



Multiple faces of narcissistic leadership in Medical Education

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Abstract

Narcissism, being the critical part of the toxic leadership paradigm, has its own impact in the education sphere. Contrastingly, leader's narcissism cannot be simply underweighted because such leaders often tend to be creative strategists who can take risky challenges to suffice the self-ego and leave behind a legacy as well. This commentary intends to portray the complex mosaic of the positive and negative consequences inbred in a narcissistic leader. The debate over whether these people provide a net gain or loss remains everlasting because it varies based on the organizational climate and also other contextual factors.

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How far leader's narcissism can impact health-care organization

"Narcissists are concerned with getting ahead, not getting along...." (1)

Over the years, as the importance of leadership in healthcare settings is being more perceived, the concept of it has evolved from a top-down paternalistic or authoritarian model, where the leader unleashes the power to demand work from his subordinates to a more collaborative one. Similarly, the influence of darker personality traits such as narcissism in healthcare leadership is being more emphasized (2). Often we could witness a senior physician who by virtue of age or academic merit occupies the department chair and it is not always necessary that he/she would acquire leadership skills out of bolt. In fact, a person who is self-immersed in his own endeavours and lacking system's perspective might not turn out to be an authentic leader. Any health care organization is a conglomerate of processes and people utilizing the resources

available and working together. Narcissism, being the critical part of the toxic leadership paradigm, has its own impact in the education sphere. Contrastingly, leader's narcissism cannot be simply underweighted because such leaders often tend to be creative strategists who can take risky challenges to suffice the self-ego and leave behind a legacy as well (3).

Beholding the traditional "leader-centricity", a narcissist leader believes that the outcome of the organization is solely because of his/her activities and many a times get rewarded inappropriately (4). Quoting a real life example, consider a department chair yelling, "There is nothing an early career faculty can tell me that I don't already know". A narcissist leader, whether emerging internally in an organization or recruited from outside, generate perturbation in the system by engaging in self-presentational pompous activities (5). Owing to this, an organization views them with awe because they easily break the barriers and infuse waves of

shock amidst the stakeholders. In the due course of time, some elements of organization begin to resist the risky reforms, question the motives and appraise the leader based on effectiveness (6). This is the point of frame, when the organization fizzles out and the arrogance, which was considered as an incremental force, shows its darker side. As these leaders, tend to brush aside the germane suggestions of colleagues and remain vengefully hostile to an insult, they begin defending maniacally and shift the blame on others. Thus, the organizational behaviour of a narcissist leader depend entirely on whether he or she keeps on getting credited for their successes and thereby feeding their idiosyncratic self-centered ego. Also, with growing acquaintance people, who have once perceived them as being effective leaders, tend to develop unfavourable impressions.

In other domains, a narcissist leader often remains as a poor mentor because they neither harbour empathy nor demonstrate emotional contagion. This end up in negative mentoring experiences and thus culminating as short-term relationships with mentees and colleagues (7). They do not offer equal opportunities to subordinates as they are pre-occupied with self-promotion and self-nomination, which negatively afflicts the growth of early career faculty. This costs much in inter-professional teams whereby the narcissist leader tries to inflate his / her positive input and fails to acknowledge the positive input of others. Similarly, they try to derogate others to pamper their self-esteem and aggress those who give negative feedback (3).

What makes an individual turn narcissistic?

Does this imply that a narcissist in an organization is all-malevolent? Every one of us, particularly in this "Generation Me" hyper-competitive environment tend to demonstrate narcissism in a way or another, failing in which we are afraid of losing our position in the organization we exist. In fact, narcissism tend to stretch from infancy to adulthood and is interpreted as a psychological defence against the indifferences and rejections we face in our lives which are manifesting as internal pressures and contingencies (8). We often encounter senior physicians who present an unusual degree of self-reference in their routine interactions and inordinately expect self-tribute from others. In fact, some of them fall prey to the susceptible circle of opportunistic followers, who trigger the narcissism for their own benefits. Thus, narcissism can be considered as a paradox which makes a person to maintain affirmative relationships with

the environment *per se* but not to other persons over there.

The strengths of narcissistic leaders lie in their visionary qualities (9) and this may 'trickle-down' the organizational hierarchy influencing the subordinates in a positive way. They can also convince the other stakeholders of an organization, owing to the infusion of enthusiasm and launching newer reforms. In contexts of organizational uncertainty, for example, when an institute is facing a crisis in terms of increasing student failure rate or inertia prevailing among faculty, narcissists are deemed as suitable leaders, as they tend to take risky decisions and outweigh the liabilities (10). Nevertheless, in adverse situations, they tend to incur more damage and leave the damaged system at times of irreparable crises.

How to perceive and manage the narcissistic leader?

"Narcissist leader" is someone similar to a complex mosaic because of the positive and negative consequences inbred in him/her. The debate over whether these people provide a net gain or loss remains everlasting because it varies based on the organizational climate and also other contextual factors. Any organization cannot restrict them from occupying the leadership positions and in a "me-me" generation like ours, a narcissist has more chances to get into power. Narcissism can be compared with fire. Research using diffusion tractography imaging (11) has identified significant associations between narcissistic traits and weakened integrity of white matter in the fronto-striatal pathway, which implies that these traits are seldom erasable. In a positive sense, it could bring organizational change and diffusion of innovations and in a negative sense, it could turn out to be self-serving and nihilistic.

It is strongly recommended for any health care organizations to adopt robust recruitment process or succession planning so that the morale and vitality could be maintained (12). More than the glam filled curriculum vitae and flamboyant impression generated at the first sight of the person, it is the decision making ability and skills for maintaining constructive relationships, which helps the organization to thrive. To some extent, the management should try to develop leadership development programmes and evaluation methodologies to mitigate the negative effects, if any. These persons, if made to develop a strong sense of team cohesion can easily be made to adopt group norms and empathize by virtue of peer pressure. The same team can act as "enforcers" to provide constructive feedback and

this avoids the dangerous face to face conflicts,

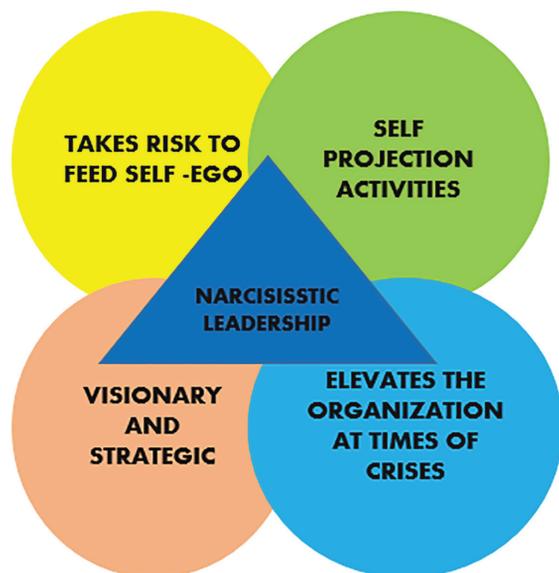


Figure 1: Schematic representation depicting mosaic like key traits of narcissistic leadership

as well. If situation goes overboard like spoiling the healthy trajectory or undue suppression of juniors, then appropriate mitigation interventions are required on a case-case basis (Figure 1).

Conclusion

It is not uncanny for any person to be concerned with the negative impacts when narcissists gain leadership positions. In the face of current hypercompetitive environments, encountering narcissism is almost inevitable. We need to perceive both positive and negative senses of narcissism and the main aim of this article is to provide a nuanced view related to this. The current state of awareness regarding the outcomes of narcissism at various levels is scarce and further empirical reviews are warranted to inspire fruitful theory building and interventions. More than individual awareness, organizations need to know better about these impacts because

narcissistic leaders on one hand, can self-destroy and lead their workplace terribly astray. On the other hand, a controlled narcissist can yield the sweetest results to the place where he belongs to.

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