

## **THE DARK SIDE AND THE BRIGHT SIDE OF NARCISSISTIC LEADERSHIP: A CRITICAL REVIEW**

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### **Abstract**

*Narcissism is a psychological term which is known as self-worship. The term is also known as boastfulness, self-admiration, grandness, pretentiousness and selfcentredness. Self-admiration seems like wonderful and it is accepted as the main principle of the modern society. However, further cases of self-admiration can lead to narcissism. According to the recent researches, we come across with narcissists everywhere and they have been increasing rapidly. Thus, it is known as the disease of our age. Researchers characterize narcissist leaders as authoritative, selfish, self oriented and destructive leaders who don't rely on their employees. These types of leaders exhibit bad behaviour which may destruct the wellness of the employees and the organization. Even if just a pinch, it is possible to find some researches which examine the narcissist leaders in positive means. In this context, the main goal of this study is to examine the term of narcissist leader's reflections on the organizations and the employees in both possible and negative means.*

*Keywords: Leadership, Narcissism, Narcissistic personality, Narcissistic leaders, Narcissist Leadership, Dark Leadership*

## INTRODUCTION

The term of leadership has excited the attention of both researchers and various research institutions (Jomah, 2017, p.197). Especially the academic studies about the leadership show a massive increase (Martinelli & Erzikova, 2017, p. 2). In this process, the disciplines like management, psychology, sociology, political sciences, public administration and educational administration performed studies about leadership and still these studies continue. Thus, leadership is accepted as an interdisciplinary subject (Yukl, 1989, p. 251).

Yet, the thoughts about leadership has shown remarkable differences recently because people are more conscious and educated (Adair, 2005, p. 9). For this reason, followers cannot be managed easily like the old times. According to the studies conducted on leadership, good leadership motivates followers and helps to the goals of organization. On the other hand, poor leadership reduce the quality of everyone affected (Blair, et al., 2008, s. 254). Poor leadership arises from the low leadership morality (Hogan & Kaiser, 2005, p. 169). Unfortunately, poor leadership can be more common than good leadership (Blair, et al., 2008, p. 254).

One type of the poor leadership which has been attracting the attention of the researchers is the narcissist leadership. It is possible to find many studies about the narcissist leadership in the international literature when examined (Braun, 2017; Brunell, et al., 2008; Deluga, 1997; Gimsø, 2014; Higgs, 2009; Ong, et al., 2016; Horwitz, 2000; Judge, 2006; Kearney, 2010; Maccoby, 2001; Ouimet, 2010). However, it is understood from these researches that they lack of knowledge about who a narcissist leader is and how it should be measured. Rosenthal and Pittinsky (2006) classified narcissist leadership as a different type of leadership while Padilla et al., (2007) classified it in relation with destructive leadership. In other respects, Deluga (1997) claimed narcissist leadership and charismatic leadership have much in common. In this study, the narcissist leaders were examined in both their good and bad qualities. Yet, narcissism must be understood first to understand narcissist leaders. Thus, narcissism was explained briefly in the following part.

## OVERVIEW OF NARCISSISM

The term of narcissism is based on Greek mythology. It comes from Narcissus who saw his reflection in the water and fell in love with himself (Braun, 2017, p. 3; Brunell, et al., 2008, p. 1663; Campbell, 1999, p. 1254; Wallace & Baumeister, 2002, p. 81; Young & Pinsky, 2006, p. 464). According to legend, water nymph Echo fell in love with Narcissus. When Narcissus refused her, she disappeared forever (Twenge & Campbell, 2010, p. 44). Therefore, Narcissus was damned by the gods. One day he tried to hug his reflection in the water and choked to death. His body turned into narcissus after his death (Campbell, 1999, p. 1254). Afterwards, this

figure was used in psychology literature as the symbols of self-admiration. The usage of the term of narcissism started 100 years ago (McCullough, et al., 2003, p. 885). The term “Narcissism” was introduced by the English sexologist Havelock Ellis in 1898 (Ackerman, et al., 2011, p. 68).

Ellis (1898) used this character in the Greek mythology to express the obsessional self-admiration (Gimsø, 2014, p. 15). He used the term “Narcissus like” to explain this tendency. One year later, Nacke wrote a summary of Ellis’s in German and used the term “Narcissimus”, which implies one’s attitude to his body as a sex object and refers sexual perversion. Although Nacke wasn’t known in German psychology, his reference on this subject attracted Freud’s attention (Raskin & Terry, 1988, p. 890). Sigmund Freud included the narcissism first time as a footnote in his study of “Three Essays on The theory of Sexuality” in 1910 (Pulver, 1970, s. 321-322). He wrote another article named “On Narcissism: An Introduction” in 1914. This article made narcissism a popular term and led it have its place in modern psychoanalysis (Tyler, 2007, p. 344). Freud approached narcissism differently than Ellis and Nacke. According to him, narcissism is not a perversion but stems from the instinct of self protection (Freud, 2017, p. 25). Narcissism is a more complex term than the first imageries (Arjoon, 2010, s. 62). Therefore, it can be understood that a consensus couldn’t be arrived after the studies conducted by Freud. At the present time, narcissism is more understood as the excessive humour of self-righteousness, self-centeredness and self-importance by groups or individuals (Humphreys, Zhao, Ingram, Gladstone, & Basham, 2010, s. 122). Although it was firstly known by Psychology and Clinical Psychology, it became a subject matter of other disciplines too. Especially in the recent years, an increase in the numbers of international studies which deal with the reflections of narcissism on organizations can be examined (Atay, 2009, s. 181).

## **NARCISSISTIC LEADERSHIP**

It is a known truth that different leaders around the world have different kinds of leadership qualities. Their power and inevitable fall depend on their narcissist personality. Many writers who have conducted researches on this subject generally described these leaders’ strengths, weaknesses, decisions and arrogant behaviours by avoiding the use of the term “narcissism” (Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006, p. 617); however, understanding the reason of leaders’ selfish and arrogant behaviours enable us to understand their incomprehensible decisions and acts.

Narcissist leader is a person who changes the needs and interests of the organization he leads according to his own selfish needs and beliefs (Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006, p. 629; Stein, 2013, p. 282). The list of narcissist leaders can be counted as Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin

and Saddam Hussein. This list of historical dictators can be extended with some business leaders like Steve Jobs, Michael Eisner, David Geffen and Kenneth Lay (Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006, p. 618). The power which pushes these narcissist people to their leadership position is the desire for power they need to obtain to shape the external world according to their own visions. The reason of this is to build a world which makes themselves relieve of their internal conflicts (Glad, 2012, p. 25).

The researchers haven't come to an agreement about what narcissist leadership is and how it should be measured yet. This situation continues in our age. The articles written about the subject consist of literature scannings. It can be understood that the views about the narcissist leadership split into two groups when the relative literature scanned. Some researchers have seen it as a different type of leadership. Others have conceptualized it in some essential types of leaderships like charismatic leadership (Schmidt, 2008, p. 10). Especially the studies about reflections of narcissist leadership on the organizations have been increasing. Besides, the narcissist leaders affect the organizations both in positive and negative ways according to the studies (O'Reilly, et al., 2014, p. 218).

### **DARK SIDE OF NARCISSIST LEADERSHIP**

Narcissism is generally a hidden motive to get leadership position. According to the studies, the people who have narcissist features are more willing to handle this challenging process of being a leader (Kets De Vries & Miller, 1984, p. 7). Thus, it is more possible them to be seen in the front in the organizations. However, a narcissist who captures the absolute power becomes uncontrollable after a while (Allio, 2007, p. 13).

Many researchers think that narcissism is related with destructive leadership. These types of leaders always seek attention, see themselves privileged and abuse their power. Their type of leadership is generally authoritative (Padilla, et al., 2007, p. 181). They listen less by the time they rise. They ignore the people who contradict with them instead of persuading (Maccoby, 2002, p. 45). They don't trust their subordinates and environment. They know the truth of everything. They don't like the people who don't think like them. Their garish and unreal visions lead to bad results. The negative sides of the narcissist leaders can be summarized as the following.

#### **Requirement of Power**

Power and the desire of control are uncontrollable needs for narcissist leader. They want to centralise power because of the belief that they can lead their subordinates better that way. Thus, it will perform better and more effective for the organization. A leader who is equipped

with full authority result in giving effective and quick decisions or creating dangers (Fuller, et al., 2018, p. 9). According to the famous historian Paul Kennedy (1987), a country's or an empire's resources may be in threat when a narcissist leader takes the control of power. This situation can be illustrated with the Adolf Hitler from Germany and Napoleon from France (Padilla, et al., 2007, p. 181). Situation is valid for organizations too.

### **Always Knowing the Single Truth**

Narcissist leaders can't stand difference of opinion. They may be offending to the subordinates who are enough courageous to resist them (Maccoby, 2002, p. 46). Because a narcissist generally thinks that he always knows the truth in the means that he doesn't listen to others. Thus, the consultants around this leader consist of the people who only talks about what his leader wants to hear. This makes the narcissist leader get away from the realities. By the time, they start to think that they are the only ones who can carry out the goals of their organizations.

### **Distrust to Subordinates**

They think people behave them well just for their own interests. They avoid from real intimacy. They always have suspicions about the real intents of the people (Behary, 2014, p. 63). Although narcissist leaders don't trust to the people around them, they trust in their spouses because they have already bore their feelings which can cause narcissists to get away from their organizations (Maccoby, 2000, p. 6). This situation threatens the futures of their organizations.

### **Jealousy**

Narcissist leaders think that they are envied by others. In reality, they envy others in an extreme manner. The main reason that they are jealous of others is that they are afraid that they will lose their power. This feeling is common among narcissists who are worried of a shift in the power balance. Jealousy can usually be expressed in behaviors like humiliation and ambitious leadership rivalries, but it also can be expressed in the propulsion that is caused by adulation. In this way, the jealous leader who is using humiliation gets rid off the things that make him feel vile (Hotchkiss, 2014, p. 172).

### **Ignoring the Organizational Goals Because of Charisma and Strong image**

Narcissist leaders must spend their energies for their images in the eyes of public instead of using it for the benefit of their followers, goals of their organizations and customer based targets

(Resick, et al., 2009, p. 1367) because they should be perceived as heroes in front of their followers. He must be a person which their followers intend to be like him but can never be.

### **Patience Until Achieving the Goal**

Narcissist leaders are patient until they reach their goal. They hide their main goal until the time comes, despite they give different promises to their followers. One example is HabibBurgiba, one of the outstanding leaders that caused Tunisia to gain independence from France. He promised his people to establish a democratic state, to give importance to women's rights and to establish a secular state until he became the president. But after he was president for nineteen years, he wasn't even using the word "democracy" anymore. He became an authoritarian who was unable to endure criticism and he declared himself president for the rest of his life.

### **Pursuit of Praise**

Another aspect of the jealousy process is the pursuit of praise of the narcissist leader to satisfy his narcissistic needs. The behavior that implies "flatter me" is a sign of an instantaneous insecurity (Hotchkiss, 2014, p. 173). The praises that the narcissist leader gets after he gave an effective speech is supporting his self-confidence and belief. But if nobody gives positive feedback after the speech, the narcissist leader becomes insecure, fragile and insistent. But there are threats of giving positive reactions to narcissist leaders. The narcissist leader becomes more self-confident and he starts to act more spontaneously as the result of these praises. He feels that he is free from any restraints. This gives confidence to the narcissist leader and excitement to his supporters (Maccoby, 2002, p. 44-45).

### **A Relationship Based on Self-Interest**

When the behaviors of a leader become exaggerated, when they don't get along with the real world or when they completely become tools of gain, he can seriously harm the organization (Conger, 1990, p. 44). Therefore, leadership means putting desires aside (Walters,2006, p. 41). But the case is different for a narcissist leader. Narcissist leaders usually use others to accomplish their own goals (Allio, 2007, p. 13). This kind of leaders does not establish long-term positive and intimate relations. But they are very talented in establishing good relationships to become more popular and achieve a high status in the short run (Buffardi& Campbell, 2008, p. 1304).

### **Lack of Empathy**

Despite they are seeking to be exposed to empathy, narcissist leaders don't show empathy. Actually, lack of empathy is present in many prominent leaders in the business world. This is a personal deficiency of many charismatic and successful narcissist leaders, even for Bill Gates and Andy Grove. This deficiency is not only present in the leaders of the business world, but also in leaders outstanding in history like Churchill, de Gaulle, Stalin or Mao Zedong (Maccoby, 2002, p. 47-48). Narcissist leaders are at the center of everything. They don't care about what others feel. It's all about themselves. This causes the subordinates to hate their leaders and eventually they quit from their jobs.

### **To Dislike Counselling**

Lack of empathy prevents narcissists to give or take advice. Generally, narcissist leaders don't like giving advice. They seldom give advice to others. And when they do, they expect from the people to put into practice their advices (Maccoby, 2002, p. 49). This closed attitude of the narcissist leaders affects the progress of their subordinates. This severely harms the organizational performance. The reason that they don't want to take advice is their ego. The narcissist leader thinks that he knows everything. So, he thinks that he doesn't need to take advice from anyone. The main reason that they don't give advice to their subordinates is that they don't care about their progress. Furthermore, the progress of the subordinates frightens the narcissist leaders because they think that these subordinates may confront them as rivals in the future.

### **Rigid Attitude Towards Subordinates**

The narcissist leader, who wants his power and uniqueness to be realized, generally knows what he wants. Trickery, distortion and seduction are among methods that he will use unhesitantly. The only thing which will bring him shame the most is failure. On such an occasion, empathy towards his subordinates can't even be mentioned (Hotchkiss, 2014, p. 170). Even subtle mistakes of the subordinates get bigger in the eyes of the narcissist leader. For example, it is known that the narcissist leader of the business world Steve Jobs was constantly criticized by researchers due to his arrogant personality and his attitude towards his employees. In a biography of Steve jobs which was confirmed by himself, it is stated that he was sometimes acting rigid and cruel. It is known that Jobs, who was a perfectionist, was humiliating some of his employees which weren't meeting his expectations (Grijalva& Harms, 2014, p. 108).

### **Avoiding from Emotions**

Narcissist leaders avoid emotions because they are tremendously sensitive. They are also putting distance between themselves and other people. They can put a wall between themselves and others that is as thick as a castle (Maccoby, 2002, p. 46). They isolate themselves because they think that they are unprecedented (Allio, 2007, p. 13). Because they have difficulties in identifying or recognizing their own emotions, they feel uncomfortable when other people express their emotions, especially the negative ones (Maccoby, 2002, p. 46).

### **THE BRIGHT SIDE OF NARCISSIST LEADERS**

The good characteristics of narcissist leaders can be listed as the following: Making quick decisions, being open to innovations, being charismatic, gaining supporters quickly and being ambitious.

#### **Making Quick Decisions**

According to some researchers, every narcissist leader isn't a bad one (Allio, 2007, p. 13). Therefore, researchers approach narcissism as a positive characteristic in some exceptional cases. According to these studies, people with high narcissism levels perform more leadership features compared to people with less narcissism levels. Therefore, these people are inclined to be leaders of their own groups (Nevicka, et al., 2011, p. 1259). When they become leaders in the group, they gather all the power in one hand and this paves the way for quick and efficient decisions which may be useful for the whole group (Fuller, et al., 2018, p. 9).

#### **Being Open to Innovations**

The narcissist leaders' effect on the improving business world is an undeniable fact (Maccoby, 2000, s. 1; Maccoby, 2002, p. 37). The reason of this is that the people which show narcissist personalities don't hesitate to take risks. This is why they are more open to innovations (B.Smith& Webster, 2018, p. 67). For example, narcissist leaders like Andrew Carnegie, Henry Ford and John D. Rockefeller are tremendously productive people (Allio, 2007, p. 13). These pioneers have reshaped the American economy by using new technologies. This progress is still carrying on (Maccoby, 2000, p. 1; Maccoby, 2002, p. 37). Furthermore, according to some studies it appeared that some narcissist CEO's have bold visions, that they gain loyal supporters and that they have caused their organizations to accomplish great successes (Allio, 2007, p. 13).

### **Being Charismatic**

Narcissists have an undeniable emotional attraction. Despite they look remote and disinterested; they can use their charm and charisma potentials as a weapon (Atay, 2010, p.133; Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006, p. 627). Researchers like Deluga (1997), King (2007) and Rosenthal & Pittinsky (2006) have examined narcissist leaders' charisma aspect. As the result of these researches, they have claimed that narcissist leaders have a powerful charisma. For example, according to Deluga (1997) USA presidents are tremendously narcissist. This is making them charismatic and causing them to be more successful (p. 61).

### **Gaining Supporters Quickly**

Narcissist leaders are also good at gaining supporters. Most of them achieve this thanks to their speech styles. They believe that effective words can move mountains and that exciting speeches can change people. Most of the narcissist leaders are skilled orators; one of the skills that render them so charismatic is this. Anybody who has seen a narcissist leader while performing a speech can witness their charm and their talent to create excitement among the listeners (Maccoby, 2002, p. 44). The reason that narcissist leaders are good orators is that they can analyze the situation they are in pretty good and that they choose their words by looking from their subordinate's perspective. Carefully chosen words increase the connection of the supporters to the narcissist leaders.

### **Being Ambitious**

Mankind has always witnessed that narcissist leaders have emerged in order to inspire people and shape the future. Narcissist leaders like Napoléon Bonaparte, Mahatma Gandhi or Franklin Delano Roosevelt have always been the ones who shaped the agenda by dominating fields like military, religion and politics (Maccoby, 2000, p. 1; Maccoby, 2002, p. 37). But the energy of these people has never run out before achieving their goal. Despite they faced many obstacles, these leaders have tried again and again after every failure, they have planned their next move by looking at their failures and eventually they have succeeded.

### **CONCLUSION**

Researchers have examined both the good and the bad aspects of narcissist leaders. In general, it seems that narcissist leaders' bad sides are much more than their good sides. In this sense, it is a serious cause of stress for the subordinates to work with a narcissist leader in the same organization. What causes them to be closed to communication is the fact that they think they know everything and this prevents their subordinates' progresses. The main disturbance

from the standpoint of the subordinates and the organization itself is that the narcissist leader doesn't trust his subordinates and that he treats them rigidly. Lacking empathy, they exploit their subordinates even more. Their will to obtain the absolute power severely damages the organizations' democratic environment. The fact that they are patient until they achieve their goal can be seen as a sign that they have dangerous personalities and that they will exhibit devastating behaviors. Being closed to an information transfer between their subordinates and themselves, they are preventing their subordinates' progress. The fact that narcissist leaders take advantage of others in order to achieve their own goals can be shown as an example of their selfish behavior. Being jealous of everyone and being in a constant search of receiving praise, they have low self-confidence degrees.

If we would examine narcissist leaders from their positive aspects, "being open to innovations" can be helpful to cause the organization to gain new products and services. This situation could get organizations one step further than their rivals because nowadays the businesses' survival depends on this. Furthermore, "Being charismatic and gaining supporters quickly" causes them to get more fanatic followers. In this case, subordinates work even harder and it gets easier for the organization and the narcissist leader to achieve their goals. In the business world, it is important for organizations that time is used efficiently. In this sense, the narcissist leader who gets all the power in his hand causes the bureaucratic processes to diminish and the decision-making processes to speed up and this causes the organizations to save a lot of time. Lastly, him "being ambitious" can cause the organization that he is part of to improve faster. In addition, the fact that this study is a literature review forms the constraints of this study. Furthermore, there is no scale to directly measure narcissist leadership. Some researchers are studying narcissist leadership as a subcategory of destructive leadership, others are conducting narcissist personality inventory in order to decide whether they are narcissist. The improvement of the narcissist leadership scale will help in filling this gap in the literature.

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