

"NARCISSISM AND LEADERSHIP :  
AN OBJECT RELATIONS PERSPECTIVE"

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Human Relations, forthcoming.

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## ABSTRACT

Having been largely unknown as a clinical entity, the narcissistic personality has recently come into the limelight. It is argued that one critical component in the orientation of leaders is the quality and intensity of their narcissistic development. In this paper the relationship between narcissism and leadership is explored. Using concepts taken from psychoanalytic object relations theory three narcissistic configurations found among leaders are presented: reactive, self-deceptive and constructive. Their etiology, symptomatology and defensive structure is discussed. The influence of each configuration on interpersonal relations and decision making is examined in a managerial context.

NARCISSISM AND LEADERSHIP:  
AN OBJECT RELATIONS PERSPECTIVE

If each of us were to confess his most secret desire, the one that inspires all his deeds and designs, he would say, "I want to be praised." Yet none will bring himself to do so, for it is less dishonorable to commit a crime than to announce such a pitiful and humiliating weakness arising from a sense of loneliness and insecurity, a feeling that afflicts both the fortunate and the unfortunate with equal intensity. No one is sure of who he is, or certain of what he does. Full as we may be of our own worth, we are gnawed by anxiety and, to overcome it, ask only to be mistaken in our doubt, to receive approval from no matter where or no matter whom ...

Corian - Desir et honneur de la gloire

When we think of leaders and leadership, a wide array of images come to mind, often conveying emotional reactions. Some leaders elicit thoughts of strength, power, and care; others recall the forces of terror, malevolence, and destructiveness. Our ubiquitous judgments of a leader's degree of "goodness" or evil are reflected in epithets such as Akbar the Great or Ivan the Terrible. We shall attempt in this paper to show that leadership effectiveness and dysfunction can often be explained by the narcissistic dispositions of the leader. We shall discuss and contrast three types of leaders and probe the etiology and consequences of their narcissistic orientations. The task will be to show the relationships between the intrapsychic development of the leader (using an object relations perspective), his subsequent narcissistic orientation, and the concrete manifestations of this orientation in his leadership behavior. In no sense will our method be positivistic. We draw upon our experiences as practicing psychoanalysts, professors of management, and management consultants to demonstrate the linkages between early developmental

experiences, types of narcissism, and leader behavior, (Kets de Vries, 1980). The framework we shall employ is based on our clinical experiences with individuals who play a leadership role. It therefore goes without saying that our conclusions are to be viewed more as hypotheses than findings.

## LEADERS AND FOLLOWERS

The dynamics of leadership have remained very much a puzzle. We still know little about what makes a good leader. But this is not for any lack of research on the subject. The late scholar of leadership, Ralph Stogdill, made the discouraging statement that "there are almost as many definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept" (Bass, 1981, p. 7). Stogdill in his Handbook of Leadership reviewed seventy-two definitions proposed by scholars between 1902 and 1967. But this lack of consensus has not discouraged researchers. The proliferation of literature on leadership is amply reflected by the increase in the number of articles listed in the Handbook. While the old (1974) Handbook referred to only three thousand studies, seven years later the number exceeded five thousand. Unfortunately, as Mintzberg (1982) has suggested, the popularity of leadership research was not equaled by its relevance. He states: "Even the titles of the theories - new no less than old - reveal the nature of their content - plodding and detached. Since the beginning, there seems to have been a steady convergence on the peripheral at best, and all too often on the trivial and the irrelevant" (p. 250). Mintzberg was not alone in criticizing excessive abstraction in the study of leadership. Bass, in his new edition of the Handbook of Leadership, noted that "if a theory of leadership is to be used for

diagnosis, training, and development, it must be grounded theory - grounded in the concepts and assumptions acceptable to and used by managers, officials, and emergent leaders" (1981, p. 26).

Competing theories abound. We find great men theories, trait theories, environmental theories, person-situation theories, interaction-expectation theories, humanistic theories, exchange theories, behavioral theories and perceptual and cognitive theories. This confused state of affairs caused some scholars to abandon the subject altogether and focus on more specific problems such as power or motivation. Other researchers, however, are less pessimistic, anticipating that the wealth of results constitutes some basis for a cogent theory of leadership. They attempt to escape the labyrinth of contradictory findings and theories of leadership by proposing a contingency paradigm (House and Baetz, 1979). They try to explain the discrepancies in the research, noting that "leadership has an effect under some conditions and not under others and also that the causal relationships between leader behavior and commonly accepted criteria of organizational performance are two way" (p. 348). But in spite of its real merits one wonders if this contingency paradigm will by itself be sufficient to breathe new life into this often discredited field.

Far richer characterizations of leadership are needed; those taking into consideration both its cognitive and affective dimensions. These are suggested by the psychoanalytic and psychiatric literature. Here, the "inner world" of leaders is analysed and their personalities and characters are related to their behavior and situation. This, of course, is a time-honored practise among many historians and biographers. Research that aims to decipher intrapsychic thought processes and resulting actions thus involves the study of "psycho-political drama" (Zaleznik and Kets de Vries,

1975) that relates managerial personality both to role behavior and to the administrative setting.

What most leaders seem to have in common is the ability to reawaken primitive emotions in their followers. Leaders, particularly those who are charismatic, are masters at manipulating certain symbols. Followers, when under the "spell" of certain types of leaders, often feel powerfully grandiose and proud, or helpless and acutely dependent. Max Weber (1947), used the term charisma to elucidate this strange influence of some leaders over followers which, for him, consisted of:

a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them, the individual concerned is treated as a leader" (pp. 358-359).

We don't have to go so far as Weber, but whatever strange "quality" leaders possess, some have the power to induce regressive behavior among their followers. They have the uncanny ability to exploit, not necessarily in full awareness, the unconscious feelings of their subordinates. In this process, some followers may try to embrace an idealized, "omnipotent" leader--one who will fulfill their dependency needs. This may lead to the destructive suspension of their own rational faculties. The mesmerizing influence of some leaders may also cause the common good to be sacrificed for personal folly. Rituals of adulation can supplant task-related activity. Form tends to dominate substance, as the followers become pawns to be manipulated, like the gullible spectators in Andersen's "The Emperor's New Clothes." Thus functional requirements pertaining to common purposes or ideals may be neglected in favor of fleeting narcissistic gratifications.

In spite of the regressive potential of some leaders, there are others who transcend petty concerns, who are able to create a climate of constructiveness, involvement and care, who engender initiative and spur creative endeavors. This is the kind of person Zaleznik (1977) had in mind when he said:

One often hears leaders referred to in adjectives rich in emotional content. Leaders attract strong feelings of identity and difference, or of love and hate. Human relations in leader-dominated structures often appear turbulent, intense, and at times even disorganized. Such an atmosphere intensifies individual motivation and often produces unanticipated outcomes (p.74).

James MacGregor Burns (1978) probably had similar thoughts when he compared transactional with transforming leadership. While the first type of leader motivates followers by exchanging rewards for services rendered, whether economic, political, or psychological, the latter type of leader recognizes and exploits an existing need or demand of a potential follower. But, beyond that, the successful transforming leader looks for potential motives in followers, seeks to satisfy their higher needs, and engages their full potential. The result of the most adept transforming leadership is a relationship of mutual stimulation and elevation that converts followers into leaders and leaders into moral agents (p. 4).

To conclude, leadership can be pathologically destructive or most inspiring. But what is it about the leaders themselves that makes it so? What differentiates styles of leadership? Our theme will be that the degree of narcissism - and its genesis - stand central.

#### THE NARCISSISTIC DISPOSITION

In studying leaders we soon recognized that one critical component of their orientation is the quality and intensity of their narcissistic development. If there is one personality constellation to which leaders

tend to gravitate it is the narcissistic one. Freud, in his study of the relationship between leaders and followers already confirmed this, stating that "the leader himself need love no one else, he may be of a masterful nature, absolutely narcissistic, self-confident and independent" (1921, pp 123-124). Later he introduced a narcissistic libidinal personality, an individual whose main interest is self-preservation, who is independent and impossible to intimidate. Significant aggressiveness is possible, which sometimes manifests itself in a constant readiness for activity. People belonging to this type impress others as being strong personalities. They are especially suited to act as moral or ideological bastions for others, in short, as true leaders (Freud, 1931 p.21).

In a similar context Wilhelm Reich referred to a phallic-narcissistic character which he portrayed as being "self-confident, often arrogant, elastic, vigorous and often impressive... The outspoken types tend to achieve leading positions in life and resent subordination ... If their vanity is hurt, they react either with cold reserve, deep depression or lively aggression" (1949, p.201).

Narcissism became a particularly important topic for study when new developments in psychoanalytic theory occurred. The introduction of object relations theory and self-psychology was especially fruitful. The most important revisions concerning narcissism were formulated by clinicians such as Otto Kernberg (1975) and Heinz Kohut (1971).(1)

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1. To be more precise, Kernberg de-emphasized the notion of developmental arrest or fixation at early narcissistic stages of childhood. Instead, he stressed how pathological forms of self-love and object love derived from pathological object relations—that is, unsatisfactory relationships with important others. Kohut argued that narcissistic personalities remain "fixated on archaic grandiose self-configurations and/or on archaic, overestimated, narcissistically cathected objects" (1971, p.3) . According to him, pathology in narcissistic development is a result of a failure to integrate the major spheres of self-maturation, which he calls the "grandiose self" and the "idealised parent image". These somewhat arcane concepts are explained later in the paper.

For the purpose of this paper we will not dwell on the theoretical controversies about whether narcissism is a result mainly of developmental arrest or regression, or whether it possesses its own developmental lines. Our aim is to explore the relationships between narcissism and leadership, a connection recognized by both Kernberg and Kohut. For example, Kernberg states that "because narcissistic personalities are often driven by intense needs for power and prestige to assume positions of authority and leadership, individuals with such characteristics are found rather frequently in top leadership positions" (1979, p.33). Kohut, in focusing on leaders as objects of identification, mentions that "certain types of narcissistically fixated personalities with their apparently absolute self-confidence and certainty lend themselves specifically to this role" (1971, p.316).

Narcissism is often the driving force behind the desire to obtain a leadership position. Perhaps individuals with strong narcissistic personality features are more willing to undertake the arduous process of attaining a position of power. A central theme of our discussion will be that the kind of behavior we encounter in a leader will be likely to reflect the nature and degree of his narcissistic tendencies.

Although the narcissistic type of personality has long been recognized, only recently has it come under critical scrutiny. For example, the latest version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM III, American Psychiatric Association, 1980), lists a large number of criteria to describe narcissistic personality disorders. There are overtones of mental illness and impairment of functioning: symptoms include extremes of grandiosity, exploitativeness, exhibitionism, and so on. Many of these characteristics are also applicable, albeit in

smaller measure, to narcissistic individuals who adopt a more "normal" mode of functioning.

Narcissists feel they must rely on themselves rather than on others for the gratification of life's needs. They live with the assumption that they cannot reliably depend on anyone's love or loyalty. They pretend to be self-sufficient, but in the depth of their beings they experience a sense of deprivation and emptiness. To cope with these feelings - and, perhaps, as a cover for their insecurity - narcissists become preoccupied with establishing their adequacy, power, beauty, status, prestige, and superiority. At the same time narcissists expect others to accept the high esteem in which they hold themselves, and to cater to their needs. What is striking in the behavior of these people is their interpersonal exploitativeness. Narcissists live under the illusion that they are entitled to be served; that their own wishes take precedence over those of others. They think that they deserve special consideration in life.

It must be emphasized, however, that these characteristics occur with different degrees of intensity. A certain dose of narcissism is necessary to function effectively. We all show signs of narcissistic behavior. Among individuals who possess only limited narcissistic tendencies, we find those who are very talented and capable of making great contributions to society. Those who gravitate toward the extremes, however, give narcissism its pejorative reputation. Here we find excesses of rigidity, narrowness, resistance, and discomfort in dealing with the external environment. The managerial implications of narcissism can be both dramatic and crucial.

## THREE TYPES OF NARCISSISM: ETIOLOGY, DEFENSES, AND MANIFESTATIONS

We shall proceed to discuss three types of narcissistic orientations beginning with the most pernicious or pathological and proceeding toward the more adaptive or functional: these we shall call reactive, self-deceptive and constructive. We will first discuss the general etiology and common defenses of these types, using an object relations perspective. We shall then present a discussion of the behavioral manifestations of the types in a leadership situation. Each type is based on examples from our clinical experiences which confirm how executives with different formative backgrounds manifest narcissistic behavior in various leadership situations. Table 1 summarizes our major findings for each of the three types.

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### Object Relations and the Etiology of Narcissism

Leaders may be said to occupy different positions on a spectrum ranging from healthy narcissism to pathology. We are by no means dealing with distinct categories. The factors that distinguish between health and dysfunction are the intrapsychic and interpersonal dynamics of the leader.

Over time, most people develop relatively stable ways of representing the experiences of themselves and others. These psychic representations in one's private inner world are known as internal objects; they are accumulated perceptions. They are composed of fantasies, ideals, thoughts, and images which create a kind of cognitive map of the world (Klein, 1948; Fairbairn, 1952; Jacobson, 1964; Guntrip, 1969; Mahler et al., 1975; Kernberg, 1976). The term "object relations" thus refers to theories, or

TABLE 1  
"Ideal" Varieties of Narcissism

	Reactive	Self-Deceptive	Constructive
<u>Early Object Relations</u> (Etiology)	Rejecting, irresponsible parenting Absence of secure attachment	Overburdening parenting Absence of secure attachment	"Good enough" care Sense of acceptance
<u>Defense Reactions</u>	Pervasive  Severe Frequent	Splitting  Projective identification Idealization/Devaluation	Rare  Mild Infrequent
	Exploitativeness	Manipulation	
<u>Symptomatology</u>	Exhibitionism Grandiosity Ruthlessness Coldness Entitlement (want to dominate)	Lack of Empathy Machiavellianism Fear of Failure "Ideal Hungry" Preoccupation with own needs (want to be loved)	Sense of Humor Creativity Self-confidence Ambition Energy Stubbornness Pride (want to achieve)
<u>Manifestation in Organizational Functioning</u>			
a) Leadership	Transforming Orientation  Expelling Mode To tolerate Only Sycophants  Cruel Task-Master Ignore Subordinates' Needs Enrages by Criticism	Transactional Orientation  Binding Mode Prefer Non-Critical Subordinates  Diplomatic Instrumental consideration of Subordinates Hurt by Criticism	Transforming/Transactional Orientation Reciprocal Mode Meritocratic  Inspirational Mentor Role  Learns from Criticism
b) Decision-Making	Major, risk-laden, spectacular projects Consults no one Crushes opponents Uses scapegoats Never admits defeat	Conservative, risk averse, overcautious consults too many Lacks resolve	Consultative in information gathering-independent in decision making Inner directed

aspects of theories, concerned with exploring the relationships between real, external people, the mental images retained of these people, and the significance of these mental residues for psychic functioning (Greenberg and Mitchell, 1983). Our interactions with actual people depend not only on how we view them, but also on our views of internal others. These psychic representations profoundly influence our affective states as well as our behaviour. Good internal objects have a generative and restorative function, and serve as a source of sustenance in dealing with life's adversities. They constitute the underpinnings of healthy functioning. But in the absence of good internal objects, various dysfunctions accrue. Therein lies the genesis of pathological narcissism. Naturally, the earliest "objects" are the parents whose nurturing gives rise to different kinds of "internal worlds." Since parents are not always consistent in dealing with their children, this world can be highly complex and turbulent. We shall proceed to discuss the etiology or early object relations of three types of narcissistic leaders.

Reactive Narcissism - In describing messianic and charismatic leaders, Kohut (1971) argues that such leaders suffer from a pathology of narcissistic development. He attributes it to their failure during early childhood to integrate two important spheres of the self, namely, the grandiose self and the idealized parental image (Kohut, 1978, p.826). The first construct refers to early feelings of grandiose omnipotence - when a child wishes to display his evolving capabilities and wants to be admired for it. The second construct applies to the equally illusory wishes about the idealized powers attributed to the parents, the desire to experience a

sense of merger with an idealized person. Typically, the child's "I am perfect and you admire me," gradually changes into "You are perfect and I am part of you."

Clinical studies indicate that these early experiences which are a part of everyone's maturation, become mitigated and neutralized through phase-appropriate development (Winnicott, 1975). By this process the child is gradually able to reduce frustration from the inevitable failures of parents to live up to his or her archaic expectations, and through experience, comes gradually to understand the difference between the ideal of perfection and just being good enough. He or she learns that the parent is neither completely good nor completely bad. A more balanced and integrated image of the parent is internalized to make for a more realistic appreciation. This fusion of originally split "good and bad" objects is said to be essential for the development of trust in the permanence, "constancy" or reliability of the parental figures (Klein, 1948). In turn, this early success in creating secure interpersonal attachments makes for confident self-esteem and for stable relationships. Kohut (1971) calls this a process of "transmuting internalization." He believes it to be the basis of the development of a permanent and durable psychic structure.

Unfortunately, phase-appropriate development does not always occur. Parental behavior may be experienced as cold and unempathic, even at the earliest stage of development. Parents might not be sufficiently sensitive to the needs of the growing child. In these cases, children acquire a defective sense of self and are unable to maintain a stable level of self-esteem. Consequently, childhood needs are not modified or neutralized, but continue to prevail. This, in turn, results in a persistent longing and a search for narcissistic recognition throughout adulthood. The stage is thus set for "reactive" narcissism. In a classic

article, Kohut and Wolf (1978) refer to the understimulated and fragmented self that results from too few stimulating and integrating parental responses during childhood.

The legacy for the child of such deficient interactions may be a lingering sense of inadequacy. To cope with such feelings some individuals create for themselves a self-image of "specialness." This can be viewed as a compensatory, reactive refuge against an ever-present feeling of never having been loved by the parent. The illusion of uniqueness will vitally affect how the individual deals with his external environment. Any discrepancies between capacities and wants are likely to contribute to anxiety and to impaired reality testing--the inability to distinguish wish from perception--or, in other words, "inside" from "outside." Individuals with this "reactive" kind of orientation will frequently distort outside events to manage anxiety and to prevent a sense of loss and disappointment. If they are in a position of leadership this can have grave consequences. Reactive narcissism caused by emotionally unresponsive, rejecting parents is the severest type. This will become obvious from our discussion of defenses and symptoms.

In making these inferences, we should bear in mind that early experiences in themselves rarely have a direct impact on adult functioning. There are many mediating experiences during one's life. Early experiences do, however, play a substantial role in shaping the core personality--which influences the kind of environment sought out by the individual. This has an effect on experience and, in turn, will influence personality. We are thus talking about an interactive cycle of personality, behavior, and situation (Erikson, 1963; McKinley Runyan, 1982).

Self-Deceptive Narcissism - We often find a second type of

narcissistic leader with a very different type of early childhood development. These individuals were once led by one or both parents to believe that they were completely lovable and perfect - regardless of their actions and in spite of any basis in reality. Such self-deceptive leaders probably suffer from what Kohut and Wolf (1979) describe as an overstimulated or overburdened self. Because the responses of the figures of early childhood were inappropriate given the children's age, the latter never learn to moderate their grandiose self-images or their idealized parental images. Ideals of perfection have been too demanding to allow them to internalize any soothing, stabilizing internal objects. These children become the proxies of their parents, entrusted with the mission to fulfill many unrealized parental hopes. What may appear as indulgence on the part of the parents is, in fact, exactly the opposite. The parents use their children to take care of their own needs, overburdening them with their implicit desires. When parents impose their unrealistic hopes onto their children, they engender delusions. They confuse the children about their true abilities.

Such unrealistic beliefs may sometimes be the original impetus which differentiates these individuals from others and makes them successful. Perhaps Freud (1917) had this in mind when he noted that "if a man has been his mother's undisputed darling, he retains throughout life the triumphant feeling, the confidence in success, which not seldom brings actual success along with it" (p.156). In those rare instances when such encouragements work out, the child may be sufficiently talented to live up to the parents' exaggerated expectations. A person who in more normal circumstances might have led an ordinary life, has used the expectations imposed on him as a child as a basis for excellence.

In general, however, the self-delusory quality of the unrealistic beliefs created by the parents will lead to problems. An exalted self-image is usually difficult to sustain in the light of external circumstances such as disappointment and failure. Thus, even though the early internalized objects are benign, disturbing interpersonal encounters when the child ventures forth from the protective family environment will give them an element of instability--of frailty. The overvalued image of the self that was garnered from an idealizing parent becomes more realistic after interactions with more honest and critical peers. Still, the traumas of early disappointments may have left a somewhat fragile and distorted concept of self. Self-deceiving narcissists are likely to suffer from interpersonal difficulties due to their desire to live up to the now internalized parental illusions of self-worth. They tend to demonstrate emotional superficiality and poverty of affect. Their behavior has an "ideal-hungry" quality resulting from difficulties in identity formation.

Conceptually, we have to be able to differentiate between the etiology of the reactive and self-deceptive modes of narcissism. In practice, however, a distinction is more difficult to make. Parents might each have responded differently toward the developing child. One parent might have taken a cold, hostile, rejecting attitude, while the other might have been supportive. Thus could have been created different gradations of benign and vicious internal objects, which accounts for mixtures of narcissistic styles. In addition, instead of being frustrated when ambitious parental expectations are incongruent with external reality, the child can sometimes strive successfully to bring his abilities up to his perceived capacity, as Freud noted so poignantly. Moreover, as we have pointed out, learning experiences later in life may also have buffering or mitigating effects.

Constructive Narcissism - Miller (1981), in describing the childhood object relations of healthy or constructive narcissists, stated:

Aggressive impulses [were] neutralized because they did not upset the confidence and self-esteem of the parents.

Strivings toward autonomy were not experienced [by parents] as an attack.

The child was allowed to experience and express "ordinary" impulses (such as jealousy, rage, defiance) because his parents did not require him to be "special," for instance, to represent their own ethical attitudes.

There was no need to please anybody (under optimal conditions), and the child could develop and exhibit whatever was active in him during each developmental phase....

Because the child was able to display ambivalent feelings, he could learn to regard both himself and the object [the other] as "both good and bad," and did not need to split off the "good" from the "bad" object... (pp.33-34).

The constructive narcissists do not behave in a reactive or self-deceptive manner. They do not feel the same need to distort reality to deal with life's frustrations. Nor are they so prone to anxiety. They make less frequent use of primitive defenses, and are less estranged from their feelings, wishes, or thoughts. In fact, they often generate a sense of positive vitality that derives from confidence about their personal worth. Such people have internalized relatively stable and benign objects, which sustain them in the face of life's adversities. They are willing to express their wants and to stand behind their actions, irrespective of the reactions of others. When disappointed, they do not act spitefully, but are able to engage in reparative action. That is, they have the patience to wait, to search out the moment when their talents will be needed (Erikson, 1978). Boldness in action, introspection, and thoughtfulness are common.

### Defensive Systems

How do these three types of narcissistic leaders use their defensive systems? What struck us most in observing their behavior was how primitive the defenses of the first two types tend to be (Kernberg, 1975). At the core of the defensive systems is a mental process called splitting. All other defenses can be seen as derivatives of this very primitive mechanism.

What we mean by splitting is the tendency to see everything as either ideal (all good) or persecutory (all bad). When the individual has not sufficiently integrated or synthesized the opposite qualities of internal objects, these representations are kept separate to avoid contamination of "good" with "bad". Individuals with a tendency towards splitting possess affective and cognitive representations of themselves and others that are dramatically oversimplified. They fail to appreciate the real complexity and ambiguity of human relationships. Relationships are polarized between unbridled hatred, fear, or aggression on the one hand, and those of omnipotence and over-idealization on the other. Splitting thus avoids conflicts and preserves an illusory sense of being good. All evil is ascribed unto others. The price of maintaining this illusory sense of goodness is, of course, an impaired conception of reality.

Closely related to this defense are primitive idealization and devaluation. First, there is a need to create unrealistic, all-good, all-powerful representations of others. This process can be viewed as a protection against persecutory objects. A sense of intense helplessness and insignificance creates the need for all-powerful protectors. In the long run, however, no one can sustain these exaggerated expectations. A vengeful devaluation of the idealized figure then occurs when needs are not met.

Other derivatives of splitting are projection and

projective identification (Ogden, 1982). These defense mechanisms serve to defend against persecution by bad internal objects. The person tries to get rid of unwanted aspects of the self. Consequently, internal representations of self and others are externalized and attributed (projected) to others. Blame is always placed on someone or something else. Never is there any sense of personal responsibility. Again, all this is associated with distortions of reality.

As we can see from Table 1 the frequency, severity, and intensity of these defensive mechanisms vary among the types of narcissism. The reactive type shows the highest frequency and intensity, the constructive type the lowest.

### Symptoms of Narcissism

The most extreme symptoms of this developmental legacy and these defenses are summarized in the DSM III (American Psychiatric Association, 1980) which lists the following diagnostic criteria for narcissistic personality disorders:

- A. Grandiose sense of self-importance or uniqueness; for example, exaggeration of achievements and talents, focus on the special nature of one's problems.
- B. Preoccupation with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love
- C. Exhibitionism: the person requires constant attention and admiration.
- D. Cool indifference or marked feelings of rage, inferiority, shame, humiliation, or emptiness in response to criticism, indifference of others or defeat.
- E. At least two of the following characteristics of disturbances in interpersonal relationships:

1. Entitlement: expectation of special favors without assuming reciprocal responsibilities, for example, surprise and anger that people will not do what one wants.
2. Interpersonal exploitativeness: taking advantage of others to indulge one's own desires or for self-aggrandizement; disregard for the personal integrity and rights of others.
3. Relationships that characteristically alternate between the extremes of overidealization and devaluation.
4. Lack of empathy: inability to recognize how others feel, for example, one may be unable to appreciate the distress of someone who is seriously ill (p. 317).

It is important once again to realize that particularly the first two types of narcissistic leaders will show many of these clinical indications - but each to a different extent. In our experience, reactive narcissists will be cold, ruthless, grandiose, and exhibitionistic. They will show a desire to dominate and control and will be extremely exploitative. Self-deceptive narcissists will be milder - they want to be liked and are much less tyrannical. Still, they lack empathy, are obsessed mainly with their own needs, and are given to being discreetly Machiavellian. Their behavior has an "as if" quality, because they lack a strong sense of inner conviction and identity (Deutsch,1965). Finally, constructive narcissistic leaders are also quite ambitious and can be manipulative and hypersensitive to criticism. But they have enough self-confidence, adaptability, and humor to stress real achievements. They get on well with others because of their insights into relationships.

## ORGANIZATIONAL FUNCTIONING

### The Reactive Leader

We shall describe two managerial situations in which we have seen the reactive narcissistic (RN) personality in operation. The first is in leadership or interpersonal relations. The second relates to their efforts at environmental scanning, analysis and decision making. The reactive narcissist can be an extremely demanding task master. His grandiosity and exhibitionism cause him to gravitate towards subordinates who are sycophants. The arguments of others are ignored if they run counter to the ideas of the boss. Solicitous subordinates seem to be the only ones who are tolerated by a reactive narcissist - all others are "expelled." A strong Machiavellian streak runs through these situations: the leader cares little about hurting and exploiting others in the pursuit of his own advancement. The followers play politics simply to survive. The RN leader surpasses all other types in his total lack of empathy. He completely ignores the needs of subordinates and peers alike, reserving his attention to matters that concern him - and him alone. The fluctuations in attitude toward his people will be extreme. Consequently, the level of employee turnover tends to be very high. Projects that require teamwork or subordinate initiative are seriously jeopardized.

The RN leader exhibits characteristic dysfunctions in making important decisions for his organization. He tends to do very little scanning or analysis of the internal and external environment before making decisions. The RN leader feels that he can manipulate and act upon his environment so that he need not study it very closely. The environment is somehow "beneath him" - it is assumed to pose no challenges that cannot easily be

met. The RN's grandiosity, exhibitionism, and preoccupation with fantasies of unlimited success cause him to undertake extremely bold and venturesome projects. The quality of his leadership style is transforming rather than transactional. He wishes to attract the attention of an invisible audience - to demonstrate his mastery and brilliance. Projects are undertaken on a grand scale, but they are often doomed to fail. First, their overblown scale reflects the desires of the leader more than the realities of the situation: too many resources are placed at risk for too little reason. Second, the leader doesn't listen to his advisors, peers or subordinates. He feels that only he is sufficiently informed to make judgments. A potentially crucial forum is thereby lost. Third, even when it is clear that things are not going well with the project, the RN leader is reluctant to admit the evidence. He will not own up to having made any errors and he becomes especially rigid and sensitive to criticism. Thus he initiates a momentum that is difficult to reverse (Miller and Friesen, 1980, 1984). When the leader finally realizes how fast the situation is deteriorating, his penchant for splitting causes him to blame others. He never sees himself as being responsible for anything that is at all negative.

### The Self-Deceptive Leader

These individuals have many of the traits of the reactive executives, but these are less evident in a managerial situation. We can again explore the categories of leadership, environmental scanning and decision making. As leaders, self-deceptive (SD) executives are much more approachable than their RN counterparts. They care more about their subordinates, are more given to listening to the opinions of others, and are not nearly as exploitative as the RNs. However, they also show a hypersensitivity to criticism, extreme insecurity, and a strong need to be loved. SD leaders

will be more tolerant of dissenting opinions in that they may seem to react sympathetically when the opinions are expressed. But they will tend to carry a grudge - to be less available to habitual critics, to promote weaker-willed subordinates over their vocal peers.

While the SD leader will often express interest in his subordinate's preoccupations, it will be out of a desire to appear sympathetic rather than out of a genuine sense of concern. He will want to do the right thing, but does not feel very enthusiastic about it. An exception to this pattern occurs in cases where the leader becomes attached to a subordinate that he has come to idealize. He will do all in his power to "bind" this person - to develop and bring him along in his own image. It is not surprising of course that this treasured subordinate generally idolizes the boss and is not usually a very strong or opinionated individual. If the subordinate were to show personal initiative, it would be interpreted as treason. The leader's idealization would then quickly change into devaluation, with predictable results for the subordinates's future in the organization.

The SD leader, in contrast to his RN counterpart, may be very eager to discover opportunities, and particularly threats, in his environment. He is insecure and therefore does a great deal of scanning of the internal and external environment to make sure that he will be able to neutralize threats and avoid costly mistakes. Competitors are watched, customers are interviewed, and information systems are established. A good deal of analysis and assessment takes place - so much so that it might sometimes paralyze action.

In making strategic decisions the SD leader has a degree of performance anxiety. He wants to do the best job he possibly can so that he will be respected and admired - but he worries about his ability to do

so. He is afraid of failure. This tends to make him much more conservative than the reactive executive. The SD executive studies the situation very thoroughly and solicits the opinions of others. Decision making is done in response to exchanges of various types, quite in contrast to the pernicious transforming style of the reactive leader. The SD leader's orientation is thus predominantly of a transactional nature. Of course, conservative (like-minded) managers are much more likely to get a receptive hearing than the more venturesome ones. They have a general tendency to procrastinate - to put things off just a bit too long, and their perfectionism and hesitancy can give rise to organizational stagnation. Note that the RN narcissist was working to impress the broader political or business community - to be revered, to fulfill bold, impossible, visionary dreams. The SD narcissist just wants to be loved and admired by the people he interacts with. Also his symptoms will wax and wane according to his degree of anxiety to a greater extent than those of the RN leader.

### The Constructive Leader

These leaders are no strangers to manipulation and are not beyond occasional acts of opportunism. But they generally are able to get on fairly well with their subordinates. Constructive narcissists possess a high degree of confidence in their abilities and are highly task and goal oriented. Thus they may sometimes come across as lacking in warmth or consideration.

Although constructive leaders enjoy being admired, they have a realistic appreciation of their abilities and limitations. Their attitude is one of give and take, and they recognize the competence of others. Constructive leaders are good listeners and appreciate the opinions of

their subordinates, even though they are content to assume the ultimate responsibility for collective actions. They are willing to take a stand and stick to their decisions. This attitude may cause subordinates to complain that CL's are unsociable or uncooperative. In fact, constructive leaders sometimes do lack true empathy and may be prone to using others as mere instruments to accomplish their own objectives.

These leaders possess a sense of inner direction and self-determination that makes them so confident. They have the ability to inspire others and to create a common cause, thereby transcending petty self-interests. Their inner directedness, however, can also be reflected by coldness, arrogance, or a stubborn insensitivity to the needs of others. Abstract concerns, such as "the good of the company" or "helping the workers," may replace reciprocity in interpersonal relations and the building of a team. In general, however, constructive narcissists have a sense of humor that makes it possible for them to put things in perspective. Their independence can make for the creativity and vision necessary to energize subordinates to engage in ambitious endeavors. Since it lacks the rigidity of the other two types, the dominant leadership style has both a transforming and transactional quality.

The constructive leaders vary a good deal in their decision making styles which are more reflections of the situation facing the firm than the personal foibles of the executive. Their flexibility allows them to do a good deal of analysis, environmental scanning, and consultation before making strategic decisions of far-reaching consequences. But it also enables them to handle more routine situations with dispatch, entrusting matters to subordinates. They also tend to avoid extremes of boldness and conservatism, operating more in "the middle range".

## ORGANIZATIONAL THERAPY

Constructive narcissistic leaders pose few organizational problems. But what can a firm's healthy managers do about the two more dysfunctional types of leaders? Where the organization is centralized and the narcissistic leader is dominant, poor performance and subsequent dismissal by a strong board of directors may be the only effective change agents. And even these mutative influences are ruled out when a leader has strong financial control. But the outlook is much brighter where organizational power is more broadly distributed or where the narcissist occupies a less elevated position.

In fact there are a number of organizational measures that can be taken to minimize the damage done by lower level narcissistic leaders. The first might be to try to become aware of their existence. In this pursuit it may be useful to bear in mind that single indicators of each of the neurotic types are not sufficient to warrant a diagnosis of narcissism. But when these combine to form a syndrome this may indicate trouble.

It is very difficult to change a narcissist's personality. The primary emphasis must be to transfer the individual out of harm's way or to reduce his influence. A number of structural devices may be used to accomplish the latter. For example, power can be more broadly distributed in the organization so that many people get involved in strategic decisions, and lower level managers are induced to take responsibility for more routine concerns. Cross functional committees, task forces and executive committees can provide a useful forum in which a multitude of managers can express their viewpoint, providing opportunities for the narcissistic leaders (and especially their subordinates) to learn from and have their influence mitigated by others. Monolithic and unrealistic

perspectives are thereby discouraged.

Regular leader appraisals in which subordinates have a chance to express their opinions to a third party about their boss may also be useful. Where a consensus of dissatisfaction emerges, particularly if it coincides with poor unit performance, it might be time to transfer or release the leader. Such an appraisal policy might inhibit overtly narcissistic exploitation.

When the top decision makers in an organization become aware of the narcissistic proclivities of some of the organizations managers, they can use this information in carrying out personnel policy. This is especially true when assigning subordinates to a narcissistic leader. One of the greatest dangers is to engage insecure, inexperienced managers to work for the narcissist. These employees will have too little strength or resolve to be able to cope, and still less potential to act as useful counterbalancing forces. In contrast, it might be useful to assign strong, confident, and secure personalities to work with the narcissistically inclined executive - those who are not afraid to express their opinions and can help to introduce more "reality" into decision making process.

It is particularly important, also, to look for signs of excessive narcissism in recruiting and making promotions. Psychological tests by trained clinicians and interviews with a candidate's previous superiors and subordinates might flag a narcissistic leader. There is no doubt that the easiest way to deal with these managers is to avoid hiring them - or failing that - to refrain from giving them much power.

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