



## Petraeus and the Rise of Narcissistic Leaders

*Updated 09 January 2013*

What to make of the confluence of [General Petraeus](#) resigning as head of the CIA and [Christopher Kubasik](#), vice chairman, president, and COO of Lockheed also resigning — both for having affairs — within days of each other? Certainly not the first men to be brought down by an inability to control their impulses — these recent examples join a long list including John Edwards, Bill Clinton, and Harry Stonecipher of Boeing.

There is a simple power story often told about such behavior: [research shows](#) that people with more power tend to pay less attention to others. They are more action-oriented, pursue their own goals, and exhibit disinhibited behavior in part because they believe that rules don't apply to them; they are special and invulnerable.

All of this is true, but nonetheless leaves at least a couple of questions unanswered. First, as my friend Bob Sutton noted in a conversation, these behaviors seem to be confined mostly to men. We seldom hear of powerful women who can't control their urges. Second, it at least feels as if this sort of behavior and the career consequences that result seem to be occurring more frequently now. Maybe that is because of more public scrutiny and the operation of social media. But maybe something else is going on — namely we are choosing more narcissistic leaders and the misbehavior is not just the consequence of power but also of excessive narcissism.

First, a definition: narcissistic leaders, as research by Stanford colleague Charles O'Reilly and colleagues notes, are characterized by the traits of dominance, self-confidence, a sense of entitlement, grandiosity, and low empathy. As Michael Maccoby pointed out in [The Productive Narcissist](#), many well-known, even iconic leaders such as Martha Stewart, Jack Welch, and Bill Gates are almost certainly narcissistic personalities, and narcissism is useful for attaining leadership positions, maintaining power, and even stimulating creativity and innovation. [O'Reilly's research on narcissism](#) among Silicon Valley

executives shows that narcissistic CEOs earn more, last in their jobs longer, and also have a larger gap between their pay and the pay of their senior team.

[Evidence from surveys of college students](#) shows that the level of narcissism has been rising over time — a possible answer for why leaders today are getting into more trouble than in the past. And examinations of the structure of narcissism and how narcissistic behavior differs between men and women helps explain the gender imbalance: "[Past research](#) suggests that exploitive tendencies and open displays of feelings of entitlement will be less integral to narcissism for females than for males" simply because women face more social constraints and social sanctions for grandiosity and self-aggrandizement than do men.

And while narcissism and the associated behaviors may indeed help people ascend into leadership roles, as recent experience suggests, narcissistic individuals also contain the seeds of their own (self)-destruction. And leaders' downfalls are costly — Lockheed now has to find another person to assume the CEO role, and President Obama must find someone to take over the CIA. So while indeed there are productive narcissists, narcissistic behavior can be very unproductive for both the work organizations and the people who experience it.

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