



How to Manage a Narcissist

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George, a senior executive of a large internet provider, was a participant in one of my leadership development programs. Although a very talented individual, he was seen as a nuisance within the group. He tended to monopolize the conversation, whatever the topic. All agreed that he was not a good listener. Whenever someone else spoke, he would quickly become impatient and try to change the topic to something closer to his interests. And he had a habit of devaluing others' work while overemphasizing his own successes. It was quite clear to the other participants that George viewed most people as far below his standards. It wasn't surprising that most of group did not like George and found it very difficult to deal with him.

Often, it seems that having a narcissistic disposition — grandiose, self-promoting, larger than life — is a prerequisite for reaching the higher organizational echelons. Narcissistic people can be charismatic and manipulative, which helps them get ahead. But although their drive and ambitions can be effective in moving organizations forward, excessive narcissistic behavior can create havoc and lead to organizational breakdown. Envious as they are, narcissistic people always strive to win, whatever the costs. They see themselves as “special,” and only associate with other “special” or high-status people.

Furthermore, narcissistic individuals have a strong sense of entitlement. When they don't receive the special treatment that they believe they deserve, they become very impatient



or get quite angry. Given their self-serving mindset, it's difficult for them to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others. Empathy doesn't come naturally. As narcissists are quite thin-skinned, they have difficulty handling criticism; they very quickly feel hurt, overreact, and get defensive. Although they may give off an impression of having high self-esteem, the opposite is often the case. Underneath the confident exterior, they are troubled by a deep sense of insecurity. Their bravado is a heroic effort to compensate for their profound vulnerability. They treat positive attention as a kind of

This all creates challenges for those who would manage narcissistic individuals. Making matters worse, narcissists refuse to acknowledge that they have a problem. Why would they ask for help, when they think that they are better than anybody else? How can they learn from mistakes if they can't admit that they've ever made one?

Psychiatrists have tried many forms of intervention with narcissistic individuals. All of them take time. Personality traits don't change quickly, if at all. So what can managers do? From my experience running leadership workshops, I have learned some techniques that offer promising results. Here's my advice.

Create a strong sense of team cohesion. A group setting makes dysfunctional acting out more noticeable, more controllable, more discussable, and therefore less acceptable. Peer pressure will push the narcissist to adapt to the group's norms. Thus, it is the peers that will take on the role of "enforcers," to encourage the narcissist to listen and empathize with others.

Use this strong team to promote peer feedback. For narcissists, it's often less threatening to receive feedback from peers, rather than from a single person or leader. Of course, feedback from many people is harder to ignore than feedback from one person. If the

dynamics of the group are facilitated effectively, the narcissist's view of themselves will be revealed, mirrored, challenged, and can be modified.

Create a safe, somewhat playful space. This can become an environment where people with a narcissistic disposition learn to develop trust, explore boundaries, accept feedback, and increase self-awareness. In such a setting, the narcissist's peers will be able to constructively confront problematic behavior while simultaneously offering a modicum of understanding.

Don't confront the narcissist directly. Instead, support the team. Returning to George, the group facilitator was very careful not to confront him too forcefully when he acted inappropriately in the group leadership development sessions. When needed, the facilitator would empathize with George (showing surprise and hurt) as a result of the confrontations with and feedback given by his peers. At the same time, the facilitator empowered George's peers not to accept his way of dominating the conversations, to interrupt him when he went on for too long, and thus to make him realize that he didn't always need to be the smartest person in the room.

As time went by, George learned to empathize with others. As he practiced listening, he learned from their experiences. He discovered that constructive criticism from the others could be helpful, rather than devastating to his self-esteem. George eventually came to realize the inappropriateness of many of his expectations, and that the world didn't revolve around him alone. He began to internalize some of the behavior patterns of the others, which, he discovered, were more effective ways of dealing with the challenges of life.

Of course, dealing with narcissists will always be a challenge, be it in a group setting or otherwise. Some of these people will not be able to tolerate the pressures from the group. They will not be able to deal with critical feedback from peers, and may decide to quit.

But a manager's biggest worry should not be losing their narcissist; it should be that *other* team members will be the ones to resign, tired of the way narcissists need to be catered to. It's hard to deal with a narcissist's sense of entitlement, lack of empathy, and need to feel special. But if you can create a group dynamic that keeps those tendencies in check and that helps develop the self-awareness of everyone on your team, you'll keep your best people — and get the best out of the rest.

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