid to expose their weaknesses. Their fear of inadequacy may cause them to reject or dismiss the coaching process.

Sometimes (a theme mentioned by a number of coaches), the client was not a narcissist but their boss or supervisor was. In these situations, they stressed that the coach should be especially careful to specify the details of the coaching contract since narcissistic bosses will expect a ‘quick fix’, and lack the emotional intelligence to support the client in the

developmental process. Such bosses may also have been responsible for creating a corporate culture where narcissistic behavior thrives.

A number of the coaches that I interviewed, defined situations or client characteristics that would cause them to refrain from accepting a coaching engagement. One said: “If I feel that I am not going to be effective, i don’t take the assignment. If the client cannot connect to others (including me), I do not see much hope for change.” Another said that in order to accept an engagement with a narcissistic client: “I need to believe that I can add value and that I will take pleasure in the process of working with the person.” A third said: “I accept that there some levels of narcissistic behavior that cannot be altered” and would not take on a client “if I assess that the client has entrenched behaviors that do not change, or that their version of the facts cannot be shifted.” One acknowledged: “I am very drawn to narcissistic individuals and therefore I would not take a one-on-one coaching engagement with a narcissist.”

## Implications

*The problem is that one man’s egomaniac is another’s visionary and investors have no way of precisely gauging a CEO’s vision or weighing up their egos (Guerrera, 2006).*

### 1. Assessment

In answer to the question “How would you assess if a client has strong narcissistic tendencies?,” the coaches that I interviewed gave me a wide array of suggestions. One coach that I spoke with stressed the need to gather a variety of information from various sources before making a client evaluation. He said that cumulative information about certain behavioral patterns helped him to get a more complete understanding of the person. A number of the other coaches I spoke with expanded upon the interview process that they undertake at the start of a coaching relationship. This allows them to dig a little deeper by asking more personal questions



in order to assess the client and clarify his or her objectives. One coach mentioned his use of the self-portrait and the 360-degree feedback instruments often used at IGLC as useful means to call narcissistic traits to attention: "When I use the self-portrait I pay attention to see what the person draws. If they just feature themselves in the picture and hardly any other people, I suspect that they have a somewhat narcissistic personality. When using a 360-degree feedback instrument, I observe how the individual reacts to positive and negative feedback."

From these discussions with the coaches, I have developed a tentative questionnaire to help coaches assess executives for narcissistic behaviors. Responses to the questions below should help to highlight narcissistic tendencies.

**Questionnaire: Evaluating a client's narcissistic tendencies:**

- Is the individual self-confident and prone to talking about him/herself and his or her achievements?
- Does the individual get bored when talking about other people?
- Is the person self-focused to the point of excluding others?
- Does the person come across as larger than life (i.e. are they charming or charismatic)?
- Does the individual think big and have grandiose (possibly unrealistic) ambitions?
- Are they willing to make risky decisions with seeming ease?
- How important is status for this person?
- Are they driven to get to the top, or to be the best?
- Who does he/she compare him/herself to and associate with?
- Does the individual interact with people at lower levels of the organization, or have a tendency to remain amongst those in the higher echelons?
- What price are they are willing to pay to stay in control or to succeed?
- What is their management style? Is it autocratic or dictatorial in any way?
- Does the company's vision exist independently of the leader's personal goals?
- Is the leader a mentor to others? Has he or she chosen and groomed a successor?

- How hard does the individual work? Do they demand perfection from others? Do they overstretch themselves and their teams?
- Is the person a poor listener? Is the person aware of other people's feelings? How does the person view or describe others?
- Do they praise others and give constructive feedback to peers and subordinates?
- Does the person have a compulsive need to tell others what to do?
- Do they tend to take the credit for work and blame others for poor performance?
- Does the person work well in a team?
- Does he or she include others in the decision making process?
- Does the individual have difficulty seeing anyone's view but their own?
- How do they react to criticism (is the person rigid in his or her views)?
- Does the individual build constructive and trustful relationships?
- Does the person have close friends?
- Does the person's self-confidence alternate with high levels of insecurity?
- Is the person's need for positive reinforcement putting a strain on the environment?
- Does the person lack self-awareness?
- Does the person deny vulnerability?
- Is the person emotionally volatile and irrational?
- Does the individual have different public and private personas?
- Does the person have a black and white view of the world?
- Are they overly sure about what is right and wrong?

*If the majority of the questions are in the affirmative, the interviewer needs to be on guard for a narcissistic personality disorder.*

Diagnosis of dealing with a narcissistic personality disorder is complicated by the fact that many organizations have somewhat narcissistic corporate cultures where self-confidence, self-promotion, a driving work ethic, high standards and perfectionism are traits that contribute to an employee's success. As a result, a coach may find that his or her client has adopted a

narcissistic facade that, when tested, does not translate into genuine personality traits. One coach said that he attempts to identify other, less visible personality traits and leadership attributes among these 'faux' narcissists in order to encourage them to bring a different (less seemingly narcissistic) side of themselves into their work and relationships with others.

According to him:

The reality is that when you scratch the surface, there is a great deal of insecurity. Most people are narcissistic through conformity because they think that that is the way you have to be in organizations. There is the idea that you have to be tough in order to move up. They aren't really narcissistic under the surface. Generally people who appear narcissistic are concerned about appearing weak but would actually benefit from softening their leadership style...I explore to see if there is another side to their personality that they do not show at work because they think it might impact the advancement of their career. Then you can make them understand that it is possible to show empathy and use the full spectrum of their personality in leadership... i often discuss vulnerability as a strength. There is nothing wrong with being human.

## *2. Creating commitment*

According to Maccoby:

Given the large number of narcissists at the helm of corporations today, the challenge facing organizations is to ensure that such leaders do not self-destruct or lead the company to disaster. That can take some doing because it is very hard for narcissists to work through their issues—and virtually impossible for them to do it alone. Narcissists need colleagues and even therapists if they hope to break free from their limitations. But because of their extreme independence and self-protectiveness, it is very difficult to get near them (Maccoby, 2000).

After the challenge of diagnosis, getting an individual with strong narcissistic tendencies to commit to coaching can be another obstacle. Narcissistic people rarely seek help of their

own accord. Typically, they only ask for help when faced with a major life crisis or when their grandiose perceptions of themselves are shaken or shattered in some way. Narcissistic individuals “often do not realize that their behavior is a problem for others and are not concerned about their behavior’s detrimental impact on others if they are aware” (Lubit, 2002, p. 128). For a narcissist, accepting the help from a coach is tantamount to admitting weakness; for someone who focuses their energy on concealing personal imperfections this is a major challenge. Acknowledging vulnerability and accepting dependency on another person is an ability few narcissists have learned since asking for help is a complete contradiction of the defenses they have established over time. According to Szasz:

Every act of conscious learning requires the willingness to suffer an injury to one’s self-esteem. That is why young children, before they are aware of their own self-importance learn so easily; and why older persons, especially if vain or important, cannot learn at all (Szasz, 1973).

Generally, a narcissistic individual will only seek help if they experience enough pain (whether psychic or physical), or if they have been forced to do so by someone else. They have to reach a point when changing established patterns of behavior is less painful than the current state of affairs. What I concluded from the interviews, however, is that the following situations may push a narcissistic individual to seek help:

- Their performance or their pattern of behavior is becoming a notable problem at work
- They have lost their job, position, or have failed in an important task
- They have (severe) interpersonal issues, either at work or in their private life, that become a roadblock to achieving their goals
- Their supervisor or team has requested the coaching
- Their spouse or other significant person has requested the coaching
- They are experiencing illness or physical symptoms of stress or exhaustion
- They are suffering from depression
- They are going through a mid-life crisis or are having difficulty coping with aging

Furthermore, what can foster or hinder the choice of a coach for help, may depend on how coaching is viewed within the organization. The resistance of narcissistic individuals may be less acute if coaching is considered a desirable benefit or a professional perk, rather than a remedial activity—the last resort before getting fired.. Coaching can be positioned in organizations as a necessary tool to attain the goals that the individual strives for.



In addition, the status, seniority and reputation of the coach are also a key factor. Narcissistic people will choose to associate themselves with people that they deem worthy of respect. It may be possible to play on the status of the coach in order to entice the individual into a coaching relationship. The following observation is illustrative of this pattern:

...[T]he narcissistic patient's frequent contemptuous disregard for the physician, who is denigrated in a defensive effort to maintain a sense of superiority and mastery over illness. Only the most senior physician in a prestigious institution is deemed worthy of respect as the frightened patient seeks an external reflection of his or her own fragile grandeur in the doctor. More junior members of the health care team may be the targets of derision as the patient seeks to establish hierarchical dominance in order to counter the shame and fear triggered by illness. (Psych central, n.d.)

One coach said that her status as a medical doctor was her initial point of contact with narcissistic clients. In fact, this was one of the only coaches I spoke to who said that narcissistic clients came to her of their own accord. They would initially come for a medical ailment and subsequently be more willing to address behavioral issues. This coach said that she used her status as a medical doctor to help narcissistic clients feel more comfortable surrendering to the coaching process. Another coach said: “You need to get [the client] a little interested in the

coach: make your stature known, outflank them on an issue, provide value in the form of a novel interpretation, etc. If they value the coach it will be easier to create a working alliance.”

Once a coaching initiative with a narcissistic individual has begun, motivating the person to continue the process can be difficult. Narcissistic individuals tend to shy away from negative feedback and their vulnerable self-esteem may cause them to stop the coaching as soon as they are faced with criticism. Also, as one coach mentioned to me, clients may choose to end the coaching as soon as they have altered their behavior enough to no longer feel any pain: “They may disappear, only to re-appear when another fire needs putting out.”

However, incremental changes can create a positive feedback loop from colleagues, friends and family, which may help to motivate the individual to continue engaging in the coaching process. “Behavior change is important, but what you really aim to create is a positive feedback loop that encourages on-going development. If those around them react positively and give positive feedback to their behavioral changes, they might be inclined to continue the developmental process” (coach interview).

Professional ambition can be used as a lever to encourage the client to change: “[The client] will be quick to understand if the coaching is helping him or her perform better, and if coaching can be used to benefit their performance and career” (coach interview). “Help the client understand that other ways of relating to people might help them be more successful and advance towards achieving their goals” (coach interview). “Catastrophize with the client by showing them the long-term negative effects of their behavior on their own career. Their ambivalence to change may be based on the fact that their behavior has been a key to their success thus far, and the fear that change will impact their success at work” (coach interview).

The coach should try to avoid becoming too invested one way or another, and should give the client the space to decide if they are ready to engage in the coaching process. “Be very clear with yourself, you cannot be manipulative, you should not have an agenda. You need to be independent of them and be able to accept if they decide to invest in coaching or not. They are very sensitive to others needing something from them” (coach interview).

### 3. *Realistic ambitions for change*

Generally, the prognosis for coaching narcissistic individuals depends on the severity of narcissistic traits and the client's motivation to change - be it psychological pain (i.e. separation, divorce, estrangement in the family), negative physical symptoms, aging, a desire to improve performance, or a way to avoid a threat to status, position or influence. A study by Jacalyn Hughes suggests, however, that coaching people with narcissistic tendencies has its limitations:



[T]he prognosis for effecting deep, lasting change in executives with narcissistic personality features is guarded at best. Long-term (4+ years) coaching or therapy is required, and executives must be highly motivated. Coaches who work short term set modest goals, targeting only the most problematic behaviors and relying primarily upon simple behavioral strategies. Changes resulting from short-term coaching are often viewed as superficial, and their sustainability is questionable. Both long-term and short-term coaching efforts are enhanced through systemic interventions (2002, p. 71).

It is important to have realistic expectations. Most narcissistic behaviors and defense mechanisms are very well ingrained and resistant to change. The amount of time that needs to be invested, and the level of trust that needs to be established with the client, is likely to determine the extent to which change is possible. As one coach observed concerning his ambitions to be effective: “The process for this kind of individual tends to be longer because of an underlying fragility and a lack of self insight. You have to generate awareness first. It takes them time to trust the coach’s interpretation of reality” (coach interview). Change takes time, and the coach should remain patient about first establishing a solid relationship with the client.

The scope of coaching can vary depending on the length of time, the depth of the client's objectives, and the severity of the problem. For example, West and Milan (2001) outline three types of coaching in their book, *The Reflecting Glass*: These are skills coaching (finite and concrete goals), performance coaching (focus on overall performance), and development coaching (non-directive and longer-term engagements). The design of the engagement needs to vary according to the client. According to them,, small changes can make a difference even if they do not delve into the chronic underlying problems. A number of the coaches agree: "I would keep my ambitions for change manageable. I would make small behavior modifications that make his or her relationships with others easier" (coach interviews).

#### 4. *Establishing the rules of the game*

Several coaches that I interviewed emphasized the importance of establishing clear rules and boundaries at the outset of a coaching engagement. They reported that narcissistic clients will initially tend to try and take control of the coaching process and that it is important for the coach to subtly remain in control of the



situation. According to one coach: "Do not see the client as more powerful or let the narcissistic client get the upper hand. Stay in charge of the process". Another said: "Your energy level should be high to stay in control."

One coach described his method for establishing a strong position starting from the initial interviews with a client: "I go through three interviews before taking an assignment. I challenge the individual: 'I do not quite understand why you want to be coached?' This type of question destabilizes them, because you imply that you are interviewing them, and that the decision to work together is taken from both sides. It also forces the client to really think about their objectives. In the third interview, I get into to the deeper issues, and then I am ready to decide whether or not to work with the client." Another coach I spoke with expanded on this subject: "The first interaction is very important. You must be very clear about who sets the rules. [The

client] may want to establish who is in charge by trying to control the schedule of appointments. If I manage to control the start of the process, the rest of the process generally goes quite well. If not, the [coaching] process can require quite a bit of energy. They will not surrender unless they know that you are in control.”

### *5. Creating transitional space*

Most of the coaches I spoke with underlined the importance of creating a working alliance with the client that is based on trust. One of the coaches said: “You are simultaneously deconstructing and then reconstructing their way of viewing the world and of behaving, that is why trust is so important. In order to have a real impact you need to develop a deep relationship with the client.” Trust is a means by which the individual can begin to show his or her vulnerability and accept another person’s perspective.

One coach I spoke with introduced the notion of trust in relation to control and their view of the coach as a containing force: “They need a safe space in which tensions can be released. They have suffered a lot of trauma and insecurity. They will test you to make sure that you are strong enough person before they open up. The tests may take the form of conscious or unconscious power games. You should try to be relaxed when they test you.”



The client should be given the room to access, acknowledge, and share their true feelings in the safe environment of the coaching context. Before a client can empathize with others he or she needs to begin empathizing with him or herself. The process of accepting vulnerability and expressing feelings in an authentic way can help the client become more in tune with him/herself and with others. Once a narcissistic client is ready to admit to his or her weakness, the coach can help them re-build feelings of self-esteem and develop strategies to deal with the issues involved: “Once trust is established you can start to portray an accurate mirror of the

person, while making it clear that you accept them for their authentic self.” Develop strategies for the client to manage emotions under stress and practice these strategies within the coaching setting.

### *6. Transferential observations*

The concept of transference-countertransference is invaluable in order to understand seemingly irrational behavior. The coach should help the narcissistic client examine their behavior, the beliefs that motivate their behavior, and seek the source of these deep-seated beliefs often within the person’s family. For example, Kets de Vries and Miller, argue that:



Mirroring executives are narcissistic; they have a grandiose sense of self-importance and uniqueness and are desperately in search of praise. Those with whom they interact are viewed, at a deeper level, as the parents who were never empathetic enough, who never recognized how the child really felt. These executives are still in search of mirroring parents; they crave constant attention and admiration (Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984, p. 84).

The narcissistic inability to construct an accurate view of him/herself may have its roots in parental overindulgence, excessive praise unbalanced by reliable feedback, unpredictable or unreliable parenting, a lack of appropriate mirroring or emotional abuse. According to another coach that I interviewed:

Try to understand the potential origins of the narcissistic behavior. Explore the person’s childhood for signs of neglect, abandonment. Was he or she allowed to show vulnerability? Did he or she have to be ‘perfect’, play a role, be an over-achiever to gain

parents' love? What is the concept of vulnerability that they developed as a child? (coach interview).

Elucidation of the psychological underpinnings of behavior may help the client better understand how their belief system is different from those around them, and how it impacts him/herself and others. One coach I spoke with said: "I know that I am adding value if I can illuminate their behavior in some shape or form."

Clients can be surprised when a coach draws the personal past into discussions about the professional present. The coach would do well to explain the theory of transference and show how repeating patterns established in early childhood may not be beneficial in the present. Self-awareness represents the freedom to disengage from potentially destructive patterns. Searching for clues in the past to explain behavior in the present is work that ventures into the domain of therapy. The coach can engage in this type of detective work as long as he or she remains conscious of the boundaries of professional coaching.

### *7. Generating interpersonal awareness*

Education and feedback about the negative effects of their narcissistic behavior on others and how emotional distancing can affect their career is key to helping the client address difficult interpersonal relationships. The coach can then help them to devise strategies for managing their destructive narcissistic traits. A deeper interpersonal awareness will hopefully reduce the client's tendency to see the world in black and white, soften their suspicious nature, take constructive feedback on board and learn.

Below are some techniques for exploring and improving the client's interpersonal relationships :

- "Establish bridges between past relationships and the present relationships at work" (coach interview). Try to highlight the parallels between past and present as a way to single out and discuss transference behaviors. This may help the individual gain insight about the reasons for their behavior at work and the reactions of others.
- "There is always the option of bringing a person (colleague, spouse, parent) into the room symbolically" (coach interview).

- Dissect and explain feedback from others. Work on the client's ability to be more empathetic towards others.
- Create an honest yet supportive interchange with the client that hopefully gives them an alternative example of interpersonal behavior.



### *8. Resistance judo*

Millon, in the context of defensive reactions, made the following observation:

Setting limits without resorting to an accusatory or attacking stance can prove to be invaluable aids in working with these patients. Great patience and equanimity are required to establish the spirit of genuine confidence and respect without which the chances of achieving reconstructive personality change become even slimmer (Millon, 1996, p. 427).

As discussed previously, in relation to the differences between Kohut and Kernberg's approaches to treating NPD, there is much debate between those who believe that empathy is the cornerstone of working with narcissistic clients and those who favor confrontation. One coach that I spoke with said that it was important to "show appreciation for the individual, and

not to seek out conflict with the client". In contrast, others said: "They won't respect the coach if they are not challenged." "Do not shy away from speaking about the real issues. Tough empathy." As a general rule, the coaches I spoke with all said that working with narcissistic clients required a delicate balancing act between the need to establish trust by being empathetic and the need to challenge the client's view of reality.

As a general rule, summarizing the observations of the coaches I interviewed, in order to create a working relationship and to provide relevant insights, it was important to "try to understand the mental model of the client and the way that they see the world." One coach even said, "You have to be a little crazy yourself" in order to empathize with the client. To convey this empathetic approach one coach underlined the need to: "be very specific and accurate with your listening and rephrasing." A couple of coaches also said that coaches should take care to "fight the desire to reject the narcissist because of their behavior" and "try to be empathetic and take care of their emotional needs." There was general agreement, however, that a non-threatening, empathetic and positive approach was the best way to diffuse the defensive behaviors that block the client from learning. A client who is defensive, or pushed to protect him or herself, will not easily progress. Feedback should be presented constructively and that it is important to protect the client's feelings of self-respect through praise and recognition without re-enforcing their grandiose misconceptions of themselves. To quote one of the coaches: "Never crush the client. Constructively encourage good behavior."

One coach noted that "Narcissistic people tend to be suspicious by nature" and for this reason it may be necessary to use certain methods for putting the client at ease. This coach found that "Business language, words like 'process' or 'strategy' help the client feel more comfortable." She also mentioned use of humor as a way to deflect conflict, create a more relaxed atmosphere, and to subtly 'push back' without seeming critical towards the client. One coach revealed that "My style is not hard or pushy. I am not going to get in an aggressive mode with the client. But I do push at times, to test I'll say, 'That doesn't make sense. Let's get back to that and discuss it again'." In essence, this coach attempted to challenge the individual through patience, curiosity and requests for clarification. He went on to say: "I try to get the client out of their comfort zone and get them on board by setting up a few narcissistic injuries. Then I work with the client's defensive reactions. But timing matters: you need to have developed a level of

trust first. If confronted too early, they can be prone to narcissistic rage and a rejection of the coaching. It is not easy to re-gain their trust afterwards: they distance themselves from the process or dismiss it.”

“A narcissist cannot accept that anyone sees behind the mask of perfection. It is like dying because they have built the mask to survive” (coach interview).

Defensive behavior can result from a narcissistic client feeling threatened in some way during the coaching process. When defense mechanisms are triggered, an empathetic approach may help to diffuse the client’s anxiety. A timely interpretation of the client’s defenses will help elucidate their behavior through tangible examples that have occurred in the coaching session. This type of insight-oriented approach can increase a client’s awareness of how their defenses reduce their possibilities for more meaningful attachments with others.

As mentioned, timing is important. If the client is too emotional, he or she will not be disposed to receiving feedback about their behavior. According to Kets de Vries:

Skilled, aware coaches/consultants...do not confront their client with their projections in an abrasive manner, nor do they scold him or her for thinking or acting inappropriately. Instead, they realize the power of resistance judo, not tackling conflicted issues head-on but reframing them. They also know the importance of timing: they “strike when the iron is cold”— that is, when their client is prepared to hear what they have to say (Kets de Vries, M., 2007, p. 26).



Below is a short list of the defensive behaviors that the coaches I spoke with described from their work with narcissistic clients:

- Not facilitating the coaching process
- Re-defining the coaching contract, taking control over the process
- Undermining the purpose of the coaching or the coach
- Using the coach as a sparring partner
- Dominating meetings (speaking first and often, or need to have the final say)
- Lack of disclosure
- Hiding the truth, lying about the facts
- Re-writing history, distorting and restructuring past events, making the story fit their view of the world in order to avoid narcissistic injury
- Complying without engaging, adopting a posture of aloofness or pseudo-compliance
- Responding defensively to criticism, either by attacking or subtly undermining
- Blaming behavior
- Rationalizing poor performance

### *9. Reality testing*

“One of the constraints in dealing with NPD in one-to-one sessions is that you really only have the client’s word for what is going on” (coach interview). For the narcissistic executive, reality testing is important as their view of the world may be particularly influenced by their need for attention. A coach intending to work with a narcissistic executive should find a way to establish his or her own view of the client’s professional situation and relationships. It is important for a coach to test the validity of the client’s statements and his or her view of reality.

Understanding the broader context of a client’s work situation will help the coach to gauge the true source of problems and areas for development. It will also allow the coach to challenge the client with an alternative view of reality and undeniable facts. It can also be a



means by which the coach involves others in the development process, builds relationship bridges, and encourages others to help the client improve his or her performance.

The coaches I interviewed suggested the following information-gathering approaches in order to gain insight and another perspective on the potential issues that a client faces in relation to their work:

- Through interviews, compare a client's description of him/herself with the description from those who work with him/her (superior, peers, subordinates).
- Compare the work evaluations with those of a more personal nature. Conversations with people close to the client such as a spouse, a family member or a friend may help to get a more rounded picture of an individual.
- Use 360-degree questionnaires to compare self vs. others' evaluations and gauge true performance.
- Shadow the client in the workplace for a short period of time. Shadowing the client during his/her various interactions at work may be eye-opening with regards to the behavior of the client and those around him or her. Shadowing can provide real-life situations for the coach to replay with the client in order to help the individual modify behavior in a practical way.
- During the process of coaching, cross check actual vs. stated change by discussing with members of the client's team.

### *10. Group coaching*

Group coaching can be a powerful setting for narcissistic individuals to receive a variety of peer feedback. "The group coaching environment has great potential for narcissistic personalities to counterbalance their tendencies, especially when one person in the group works at a level higher in the



organization. Group coaching can be very helpful to give the client another perspective” (coach interview).

As in one-to-one coaching, the narcissistic client may become defensive when given negative feedback. Group coaching, however, is a less controlled environment and the coach runs the risk that other members of the group may not be adept at positively re-framing their comments. “It is important that the group does not reject the narcissistic individual. Some praise and recognition may be able to draw in the individual so that they contribute to or at least not damage the group process” (coach interview).

Narcissistic clients can be intimidated by group coaching and “may be more willing to open up in a one-on-one setting” (coach interview). Or they may be too focused on getting the group to feed their narcissistic need for admiration” (coach interview). Certainly, in a group coaching engagement, a narcissistic client can be demanding of attention, ego-centered in discussions, condescending in their advice to others, or can withdraw altogether. It is important that the coach does not allow the narcissist to take up too much space in the process. “Narcissistic individuals can withdraw from the process if they cannot dominate the group and are not in their position of comfort. But by doing this, they may show another side of themselves that the group can bring to awareness and encourage” (coach interview).

The coaches that I interviewed stressed the importance of using the group as a powerful vehicle for feedback. They also said that a narcissistic client is inclined to divide a group into those who “align themselves with the narcissist and those who challenge him or her” (coach interview). At times, other members of the group may buy into a narcissistic group member’s view of the world or they may be too intimidated to speak their minds and offer honest feedback. “In some cases, the group idealizes or fears the narcissist, in which case it is very difficult to break through as the group won’t give any feedback” (coach interview).

By letting the group do the difficult work of providing realistic feedback, the coach can remain a trusted ally on whom the narcissistic individual can depend. “Diffuse the relationship between the coach and client by bringing in other members of the group. Do not let the relationship with the coach become antagonistic” (coach interview). “Do not corner the individual or put them on the spot. If you do, the group will side with and protect the narcissist” (coach interview). One coach said that she will not only use the group in order to

challenge the narcissist, but “If [she] sensed some kind of counter-transference, [she] would step back and let the group take over.”

The relationships of the narcissist within the group are examples of interpersonal exchanges that can be used to illuminate patterns of behavior. Often, some kind of parallel processes take place, which gives the coach material to point out dysfunctional behavior patterns. If the group and the coach are able to create a safe transitional environment, the coaching sessions can provide a real training ground for interpersonal behavioral changes, especially due to the variety of individuals in the group with whom the individual must interact. For example,

The empathy expressed by the other participants, the appreciation that other people truly care, encourages the person to take greater control of his or her life.... Using this very subtle, non-confrontational intervention technique, clients become ready to re-evaluate their perceptions and more prepared to discuss the pros and cons of change. (Kets de Vries & Engellau, 2008, pp. 27-28)

### *11. Adjusting goalposts*

Once the process of generating self and interpersonal awareness has begun, help the client explore their future goals. It may be useful to discuss their motivations and drive for success and achievement at work. Clarifying these motivations may help the client consciously decide what sacrifices they are willing to make in order to attain their goals rather than over-extending themselves and others unwittingly.



The coach may also choose to encourage the client to explore other facets of their personality that they rarely access due to an unrelenting work ethic and desire for success. The discovery of different kinds of talents and goals may help to improve the client's work/life balance and self-esteem.

## Organizational safeguards

Regardless of the advisability of placing narcissists in leadership positions, the fact is that narcissists head numerous countries, companies, and other organizations. Because of this, “the challenge...is to ensure that such leaders do not self-destruct or lead...to disaster” (Maccoby, 2003, p. 71).

In addition to one-on-one or group coaching to help narcissistic executives, an organization can employ other (complimentary) safeguards to mitigate the negative effects of narcissistic leaders. Below is a short list of ideas from various scholars on the subject (plus some advice that came from my interviews):

- Organizations can attempt to identify narcissists during employee selection if there exists an awareness within the organization of the vicissitudes of narcissism. The problem with identifying narcissists early on in their career is that narcissistic behavior may be less pronounced. Still, there will be indications. Individual appraisals and 360-degree feedback may also help to spot narcissistic tendencies. Early identification of narcissistic behavior patterns can serve as a preventative measure against possible negative effects on the organization. Generally, it is easier to work with narcissistic individuals before they have attained great power; they are more amenable to change as they have not yet reinforced their belief of greatness. Furthermore, a number of other steps can be taken:
- An effective accountability structure: a system that keeps the leader in check and aligned with organizational objectives. For example, a supervisory board can play an important role; a team culture may ferret out narcissists as they are not good team player; the distribution of decision-making power: or an agreement regarding decision-making parameters (Chandler, 2009, Kets de Vries, 1997).
- The regular assessment of each leader’s strengths and weaknesses, with opportunities for feedback, and the option of a coach (Chandler, 2009, Kets de Vries, 1997).

- A support system to ensure that the leader does not become emotionally isolated or distanced from reality, for example via a team of peers (not yes-men), ongoing training and development, systems of mentoring, etc (Chandler, 2009).
- Executive training to prompt the individual “to engage in a form of self-renewal” and avert potentially destructive behaviors (Kets de Vries & Engellau, n.d., p. 24).
- Reduce the narcissist’s scope of influence within the organization to avoid their interaction with inexperienced or otherwise vulnerable employees (Kets de Vries & Miller, 1997). Executive training to prompt the individual “to engage in a form of self-renewal” and avert potentially destructive behaviors (Kets de Vries & Engellau, 2008, p. 24).
- Help the surrounding team to cope with the narcissist’s behavior.
- Reduce the narcissist’s scope of influence within the organization to avoid their interaction with inexperienced or otherwise vulnerable employees (Kets de Vries & Miller, 1997).

### Limitations of the study

Although all the coaches interviewed had had other forms of education (and indeed their diverse backgrounds enriched our discussions), their particular orientation to coaching (given the fact that many had followed the CCC program--which has a strong clinical orientation) may have limited the scope of this exploratory research project. To counter-balance the findings, interviews would need to be undertaken with a larger, more diverse sample of coaches who have experienced other coaching training and methodologies.



## CONCLUSION

*Regardless of whether the self-enhancer proves to be an asset or a liability in the workplace, we believe that it is important that organizations identify and take such individuals into account. For better or for worse, organizations cannot afford to overlook them (Robins & Paulhus, 2001, p. 212).*

Narcissists continue to play an important role within organizations. Their grandiose visions, high standards and work ethic can have real positive effects on the companies in which they work. (Although according to Chatterjee and Hambrick, companies headed by narcissistic and non-narcissistic leaders are equally profitable.) Organizations must learn to mitigate the negative aspects of narcissistic leaders and avoid the dramatic downfalls to which they are prone. Companies should identify narcissists, manage their professional development and ascertain the alignment of their goals with those of the business. Through coaching, organizations may help such executives become more receptive to feedback, and manage weaknesses before they become a problem. As Gladeana McMahon, the Chair of the UK Association for Coaching, says:

If you monitor an individual you can head the problems off and find ways of keeping the benefits of that person's talents. At worst you can plan an exit strategy before things go wrong. Narcissism, like everything else, has a place but a place (that is) best controlled.  
(n.d.)

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