The Redemption of Paul’s Narcissistic Leadership

Andrew T. Babyak
Chowan University

Glen Metheny
Harding University

Author Note

Andrew T. Babyak, Assistant Professor of Management, Chowan University.

Glen Metheny, Associate Professor of Business, Harding University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Andrew Babyak, One University Place, Murfreesboro, NC 27855. Email: babyaa@chowan.edu
Abstract

Narcissistic leadership has been a popular area of study within the field of leadership due to its prevalence in many organizations. Narcissism, in regards to leadership, is a term that implies that a leader has an exaggerated feeling of self-importance, a strong sense of entitlement, and an extreme love of self (Duchon & Drake, 2009). Cooper (2011) posits that the characteristics that describe a narcissistic leader can be divided into positive and negative categories. This understanding of narcissistic leadership results in the concept that the positive qualities of strong leaders can become toxic if they are not tempered. This paper investigates the thin line that often separates toxic narcissistic leaders and positive leaders. Additionally, an examination of the life of Paul indicates that narcissistic leaders can change from being toxic to positive as they give their life to God and follow the Holy Spirit (Strom, 2006). The life of Paul provides a good example for leaders who possess narcissistic qualities, but want to make a positive instead of a toxic impact on organizations.
The Redemption of Paul’s Narcissistic Leadership

Americans generally equate positions with leadership as they refer to the individuals who hold the highest positions in political, military, religious, and for-profit organizations as leaders. Additionally, in terms of leadership, it is often viewed as a characteristic or quality that some people possess as it distinguishes them from those who do not have it (Silva, 2014). As such, leadership can come in a variety of shapes and sizes. It is evident that a significant number of world leaders possess grandiose belief systems and leadership styles (Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006). The history of such leaders connects both the leaders’ rise to power and their ultimate downfall to their narcissistic splendor. And while every author does not utilize the term ‘narcissistic’ to describe leaders, it is regularly used to portray individuals whose goals, objectives, judgments, and decisions, both good and bad, are driven by a strong purpose, arrogance, and self-absorption (Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006). The extent of purportedly narcissistic leaders stretches from perceived dictators of history, including Adolf Hitler and Saddam Hussein (Glad, 2002); historical figures such as Alexander Hamilton (Chernow, 2004); a diverse group of business leaders, including Steve Jobs (Robins & Paulhaus, 2001) and Kenneth Lay (Kramer, 2003); and perhaps a surprising list of more recent political figures, such as John McCain (Renshon, 2001), George W. Bush (Krugman, 2005), and Benjamin Netanyahu (Kimhi, 2001).

While many of these leaders share a perceived history of disgraceful downfalls, the jury is still out on the eventual success or failure of many. However, what truly ties them together in their leadership was that they were led by their own egotistical needs for control, power and esteem (Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006). Judge, Piccolo, and Kosalka (2009) suggested that
narcissistic leaders possess a variety of negative characteristics including self-absorption, self-love, entitlement, hostility, and arrogance. Accordingly, a key motivation leading narcissists is that they seek leadership positions are their desire to acquire the power they need to rule their world that supports their grandiose needs and visions.

Because many leaders have been described as narcissistic, this paper seeks to examine in detail the positive and negative leadership traits that are associated with narcissistic leadership and examine the difference between them. Additionally, a case study that examines the life of Paul discusses some key factors that might determine whether a leader who possesses narcissistic traits will be a positive or negative leader. Paul was found to be a very good case study for this paper because of his conversion experience that clearly divides his life into two chapters. DeSilva (2004) explains that before Paul’s conversion, he was more zealous and radical than his peers as he tried to destroy Christians, but after his conversion, those sinful acts of leadership were changed and aligned with God’s purposes.

**Narcissism in Organizations**

Every organization possesses some type of identity. They have names, occupy physical space, and employ individuals to carry out specific duties. They possess certain attributes that separates them from other organizations. Organizational identity can be defined as, “. . . central and enduring attributes of an organization that distinguish it from other organizations” (Whetten, 2006, p.220). Such attributes of an organization allows them to legitimize claims of uniqueness that provides them the ability to define a competitive sphere and to present itself as an ideal player within that sphere. These attributes establish a structure that is shown in its policies and procedures and provide a point of reference for decision-making and communication (Duchon &
Drake, 2009; Schein, 1992; Trice & Beyer, 1993). This point of reference ultimately serves as a foundation for which an organization operates and stands as the embodiment of its beliefs and ideas about the organization’s role and how the organization’s role will be defined. Narcissistic leaders can have a great impact on organizations and their cultures as they exert their power, which is often done in a toxic and negative manner.

While followers can be captivated by narcissistic leaders, followers are generally also uneasy in regard to their relationship to them. Followers love them, hate them, like them, dislike them, desire them, despise them, seek them out, and shun them, yet their desire to follow them is endless due to the narcissistic leaders’ positive qualities (Gini & Green, 2012). And while there is an appeal and fascination with leaders, narcissistic leadership spans the gamut between good leadership and bad leadership. While the main focus of leadership studies and research has related to positive leadership outcomes, events such as the collapse of Enron and WorldCom have prompted debate and consideration of the toxic results of narcissistic and poor leadership (Benson & Hogan, 2008).

In historic Greek mythology there was a young man named Narcissus. This young man became so smitten with his own reflection in a pool, falling in love with the perfection of his own reflection, that he ultimately died due to his own self-centeredness, selfishness and egotism. Consequently the term narcissism was founded. Havelock Ellis (1898) coined the term to describe a clinical condition of perverse self-love. Freud (1931/1950) suggested that a specific narcissistic personality type exists that is characterized by outwardly composed strength, confidence, and at times, arrogance. Narcissism is a term that typically signifies an individual who possesses an extreme love of self, holding a strong sense of self-importance and a powerful
sense of entitlement (Duchon & Drake, 2009). The American Psychiatric Association (2000) defines narcissism as a personality disorder characterized by “a pervasive pattern of grandiosity, need for admiration, and lack of empathy… and is present in a variety of contexts” (p. 717).

Primary characteristics of narcissism include grandiosity, an exaggerated sense of self-importance and manipulation of others, lack of empathy, sense of entitlement, self-centeredness, and a feeling of superiority and vanity (Nevicka, De Hoogh, Van Vianen, Beersma, & Mcllwain, 2011). Additionally, narcissistic behaviors are generally viewed as ego-defense mechanism used to strengthen a fragile sense of self (Duchon & Drake, 2009). Narcissistic individuals crave admiration and are persistently concerned with how well they are doing as well as how favorably they are regarded by others. They need constant validation from the external world and require an audience in order to construct and maintain their grandiose self (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). It is this narcissistic elaborate sense of self-importance which leads them to believe they are exceptional individuals relative to others. Research has shown that narcissists generally consider their abilities above their peers and colleagues. They overestimate their performance (Farwell & Wohlwend-Lloyd, 1998), their leadership potential (Judge, LePine, & Rich, 2006) and their contribution in comparison to how they are rated by others (John & Robins, 1994). Additionally narcissists tend to overestimate their physical and mental attributes, such as their level of (physical) attractiveness (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008), their intelligence (Gabriel, Critelli, & Ee, 1994), and their positive personality characteristics (Paulhus, 1998). Knowing that narcissists are concerned with proving their superiority publicly, they would delight in a chance to enter highly interdependent and interactive social setting where the opportunity exists for them to exhibit
themselves. For a narcissist, then, social interactions signify settings for the representation of social manipulations and self-presentations (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001).

Cooper (2011) proposes that there are actually two sides of narcisssistic leadership as some of the narcissistic leadership traits are praised, while other aspects of it are shunned.

Table 1: Aspects of Narcissistic Leadership (Cooper, 2011)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vision</td>
<td>Selfishness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energy</td>
<td>Greed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity</td>
<td>Lust for power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drive</td>
<td>Insensitivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>Ambition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charisma</td>
<td>Grandiosity/ Arrogance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Star power</td>
<td>Ruthlessness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success</td>
<td>Demands for unquestioned allegiance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiative</td>
<td>Sense of entitlement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovativeness</td>
<td>Lack of empathy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cooper’s list of positive and negative qualities of narcissistic leaders is important because it shows the thin line that often exists between a strong and good leader and a toxic, narcissistic leader.

**Positives Aspects of Narcissistic Leadership**
For the past two decades, an ongoing applied research study found that high-performing business leaders possess a common set of leadership characteristics and practices that allow them to regularly produce exceptional performance. The successful leaders create clear focus on desired outcomes, properly equip their operations for high performance and build strong working relationships. Leaders in this group work diligently to create a climate where processes and people are constantly developed and employees receive continuing feedback and coaching (Longenecker, 2011). These qualities that focus on innovation, energy, and creativity are all positive aspects of narcissistic leadership.

One of the important factors that have evolved in the literature that has helped to separate toxic, narcissistic leaders from positive leaders is integrity. Integrity indicates that a person is trustworthy, ethical, and honest. Important indicators of integrity include (a) the ability to keep promises, (b) the ability to keep confidential information secret, and (c) the ability to take responsibility for one’s actions (Yukl, 2006). According to Yukl, integrity is customarily linked to ethical leadership (2006). Furthermore, not only is integrity important to ethical leadership, but it also appears to be important for effective leadership (Blair, Hoffman, & Helland, 2008). McCall and Lombardo (1983) found a correlation between integrity and successful leadership as well as an association with lack of integrity and leadership ineffectiveness. Moreover, McCall and Lombardo suggest that a manager’s actions must be consistent with his/her promises. They observed, “Integrity . . . seems to be the core method of keeping a large, amorphous organization from collapsing on its own confusion” (p.11).

In terms of integrity and positive leadership, there are behaviors associated with narcissism that are important indicators that a leader lacks integrity. Particularly, narcissists fail
to admit when they have made a mistake and often blame others for errors that they might make. Additionally, narcissists have a tendency to exploit and manipulate others to reach their own goals (Kets de Vries & Miller, 1985). They often want to take superfluous credit for success. As such, narcissistic leaders are less likely to engage in pro-social organizational behavior and more likely to deceive and violate integrity principles (Chen, 2010). Essentially, they crave attention and the acclamation of others so they always want the credit.

Kellerman (2004) makes a strong case for the consideration and studying of both sides of the leadership equation. While most individuals are generally more drawn to the good guy scenarios, Kellerman suggests that if one does not also seriously address the “worst-case scenarios” people will remain susceptible to the famous warning, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” (Kellerman, 2004). Unfortunately, says Kellerman, history has revealed to us time and time again that people can achieve and maintain power and control while being completely unethical and narcissistically self-serving.

Kellerman (2004) claims that there are a myriad of reasons for bad leadership. While leaders can simply be guilty of making an honest mistake, this is not always the case. They can be lazy, inept, and corrupt. They can also dictators with an autocratic style of leadership. They can lack cognitive intelligence and emotional intelligence. Worse, they can be malignant narcissists who are heartlessly aggressive and sociopathic in their relations with all others, including family, friends, and foes (Gini & Green, 2012). Narcissistic leaders are willing to run over anybody who is standing in their way.

Toxic, narcissistic leadership can take a toll on corporate culture, organizational morale, and company profits. Additionally many bad leaders are compulsive liars, sociopathic in their
interactions with others and completely deceitful in their use of power. Because of their ineffectiveness, these leaders have damaged the lives of both individuals and nations, and who, in the business world, have had a negative financial impact on corporations (Gini & Green, 2012). They often leave at that point and others are left to fix the problems that they caused.

To consider the positive and negative aspects of narcissistic leadership, researchers have classified what is referred to as the “bright side” and “dark side” of personality and narcissistic leadership. On the positive side, researchers have examined and determined that successful leaders can be characterized by high self-esteem, self-efficacy, and having control over one’s emotion (O’Reilly, Doerr, Caldwell, & Chatman, 2014). Gupta and Spangler (2012) claimed that the dominance and extraversion components of narcissism have positive effects on firm performance in difficult environments and situations. Additional studies found that elements of narcissism such as dominance and vision have positive results under certain conditions (Campbell & Campbell, 2009). This is because not all of the traits that narcissistic leaders possess are negative and they can actually do some good things as leaders.

Exhibited against the potentially positive results of narcissism is an array of evidence detailing its negative impact. Narcissistic leaders are generally more likely to have unhappy employees and create damaging workplaces (Thompson, 2011). Narcissists have also been shown to hinder the exchange of information within organizations (Nevicka, De Hoogh, Van Vianen, Beersma, & McIlwain, 2011) and to reject negative feedback.

**Examining the Leadership of Paul before His Conversion**

The biography of the apostle Paul can easily be divided into two sections: life before his conversion and his life after his conversion. Paul was clearly a narcissistic leader before his
conversion and then the Holy Spirit’s work in his life changed his leadership from being narcissistic to act as a more positive leader, yet his personality did not change. A closer examination of the life of Paul reveals that there is often a thin line between a narcissistic leader who brings negativity and toxic elements to organizations and strong leaders who share the same general personality of the narcissistic leader but have submitted their lives to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Paul was born in Tarsus, the capital city of Cilicia and he was given the Jewish name Saul by his parents (Goodspeed, 1947). Tarsus was large city that was located on the old trade route that connected Rome and Asia. This enabled Paul to learn many things from the Hellenistic traditions and develop a broad understanding of the world during the reign of Augustus (Harrer, 1940). Paul was a Roman citizen and also a Hebrew, so his father or another male ascendant would have likely been granted Roman freedom at some point in their family history (Herrer, 1940). Paul was raised in a middle-class household, but he was not a part of the wealthy and elite society.

Even though Paul’s family was not in the top level of society in regards to wealth, his family was very devout in their faith and Paul had a future as a Jewish leader. Paul was raised in a Pharisaic home in which he studied the Law at a young age and he was very proud of his Jewish tradition (Deissmann, 1972). As a result of his family’s heritage, education, and time in Jerusalem, Paul belonged to a committed and elite group of Pharisaic Jews who had the reputation of strictly interpreting the law (Awwad, 2011).

Paul received a top-notch Jewish education as a child in Tarsus, but then he moved to Jerusalem to study under the great teacher Gamaliel when he was around 12-13 years old.
PAUL’S NARCISSISTIC NATURE

(Sanders, 1991). He was taught by this group that it was possible for a Jew be in right standing with God if they lived a pious and good life. This sense of superiority was the basis of the pride of the Pharisees (Goodspeed, 1947). Thus, Paul was not simply an ordinary Jew, but a fanatic who thought of himself as blameless before God (Awwad, 2011), which led to an inflated ego.

Paul became very prideful regarding his childhood, training, and education (Martin, 1964). Stom (2006) describes his way of thinking as “A closed circle of elitist logic assured the noble man of his superiority” (p. 5). In this way, Paul’s childhood developed many narcissistic tendencies such as: (a) sense of entitlement, (b) selfishness, (c) lust for power, (d) insensitivity, and (e) demands for unquestioned allegiance (Cooper, 2011). Paul had a very strong personality, an excellent Jewish education, and the desire to move up the ranks in Judaism. His narcissistic tendencies were magnified as he persecuted the church.

Paul took the responsibility of persecuting the church with great zeal (Sanders, 1991). Paul explains this zeal in Galatians 1:13-14,

For you have heard of my former manner of life in Judaism, how I used to persecute the church of God beyond measure, and tried to destroy it; and I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely jealous for my ancestral traditions.

Paul displayed these jealous fits for Judaism by taking his persecution of the church to great extremes. Paul states in Acts 22:5 that the high priest and all of the Jewish leaders knew of his extreme zeal as he sought letters from them to have the authority to arrest Christians in Damascus and bring them back to Jerusalem. This trip to Damascus was a large undertaking as
it was approximately 100 miles north of Jerusalem (Swindoll, 2002). However, Paul did more than simply imprison Christians for their faith. Acts 26:9-10 states,

So then, I thought to myself that I had to do many things hostile to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And this is what I did in Jerusalem; not only did I lock up saints in prisons, having received authority from the chief priests, but also when they were being put to death I cast my vote against them.

Paul’s motives were most likely twofold. On one hand, he viewed himself as a defender of the Jewish faith, but he also looked forward to the day when he could become a member of the Jewish Supreme Court, the Sanhedrin (Swindoll, 2002). As a narcissistic leader who displayed arrogance, a sense of entitlement, ruthlessness, and a lust for power, Paul was very successful in his persecution of the church. Wiersbe (1989) explains Paul’s mindset:

Jesus of Nazareth is dead. Do you expect me to believe that a crucified nobody is the promised Messiah? According to our Law, anybody who is hung on a tree is cursed. Would God take a cursed false prophet and make him the Messiah? No! His followers are preaching that Jesus is both alive and doing miracles through them. But their power comes from Satan, not God. This is a dangerous sect, and I intend to eliminate it before it destroys our historic Jewish faith” (p. 438).

The combative tone and competitive spirit that Paul had before his conversion were characteristics that were common to elite groups in which people were selfish and lusted for power (Murphy-O’Connor, 1996), which embodies the traits of a narcissistic leader.

Paul’s Leadership after His Conversion
Saul was nearing the end of his journey to Damascus to persecute the church when he was blinded and finally recognized the ultimate power in life comes God (Wilson, 2014). The Damascus road conversion was a supernatural and magnificent event that clearly resulted in a complete overhaul for Paul’s beliefs and theology (Awwad, 2011). As a result of Paul’s encounter with God on the road to Damascus, Paul lost his sight and waited in a house in Damascus for Ananias to come, lay hands on him, and pray for him (Acts 9). At this point, Rabens (2009) explains that Paul had an infusion of the Holy Spirit and the trajectory of Paul’s leadership changed from being a narcissistic leader to a strong leader that was controlled by God.

Paul’s personality did not change as a result of his conversion, but his spirit, mind, and body changed as he exchanged a lust for personal power to a desire to serve God no matter the cost. Paul spent close to three years in solitude after the Damascus road experience and during that time his entire life, including his leadership style was changed. Stott (1968) explains that:

He went into Arabia for quiet and solitude. He seems to have stayed there for three years. In this period of withdrawal, as he meditated on the Old Testament Scriptures, on the facts of the life and the death of Jesus that he already knew and on his experience of conversion, the gospel of the grace of God was revealed to him in its fullness. Now he had Jesus to himself, as it were, for three years of solitude in the wilderness. (p. 34)

Paul desperately needed those years to spend with God so that he could rework his theology and his way of living. It was during this time that Paul was radically transformed from a narcissistic leader to a positive leader. His personality remained the same, but he gave the control of his life to God.
After this time, Paul was given the name of Paul, instead of the name Saul that he had received as a child. Paul means little, but the idea that Paul is small was most likely not given purely because of his physical stature. McDonough (2006) explains that the name change that is recorded in Acts 13 is symbolic, as he made the transition from a proud “big man” who oppressed the church to a servant of the “little” messianic offspring of David. This name change was significant because Paul’s time, leadership meant rank, position, right, and responsibility as the social network of the time was like a modern pyramid scheme in which those at the top never really worked as they worked to impress others (Strom, 2006). Strom (2006) continues to explain that the entire social network hinged on ancient demarcations of rank such as free, slave, and many other levels that separated those who were born free. Therefore, it is important to note that Paul’s entire worldview was changed by God as he no longer desired the prestige and power associated with Jewish leadership, but he wanted to use his leadership influence to strengthen the church, many times at his own personal expense and eventually his life (Dailey, 1990). Paul lost his selfish ambition as his only ambition became one of making Christ known to all people (Rom 15:20).

This attitude change caused Paul to be much less rigid in his interactions with people. He could no longer gallivant and act as a toxic narcissistic leader. Essentially, Paul’s leadership changed from one that tried to make everybody conform to his strict understanding of Judaism to being a leader who became all things to all people (Strom, 2006; 1 Cor 9:22). The leadership framework that Paul had before his conversion was radically changed and his leadership and work after his conversion was radical as he worked to “neutralize the grip of every social convention that tied the hearts and minds of his co-workers and converts to the current world
order” (Strom, 2006, p. 4). Paul still had vision, motivation, charisma, initiative, and many other positive traits that Cooper (2011) describes as positive aspects of narcissistic leaders, but his leadership was quite different from the current idea of leadership of Paul’s time. “We think of Paul as a leader, but in the terms of his own day, perhaps it is becoming clearer that he was anti-leadership. Leadership equaled rank. But not for Paul, as he had seen in the example of Jesus” (Strom, 2006, p. 6). The leadership of Paul and Jesus focused on the Kingdom of God and other people, and often meant suffering and service for the leader.

Effective leaders must demonstrate boldness amid opposition. While Paul was regularly met with opposition and often hostility, he persisted with his message despite these hardships. This demonstrated his concern for the truth, not private gain (Morris, 1991). Paul’s leadership style was one in which he exerted influence without asserting authority. In 1 Thessalonians 2:6 Paul states, “even though as apostles of Christ we might have asserted our authority.” This refers to demands that the apostle might have made on the Thessalonians for both physical and financial support. Instead than doing this, Paul worked diligently so as not to be a burden. He lived on what he earned as a tentmaker in addition to the offerings from the Philippians. In doing this, Paul further demonstrated the purity of his motives which, in turn, gave him a platform for influence that did not rely on the authority of his title or position (Whittington, Pitts, Kageler, & Goodwin, 2005).

In writing to the church in Ephesus, Paul specifically addressed the relationships between masters and slaves. In one passage (Eph. 6:5–9), Paul reminds both parties that they are to treat each other with respect “as to the Lord” and then clearly tells the masters to “give up
threatening.” Although Paul possessed the ability to operate from a narcissistic position, his pure motives allowed him to operate from position of selflessness.

Because of his pure motives, Paul was able to be honest and open with his followers. In the ancient Mediterranean world, those who admit publicly that they were wrong would be viewed as weak, but that is precisely what Paul does in 1 Cor 15:8-10 as he admits that he made some mistake in his understanding of Christ and the actions that he took before he became a Christian (Joubert, 2013). This added a moral dimension to Paul’s leadership.

Paul used his leadership to influence people on a moral level (Berry, 2010). Rabens (2009) posits that one’s “moral life should be the natural outflow of the transformed nature of the believers which results from this infusion” (p. 299). Paul’s life was changed when he had an infusion of the Holy Spirit and now his entire leadership paradigm was changed. Instead of using violence and intimidation to force people to change, Paul’s leadership became very thoughtful and deliberate. As Paul interacted with people, he worked to “get individuals within the group or the group as a whole to adopt certain values, goals, practices, or behaviors” (Berry, 2010, p. 2). Paul urged his followers to live his new type of lifestyle in which he is imitating Jesus Christ (Clarke, 1998; 1 Cor 11:1).

Paul’s teaching on sin supports the argument that leaders who are not controlled by the Holy Spirit are likely to become narcissistic in their leadership (Berry, 2010). Paul even uses the concept of personified power to illustrate the nature of sin that seeks to enslave and dominate people (Rom 6:12; 6:20; 7:14). Those who do not know Christ are slaves to sin and under the power of Satan, but the death to life dynamic that Paul explains in Romans 6 emphasizes the new life and identity that Christians can have in Christ as they are controlled by the Holy Spirit.
PAUL’S NARCISSTIC NATURE

(Berry, 2010). Ejenobo posits that “spiritual influence is only possible with those who live and walk in the Spirit” (p. 70). It is interesting to note that in the life of Paul, God gave him a physical thorn in the flesh and different health issues to remind him that he was a human being who was always in need (Deissmann, 1972). This caused Paul to learn that his strengths were really found in his weaknesses when Christ could be seen most clearly (Deissmann, 1972). It is easy for leaders to become prideful when they experience success, but God used Paul’s frail body and health problems to remind him that he was dependent on God for everything that he does and even for his physical health.

A final aspect of Paul’s change in leadership was that he was able to add a tender nature to his personality that helped him to balance his harsh side (Deissmann, 1972). Paul frequently wept with those who were suffering (Deissmann, 1972), which is ironic considering the life that Paul lived before his conversion. Even after his conversion, Paul retained an attitude of intolerance that was used by God as he clearly did not tolerate his opponents and those who were not doing the will of God (Deissmann, 1972). However, it is the balance that the Holy Spirit provided in the life of Paul that allowed him to use his natural narcissistic leadership style for God’s glory and to build the church. When Paul became a Christian, he perceived the glory of God that his main goal in life was the encourage others to follow God (Duff, 2008). His selfish ambition and pride were washed clean by the work of God in his life.

Implications for Christian Leaders who Possess Narcissistic Traits

Given the many attributes and examples of narcissistic leaders, one might wonder how any strong case might be made for an upside. Regardless of the advisability of placing narcissists in leadership positions, the fact is that narcissists lead numerous countries,
organizations, and groups. Because of this, “the challenge . . . is to ensure that such leaders do not self-destruct or lead . . . to disaster (Maccoby, 2000, p.71). A number of approaches have been proposed to address this task. For example, Kets de Vries (1997) suggests safeguards such as organizational checks and balances, honest feedback, and executive training to keep narcissistic leaders in check. Kets de Vries and Miller (1997) recommend evading the problem by limiting narcissists’ influence, transferring them out of harm’s way, and keeping inexperienced and insecure subordinates out of their reach and influence. Finally, Kramer (2003) suggests that narcissistic leaders should “retain a . . . sense of proportion and . . . self-awareness” (p.64), ultimately keeping their lives simple, nurturing their humility, understanding their weaknesses, and regularly reflecting on everything they do. While such suggestions may be prudent for those who may wish to enhance and improve their leadership abilities, it is far from clear that they will be the types of practices to which any narcissist would be agreeable (Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006).

An examination of the leadership throughout the life of Paul indicates that he started as a toxic narcissistic leader and developed into an effective leader who still retained the personality of a narcissistic leader. The difference between his two states of leadership was that his positive leadership style was marked by the leading of the Holy Spirit. As the Holy Spirit worked in his life, his humility was nurtured and he began to understand that his weaknesses were opportunities to display the work and glory of God in his life. Paul’s nature was transformed by God and this is ultimately the difference between toxic narcissistic leaders and leaders who naturally have narcissistic personalities that are able to be viewed as positive leaders. This is the crux of Paul’s message in Romans that explains how Christians needs to have their mind and
nature renewed so that they can live a life that is worthy of the calling that God has placed on them.
References


