
Three Questions Humble Leaders Ask



By , INSEAD Adjunct Professor of Strategy

To avoid falling victim to narcissistic tendencies, leaders need to look outside in more ways than one.

My office window looks out on the only grassed square in my neighbourhood. The view is wonderful: toddlers stumbling along playing tag, love-struck teenagers flirting shyly, fathers patiently playing ball with their offspring, hopeful they have an Olympics contender in the making.

As a supervisory board member of several companies, I often have to make difficult telephone calls over the course of the day; it may be to address conflicts in the boardroom or discuss tricky takeovers or remuneration issues. In each case, a quick glance out of the window during these conversations provides perspective and significantly improves my mood, which clearly benefits the outcome of the discussions.

It is a shame then that so many directors' offices are without such a view and are often far away from the ordinary world.

Narcissistic leaders

Research conducted by my INSEAD colleague, Professor Manfred Kets de Vries, among others, suggests **narcissism is a frequent occurrence among management's upper echelons**. In fact the number of narcissists in top management is clearly above average, although it is impossible to say exactly how many because narcissism is not black and white: it is a sliding scale. A degree of narcissism is required to be an inspirational and visionary leader, someone with the courage to take unconventional steps in disruptive environments. Too much narcissism, however, leads to megalomania, manipulative behaviour and a focus on one's own power and status instead of the interests of the company, employees and clients.

Narcissism doesn't just happen; the foundation is laid by a combination of innate personality traits and childhood experiences. It only truly reveals itself as an individual attains increasing power and success, and is most obvious in organisations with large hierarchical distances where great importance is attached to status.

According to academic literature, external indicators for narcissism include the frequency with which a manager uses 'I' instead of 'we', how prominently they feature in the news, and the distance between their remuneration and that of the rest of the organisation. To this list I have personally and subjectively added, an attractive, young, second (or third) wife, a luxury company car and prestigious additional functions.

Three questions to staying grounded

So, what role does my office window play in preventing excessive narcissism? As a manager, it is important to keep your feet firmly on the ground. To do this, leaders need to look at three aspects of their lives and regularly ask themselves: am I surrounded by enough critical voices? Is there enough adversity? And, have I kept contact with the world outside the office?

Critical voices can come from many sides. On a personal level, from censorious teenagers and one's (first) spouse who knows you inside out. At a professional level you can regularly ask for feedback from employees. Evaluations from young employees in particular can be ruthless but very enlightening. And of course you can surround yourself with colleagues, and supervisory board members, who won't accept things at face value.

When it comes to adversity, setbacks cannot be planned but I can't help but be sceptical if a manager has always prospered. Adversity teaches us that

we cannot have control over everything. It makes us less likely to judge others. How an individual deals with adversity and what he/she learns from it is one of the most meaningful indicators of sustained success.

Finding another perspective

Finally, how do we stay in contact with the real world? It's not easy for today's managers to remain open to customers, staff and the people on the street, when they spend the majority of their time in transit or shuttered in meeting rooms, usually in the company of other directors. However, taking time to spend a day in your organisation's call-centre speaking to dissatisfied customers, or visiting customers' homes with the technical team, can be well worthwhile. Tony Ball, a non-executive board director at British Telecom, tells the story of the day he went 'on the job' and discovered how inventive engineers managed to avoid unnecessary bureaucratic rules to genuinely assist customers. The CEO of one of the companies where I am a board member holds regular 'fireplace meetings' with young staff members in all the countries where they are active.

By taking a more humble, grounded approach and seeking advice from a different perspective, managers can contain inherent egocentricity and avoid the trappings of narcissism.

Of course it helps to be able to view the real world through your window, and be reminded that power and happiness are two separate things.

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