

THE LEADERSHIP
DIMENSION

Understanding and Working with Narcissistic Leaders

By Douglas B. Richardson



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Daniel Goleman, the researcher and author most responsible for popularizing the concept of emotional intelligence, has suggested that the heart of great leadership is the ability to adjust one's style in order to relate effectively to differing people in differing situations. Supplementing the classic leadership characteristics of vision, innovation, motivating others and exercising effective influence, Goleman emphasizes the importance of *appropriateness* — what other experts have variously labeled as situational leadership, adaptability, political astuteness or “going with the flow.”

For any leader, adjusting one's operating style is a lot easier said than done. Most of us have a strong tendency to view the world through a fairly rigid set of lenses and filters, to have a way of explaining and interpreting things that is stable, consistent and, above all, comfortable. As the maxim puts it, “to a person with only a hammer, everything looks like a nail.” Furthermore, when we then convert our perceptions into action, we tend to retreat to an equally comfortable default style, an automatic way of responding and acting that is shaped by our basic personality type. In leadership terms, this means that many leaders unconsciously bring a “my way” or “one-size-fits-all” approach to any and all situations, whether or not that approach is most effective under the unique circumstances of the moment.

This tendency is no less true with legal leaders than with leaders in other sectors. A majority of people who self-select into the legal profession display, in abundance, the traits of autonomy, skepticism, dispassionate analysis, and drive for personal achievement and recognition. When leading, therefore, their natural tendency is to default to an *exemplar* style of leadership. That is, their unspoken mantra is, “If you want to see it done right,

just watch me do it. I'm an expert.” This type of “lead by example” leader tends to seek out personal challenges and rewards, and — if forced into team activity — leads by *coordinating* rather than *collaborating*. They therefore are not natural relationship-builders or “people people,” and they tend to hold tightly to personal control. In short, they're “turfy.”

Today, extreme examples of this style can be found at the top of many law firms whose growth and profitability are astonishing by any standard. Few can deny the impact of an extreme personality type, what Dr. Michael Maccoby calls the “productive narcissist.” Major change is being wrought (and many large firms now are being led) by these powerful, charismatic, and distinctly *non-collaborative* leaders.

Unlike the humble, implementation-oriented “Level 5 Leaders” popularized by Jim Collins in *Good to Great*, or the highly collaborative, people-oriented leadership model championed by most legal leadership coaches, narcissistic leaders are distinguished by their big ideas, big personalities, big egos and general indifference to the opinions of others. They resolutely reject the *status quo*, thus affronting all those tied to tradition and cautious about change. They want to reshape the world to their vision. They don't much care if others label them vain and self-centered; they count on the power of *their* vision and their personal charisma to drive them to the top during periods of great upheaval or change. Their style is at best despotic, and often coercive. They have posters of Gandhi, Henry Ford, FDR and Mao Tse-Tung on their walls; they have the writings of Churchill, Gandhi and Welsh on their bookshelves.

Narcissistic leaders are not people-pleasers or joiners (unless they founded the club or lead a compliant team). They are not natural

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implementers, stabilizers or rule-abiders. They eschew emotional intelligence: appropriateness is for wimps. They don't see themselves as taking huge risks (although in fact they do); for them the proper course of action is obvious and indisputable.

In addition, because they tend to be unreflective, narcissistic leaders often are poorly attuned to the incentives and needs of different individuals, assuming that everyone will respond equally fervently to their vision and that others desire only to be subjects under the nar-

rol, respect and affiliation.

The most significant operational challenge for the narcissistic leader, of course, is *implementation*. While grand visions may attract adherents, they are not self-executing. Great ideas must be supported by people skilled at translating abstract strategic goals into tactical priorities, and then by still other people good at translating those tactics into practical processes, procedures, standards and results. The people with those skills must have incentives to use them. In cutting-edge law firms today those incentives tend to be primarily monetary: firms that are trend-setters and first-adopters have engineered astronomical and exponential increases in profits-per-partner in recent years.

For Gen X and Gen Y lawyers, many of whom claim that maximizing income, or even the status and prestige of equity partnership, are not primary motivators for them, the allure and benefits of The Great March to Dollars may seem dim and distant. Yes, they relish the big-buck starting salaries, but retention and attrition numbers already suggest that many younger lawyers' long-term commitment is shaky. While firm management and practice leaders express alarm at this, the narcissistic leaders tend to focus more on increasing top-line revenue than on the bottom-line costs of dissatisfaction and turnover. What rapidly evolves are hostile, competitive cultures predicated on golden handcuffs.

Narcissistic leaders also create succession problems, even if their vision is presently paying off. For all their genius, geniuses cannot be cloned, or even successfully imitated. When the giant moves offstage (or is lured away), it can be impossible for a firm to fill the big shoes, and merely continuing to implement the existing strategy is a recipe for obsolescence and competitive vulnerability.

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For them, the equation is simple: leadership equals vision. Their motto is clear: “Be reasonable. Do it my way.” As Maccoby puts it, “What distinguishes productive narcissists from idle dreamers and big talkers is that their vision engages others and provides them with meaning.”

The upside of a global, compelling vision is evident. At least initially, the charm of the vision and the unique force with which the strategy is communicated creates broad, intense (and rather indiscriminate) support. The past is ridiculed, the glowing future embraced and lots of energy is released. Yet the dark sides and downsides of this leadership style also are evident. Narcissistic leaders see the growth and power of their firms as means to their own ends, as opposed to Level 5 Leaders who see themselves as the means to their organization's ends. This self-aggrandizing tendency means that narcissistic leaders often cannot count on the trust and loyalty of followers. Moreover, if their grand visions don't bear immediate fruit, they can find the troops can quickly turn on them — unless those troops are kept firmly in line or kept at least partially in the dark.

cissistic leader's dominant control. The high rates of associate attrition and lateral partner movement prove that this assumption is unrealistic.

Of course, in a rapid-change environment, the glowing vision itself must grow and adapt; no matter how big its teeth, the shark that stops swimming sinks and dies. But narcissistic leaders are reluctant to incorporate others' input, and it is difficult, Maccoby notes, “even with foresight and a strategic vision, to get cultures that are increasingly differentiated and fragmented to embrace their ideas, goals and values. It is exceptional, then, for narcissistic leaders to excel at motivating.” In large firms with numerous offices (often created by mergers with other cultures) and scores of different practice areas, the challenge increases exponentially. Palace intrigues abound, covert political alliances emerge to address the potential corruption of absolute power, and communication becomes selective and opaque. In their own defense, others ramp-up their skepticism and silo themselves into local subcultures (often by geography or practice group) that provide them with some measure of personal con-

To make the most of their geniuses and visionaries, shareholders, boards and senior management of firms really must work actively to channel and often constrain that genius and vision. The attempt of other firm leaders to exercise control and balance leadership power, however, is likely to be an *extremely* difficult and contentious process. Although more enlightened narcissistic leaders recognize the need for colleagues and subordinates with complementary leadership and management skills to implement their vision, the more typical response to a bridle and reins is to denounce such efforts as disloyal, reactionary, and grounds for war.

Maccoby suggests that wise leaders may know their limits: "Effective leadership depends on context; running an innovative company will never be the same as presiding over a bureaucracy." We must disagree with his suggestion, however, that it is sufficient simply to "understand the personality type of our leaders and have a clear understanding of both the promises and perils of narcissistic leadership."

Our experience at Altman Weil is that that while narcissistic zeal is not self-regulating, better working relationships between visionary leaders and their colleagues often can be forged with the help of an experienced external coach with plenty of candor, a tough skin and a strong mandate from the firm to help with top team-building. Experienced coaches can emphasize the myriad faces of legal leadership: strategic vs. managerial; innovative vs. stabilizing; marketing-oriented vs. results-oriented; inward-facing vs. outward-facing; quantitative vs. humanistic;

or nurturing vs. directive.

Coaches' roles include working with different types and levels of leaders to help identify their natural leadership goals, incentives and strengths, but improving self-awareness is only the start. The real value-add comes from providing perspective on day-to-day challenges and scenarios. Skilled coaches are process advisors: they know how to ride shotgun without interjecting themselves as advocates for any faction or positioning themselves as technical consultants.

Narcissistic leaders report that while it's exciting at the top, it's also frequently lonely. Many may welcome the candid support of an objective, disinterested outsider to provide practical advice on how to deal with other personalities. One powerful coaching client has labeled this "*consigliore* coaching," saying, "I'm not looking for a hug or a school teacher. I'm looking for a confidential outside sounding board who can help me translate my ideas into effective action, and also cover my back." ♦

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