

Successful Supervisor Part 29

Coaching a Narcissist

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

The definition of a narcissist is a person who has fallen in love with his own appearance and abilities. The etymology of the word comes from a Greek hunter named Narcissus, who fell in love with his own reflection in a pool of water.

Supervisors sometimes need to deal with a narcissist, and usually it turns out to be someone higher in the management chain than she is. I will give some advice for that situation in this article, although it is possible that the narcissist in the supervisor's life could be one of her direct reports, or even herself. How you deal with it depends on who it is.

Narcissism is known in trait theory as a psychological disease, but it plays out in organizational life to varying degrees daily, and it can be a major headache to people who have to deal with the person who has it.

Warren Bennis put it this way, "One motive for turning a deaf ear to what others have to say seems to be sheer hubris: leaders often believe they are wiser than all those around them. The literature on executive narcissism tells us that the self-confidence top executives need can easily blur into a blind spot, an unwillingness to turn to others for advice."

Leaders who are convinced they are so macho and smart have a difficult time hearing what people are really saying. I love James O'Toole's observation,

"...it is often the presence of excessive amounts of testosterone that leads to a loss of hearing."

How can you recognize if you have the problem?

If you have a problem with narcissism, then you are most likely unaware of it. If you have a particularly bad case of it, you are even more likely to be unaware of it. One way to determine if you have narcissistic tendencies is to ask other people. You can ask your spouse, your supervisor, a good and trusted friend, or a mentor. If the input from others indicates you might be a narcissist, then at least you know about it now and can seek out some help to deal with it.

I suggest getting a leadership coach to listen to your story and give you some tips that are specifically designed to help you. I also recommend reading about Emotional Intelligence. My favorite book on the topic is ***Emotional Intelligence 2.0*** by Bradberry and Greaves.

It is common to find more tendencies toward narcissism as you go up the organizational ladder, so the next part of this article will include tips on what to do if your boss or some other higher leader is narcissistic.

Why is narcissism a problem?

For people in the organization, having a narcissistic manager somewhere in the chain above them can make life pretty miserable. They have to endure a manager who has an inflated view of his or her own wisdom and has little interest in the collective wisdom of the group. A narcissist manager severely limits the creativity and engagement of the workers, and thus has a major negative impact on profitability.

Trying to point out the problem to a superior only makes matters worse, because the manager has no intention of listening. In many cases, employees suffer in silence for years rather than speak up and get decapitated. Let's look at one approach to avoid and follow up with some suggestions for positive things you can try.

One approach to avoid

It would be easy, but ineffective in most cases, to just tell the boss "don't be so full of yourself" and show the benefits of humility. Unfortunately for the narcissist leader, changing the thought patterns and behaviors is extremely difficult. Besides, in most cases, the narcissist is blissfully unaware that he has a problem.

Daniel Goleman also noticed the same tendency when he identified that leaders with low Emotional Intelligence have the most significant blind spots. So a direct approach to correct narcissistic tendencies is likely to backfire.

You can't just march into the boss's office and say, "You are a total narcissist, knock it off and get down from your pedestal." You need to use a water drop treatment with lots of Socratic Questions.

The issue of leader hubris is perhaps the most common schism that exists between the senior levels and the supervisors or workers. If it is so important, what can we do about it? Is there a kind of anti-hubris powder we can sneak into the orange juice of over inflated executives? Oh, if it was only that easy.

One possible solution: education

What we are talking about here is reeducating the boss with influence from below. We want to let him know that his own attitude and behaviors are getting in the way of trust. Reeducating the boss is always tricky. It reminds me of the adage, “Never wrestle a pig...you get all muddy and the pig loves it.” What do the sailors do if they are facing a Captain Bligh every day? Mutiny is one option, but it can get pretty bloody.

The road to enlightenment is through **education**, but how do you get an unaware manager to warm up to being educated? One suggestion is to form a kind of support network with other supervisors and leaders on the topic of leadership. Book clubs where employees, along with their leaders, take a lunch hour once a week to study the topic can begin a constructive dialog.

Try a slow shaping process

Shaping the thought patterns of a superior in the organization is a slow process, like changing the face of the planet in Arizona. Drop by drop and particle by particle, the sand and soil have been moved to reveal the Grand Canyon. Changing a leader’s approach might not take eons, but the slow shaping process is the same, only in human years.

Having the boss select the books to review is a nice technique for getting him involved in the process in a positive way. Try to avoid singling out the offending manager for retraining. Express a need to improve the leadership capabilities of **everyone** on the team (and that includes the boss). That way, peer pressure among the other managers can help educate the narcissistic manager in a way that is artful and effective.

Some leaders will remain clueless regardless of any effort to correct it. I know one leader who will go to her grave totally blind when it comes to her attitude about her own capability and superiority. If she was reading this passage, she would be nodding her head affirmative and be 100% convinced that I was referring to somebody else, not her. Perhaps the only hope for a leader like this is some form of radical shock treatment in the form of a series of pink slips.

If you are dealing with a serious case of narcissism, having a leadership coach can help a lot, but you first have to get the boss to agree to some coaching. Try suggesting some coaching for the entire leadership team, then that will cover the boss as well.

What if the Narcissist reports to the supervisor?

If the problem person is below you, then you need to coach the person yourself or get some outside help. I would start by having the employee work through the ***Emotional Intelligence 2.0*** book with you. That will form the basis of many substantive discussions and some significant growth.

The above tips may help you work out of a problem with narcissism, but do recognize the challenge is great. Narcissism is more common than we realize, and it is not easy to cure. It is something you need to work on if you are experiencing a problem in this area.

This is a part in a series of articles on “Successful Supervision.” The entire series can be viewed on www.leadergrow.com/articles/supervision or on this blog.

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