Addressing Narcissistic Leadership through Organizational Development and Systematic Implementations

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore narcissistic leadership and its impact on the organization. Furthermore, this paper proposes two potentially effective approaches in addressing the negative aspects of narcissistic leadership while encouraging its positive effects on organizations. These approaches, which are found in literature, include an organizational development approach as well as an accountability theory approach through systematic organizational controls. Although both of these approaches provide potentially effective methods in addressing the negative aspects of narcissistic leadership, this paper also proposes that further research is needed on these approaches. This proposal also includes discussions on the positive and negative aspects of narcissistic leadership as well as support for the stance that the negative effects of narcissism can be addressed. In addition, this paper includes biblical support for this proposal through a Christian perspective on the topic of narcissistic leadership.

*Keywords:* Narcissism, accountability, coaching, narcissistic leadership
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The paper conducts an exploration of the topic of narcissistic leadership. Furthermore, the paper proposes solutions in minimizing the negative effects of narcissistic leadership while exploring ways to encourage the positive aspects of this form of leadership. This paper posits that there are two significant approaches in addressing the negative aspects of narcissistic leadership while enhancing the positive effects of this form of leadership. One approach includes systematic implementations in an organization to control the negative aspects of the narcissistic leader while the other approach includes the organizational development approach of coaching (Gallos, 2006; McMahon & Rosen, 2009; Ouimet, 2010). Although, these approaches are potentially effective methods in dealing with narcissistic leadership, this paper also discusses the potential limitations of each approach. In addition, this paper discusses avenues for further research in specific areas pertaining to these potential solutions.

Defining Narcissistic Leadership

There are various definitions of narcissism in literature, but most accounts contain similar general characteristics. For example, Yukl (2006) defines narcissism as a personality syndrome involving “an extreme need for esteem” including “prestige, status, attention, admiration, adulation” and “a strong need for power, weak self-control, and indifference about the needs and welfare of others” (p. 191). In addition, Yukl (2006) states: “They have a grandiose, exaggerated sense of their own self-importance and unique talents” (p. 192). O’Reilly, Doerr, Caldwell, and Chatman (2014) provide a general similar definition when describing narcissism as “dominance, self-confidence, a sense of entitlement, grandiosity, and low empathy” (p. 218). Similarly, Yukl (2006) states: “Because they are so preoccupied with their own ego needs, narcissists have little
empathy or concern for the feelings and needs of others” (p. 192). Yukl (2006) continues this description by stating: “They exploit and manipulate others to indulge their desire for self-aggrandizement without feeling remorse” (p. 192). McMahon and Rosen (2009) provide a similar analysis by describing that narcissistic people often “find themselves unable to accept feedback, take responsibility for mistakes and tend to vainly continue on their original quest without any remorse” (p. 64). Narcissists also expect favors from others without reciprocity and tend to not take responsibility for failures (McMahon & Rosen, 2009; Yukl, 2006).

In addition to defining narcissism, there are various implications for its presence in organizations. For example, O’Reilly et al. (2014) describe how people with these characteristics often emerge as leaders in organizations. According to Yukl (2006), leaders with narcissistic tendencies surround themselves with loyal and uncritical subordinates. Yukl (2006) also indicates that they tend to make uniformed and high risk decisions that lead to failure. Godkin and Allcorn (2010) argue that organizational identity shifts in response to narcissistic leadership behavior. Adding to this, Duchon and Drake (2009) suggest that organizations taking on narcissistic tendencies as a whole can disrupt that organization’s moral identity. Also, rather than take responsibility, narcissistic leaders tend to blame others for failure causing potential organizational turmoil (McMahon & Rosen, 2009; Yukl, 2006). They also possess the tendency to cling to power in comparison to leaders that retire gracefully (Yukl, 2006).

The Positives and the Negatives

According to McCleskey (2013), narcissism is found at the heart of dark leadership. However, narcissistic leadership is not all negative and can provide both positive and negative aspects to an organization (McCleskey, 2013; O’Reilly et al., 2014). Godkin and Allcorn (2010) support this view by arguing that organizations can have constructive narcissists as well as
destructive narcissists. On one hand, their behavior displays confidence and interpersonal skills that attract a followership (McMahon & Rosen, 2009; O’Reilly et al., 2014). However, on the other hand, they are more likely to break ethical standards and systems that people rely upon (Godkin & Allcorn, 2010; McMahon & Rosen, 2009; O’Reilly et al., 2014; Rijsenbilt & Commandeur, 2013).

O’Reilly et al. (2014) found that confidence plays an important role in attracting followers. McMahon and Rosen (2009) support this perspective by indicating that narcissists “can charm and convert people with their rhetoric” (p. 64). O’Reilly et al. (2014) also found that narcissistic leaders generally leave more positive first impressions and are perceived as charismatic and charming. Unfortunately, a narcissistic leader’s sense of entitlement and to some degree, their manipulative tendency, can also be perceived as attractive by followers (O’Reilly et al., 2014). With regard to compensation, the O’Reilly et al. (2014) study found that CEOs with narcissistic characteristics often obtain higher “total direct compensation (salary, bonus, and stock options)” than their less narcissistic counterparts and also “have more money in their total shareholdings, and have larger discrepancies between their own (higher) compensation and the other members of their team” (O’Reilly et al., 2014, p. 218).

Proposed Solutions for the Negative Aspects

There are various approaches to addressing the negative aspects of narcissistic leadership in literature. However, two significant approaches include the organizational development approach through coaching and a more systematic approach through accountability theory (McMahon & Rosen, 2009; Ouimet, 2010). The McMahon and Rosen (2009) approach describes that minimizing the negatives while enhancing the positives can be challenging when coaching leaders with narcissistic traits. The Ouimet (2010) approach proposes addressing the negative
aspects of narcissistic leadership by injecting accountability theory as a possible solution to this issue. This approach is described by Ouimet (2010) as one in which the actions of all members of the community or organization will be evaluated by their peers in systematic fashion. This is similar to the checks and balances approach used in the U.S. government design. However, the main stance Ouiment (2010) takes in the study is that this possibly effective approach will need to be studied empirically in order to better understand the intricacies this potential solution has on the problem.

Gallos (2006) describes that executive coaching is an interpersonal trusted partnership with the leader. In the past, and in addition to other aspects of executive coaching, it was used when “a leader’s personal style had a negative impact on peers and reports” (Gallos, 2006, p. 434). This suggests that the negative aspects of a leadership style, such as those found in narcissistic leadership, can be addressed through coaching and in order to improve a leader’s performance, effectivity, and for optimizing a leader’s abilities (Gallos, 2006). According to Gallos (2006), there are five categories of executive coaching including coaching a leader’s behavior, life coaching, leadership development, organizational change, and strategy coaching. These areas of coaching suggest that coaching leaders or leaders’ behavior is a category in which the negative aspects of narcissistic leadership can be addressed while enhancing the positive aspects of this form of leadership.

McMahon and Rosen (2009) outline some of the challenges in coaching narcissists including their sensitivity to criticism, they are poor listeners, they have a lack of empathy, they dislike being mentored, and they have an intense desire to compete. However, McMahon and Rosen (2009) approach the handling of negative narcissistic behavior from the organizational development perspective and suggest various approaches to overcoming these challenges as well
as effectively coaching leaders with narcissistic tendencies. For example, one suggestion is for the coach to find a trusted friend of the narcissist in order to learn how to manage their personality better (McMahon & Rosen, 2009).

Exploring ways to address the negative effects of narcissism while trying to keep the positive effects might appear daunting but is a pursuable objective. In Daniel 4, King Nebuchadnezzar was driven from his kingdom until the day he acknowledged God. What is particularly significant in this passage is that the kingdom was restored to Nebuchadnezzar after this occurrence. This is a passage in scripture in which a self-centered even narcissistic leader became aware of God and others. This did not hurt his already effective leadership, but enhanced it. This passage implies that there is hope in being able to change a leader’s behavior from a Christian perspective as well as from an organizational perspective. In other words, if Nebuchadnezzar was able to change, might other narcissistic and toxic leaders be able to change as well?

Rijsenbilt and Commandeur (2013) indicate that one of the first definitions of narcissism is described as “perverse self-love” (p. 414). McCleskey (2013) supports this perspective by describing a narcissistic person as self-absorbed and self-loved. Duchon and Drake (2009) describe it as “love of self” (p. 303). These descriptions of self-centeredness and self-absorption in narcissistic leadership are potentially consistent with Nebuchadnezzar’s documented personality tendencies in Daniel 4. For example, in Daniel 4:30 Nebuchadnezzar states: “Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for a royal dwelling by my mighty power and for the honor of my majesty?” (NKJV). However, before this statement Nebuchadnezzar had a dream that Daniel interpreted concerning the king’s sins and indifference towards others. Daniel tries to keep the king from suffering the consequence of his actions by suggesting to Nebuchadnezzar to
turn from his sins by doing what is right and by showing mercy to the oppressed. However, Nebuchadnezzar did not do this and eventually suffered the consequences. In the midst of his demise, however, Nebuchadnezzar displayed humility in Daniel 4:24 by acknowledging someone other than himself. In this case, he acknowledged “the Most High” and his kingdom was restored to him, but with a more positive attitude from the king (Daniel 4:34-37).

**Further Research and Discussion**

From research it appears that there might be two possibly effective approaches to dealing with narcissistic behavior in leadership positions. One approach is the implementation of systematic controls that keep negative narcissistic behavior under control (Ouimet, 2010). The other approach is through a more interpersonal avenue of organizational development called executive coaching (Gallos, 2006; McMahon and Rosen, 2009). These possible solutions are well supported and worthy of study because accountability may systematically pressure people in an organization to think carefully about their actions allowing them to spend more time in self-reflected behavior (McMahon & Rosen, 2009). However, there is very little research on the results of these two approaches, therefore more empirical research is needed. In addition, the Ouimet (2009) proposal does not solve the negative aspect of narcissistic leadership, but offers ways in which it can be controlled or minimized in an organization or community. In contrast, the McMahon and Rosen (2009) offer a more trusting interpersonal approach that can potentially provide a deeper rehabilitation of the narcissistic leader. However, without further research this is difficult to conclude although these methods are used in practice in organizational development.

There is reason to believe that the offered systematic approach might work as it makes sense that accountability might offset a person’s inability to look inwardly at their actions as
being right or wrong. The only refutation is the claim that this possible solution has some limitations. One limitation is the degree to which a narcissistic leader is willing to comply with rules and accountability (Ouimet, 2010). The second limitation is the degree to which the narcissistic person is willing to offer behavioral transparency (Ouimet, 2010). As previously mentioned, this is something that would need to be tested empirically in order to better understand these components.

One last implication is the possible exploration of a leader’s personality traits. For example, the O’Reilly et al. (2014) study mentions that there is a difference between self-confidence and narcissism in leadership. Could this be a key to minimizing negative effects of narcissistic leadership? Is it possible to encourage the self-confidence in a leader without encouraging the more narcissistic aspect of this personality trait? The Ouimet (2010) approach suggests this can be controlled through systematic implementations while McMahon and Rosen (2009) and Gallos (2006) suggest this can be addressed through coaching. These approaches are very relevant because of their proximity to other related pieces of research on the topic. These approaches raise related issues with narcissistic leadership as well as valid potential solutions to the problem. These approaches can be used to design further research on the topic under the theoretical idea that aspects of narcissistic leadership are positive. By minimizing the negative aspects and allowing the positive aspects to flourish, then it might be possible for a narcissistic leader to be long-term more positive and effective leader in an organization. Again, more research would help either support or not support these approaches as effective methods in addressing the negative effects of narcissistic leadership.

Conclusion
Based on this proposal, it is evident that there are various approaches in addressing the negative aspects of narcissistic leadership. This paper conducts an exploration of the topic of narcissistic leadership as well as proposes two potentially significant and effective approaches in minimizing the negative effects of narcissism while continuing to encourage the positive effects of this leadership style in organizations. One approach is the organizational development approach supported by Gallos (2006) as well as by McMahon and Rosen (2009). The other approach is a systematic organizational controls implementation approach found in the Ouimet (2010) proposal. However, these two approaches contain both strengths and weaknesses, therefore further research on specific aspects of each of these approaches are necessary. For this reason, it is important for more research to be conducted on the topic of narcissistic leadership as well as for further research to be conducted on effective solutions in minimizing the negative effects of this form of leadership while continuing to encourage its positive effects.
References


