Narcissistic leaders: The good, the bad, and recommendations

Yoonhee Choi, Wei Ming Jonathan Phan

"It's the greatest place I hate to work."
—John Rossman, a former executive at Amazon and author of *Think Like Amazon*

"Steve Jobs was known for the clarity of his insights about what customers wanted, but he was also known for his volatility with coworkers. Apple's founder reportedly fired employees in the elevator and screamed at under-performing executives. [. . .] Bill Gates used to throw epic tantrums. Steve Ballmer, his successor at Microsoft, had a propensity for throwing chairs. Andy Grove, the longtime CEO of Intel, was known to be so harsh and intimidating that a subordinate once fainted during a performance review. Jeff Bezos fit comfortably into this mold. His manic drive and boldness trumped other conventional leadership ideals, such as building consensus and promoting civility. While he was charming and capable of great humor in public, in private, Bezos could bite an employee's head right off."

—Brad Stone, author of *The Everything Store: Jeff Bezos and the Age of Amazon*

Great leaders in business can serve as visionaries for innovation and change. Up until a decade ago, the world's idea of the electric vehicle was largely limited to golf carts; Elon Musk thought otherwise. Under his leadership at Tesla, fully electric automobiles with self-driving features became widely available and affordable, and the firm is facilitating the world's transition to sustainable energy. Jeff Bezos dreamed of building an online store where one can buy almost everything when people were skeptical about paying money for products they cannot see or take home right away. He started Amazon.com with one of the most standard yet unassuming commodities—books—and increased people's comfort level in online shopping by offering convenient and secure shopping experiences. Amazon's success was the fruit of Bezos' and his company's tireless work in dramatically improving and creating industry standards for fast delivery, customer service, expansive selection, an intuitive user interface, and more.

Musk, Bezos, and other renowned CEOs mentioned in the quote above are appreciated by shareholders and customers alike. Under their leadership, their firms have provided (or have been providing) handsome returns to shareholders and developed strong brand loyalty. One would expect the executives and employees working under such CEOs to feel just as excited and rewarded by sharing their leader's vision and executing the work needed to bring these ambitions to fruition. Yet, as the quotes above illustrate, working with confident and charismatic leaders can be challenging. Apocryphal stories from Apple, Amazon, and other so-called "great" companies describe how these CEOs and the company cultures these leaders foster diminish employee work satisfaction, well-being, organizational commitment, and ultimately, retention. What is it about these leaders that magnetize others to come and work with/for them but later drive these same people away? We suggest that narcissism in their personality plays a contributing role in both this attraction and repulsion.

At the core of narcissism is an excessive focus on the self, its aggrandizement, and the fulfillment of its desires at the expense of others. Subordinates working under a narcissistic leader pay the cost of expending their best efforts for an

individual in pursuit of self-centered goals. This unequal relationship between narcissistic leaders and subordinates sharply contrasts with the reciprocity norms that form the foundation of satisfying and productive relationships. The lack of this reciprocity over time leads to a deteriorated relationship between the narcissistic leader and subordinates; it also explains why subordinates find it increasingly difficult to work with ostensibly ideal and visionary leaders over time. It is important for firm performance to retain valuable employees by developing sustainable leader-subordinate relationships. Thus, it is crucial to understand how narcissistic leaders behave around their subordinates and what the outcomes are of these interpersonal work relationships. An in-depth understanding of narcissism and how it unfolds in interpersonal work relationships can help organizational leaders recognize the caveats linked to a narcissistic personality; it can also help those who work for/with narcissistic leaders to better prepare themselves for interactions with these leaders and to adjust their expectations about such leaders.

The goals of this article are threefold. First, we describe narcissism as a personality trait. Specifically, we describe and review the narcissistic personality trait as consisting of a continuum (low to high) and a combination of facets (i.e., different aspects of narcissism). Second, we illustrate why narcissism is more prevalent among leaders. We highlight whether and to what extent narcissism can help or harm in organizational leadership. We pay special attention to how a leader's narcissism can initially build and subsequently break a leader-subordinate relationship. Lastly, we provide practitioners with helpful guidance not only in terms of how to recognize these narcissistic facets, but also how to potentially ameliorate their harmful aspects in organizations.

UNDERSTANDING NARCISSISM: A PERSONALITY TRAIT

In Greek mythology, Narcissus was a young man who fell in love with his reflection in a pool; ultimately, he perished because he was too enamored with his own image. Taking his name, we now refer to a person with excessive self-love, self-admiration, and self-aggrandizement as narcissistic. Some argue that millennials are more narcissistic than previous generations because they inhabit an environment saturated with selfies, social media, and technology. However, narcissism has been widely observed throughout history. Baby boomers too were dubbed as the "Me Generation," and the cultural historian Christopher Lasch received a great deal of attention by publishing his book, *The Culture of Narcissism,* in 1979, arguing that narcissism is prevalent in America among the younger generation. Going back further, Sigmund Freud delineated narcissism as one of the three main types of personality, along with eroticism and obsessiveness. It is undoubtedly important to understand such a prevalent personality trait that everyone possesses to some degree. Accordingly, narcissism has been extensively studied across several disciplines (e.g., psychology and psychiatric medicine). In this paper, we utilize the perspective from personality

psychology, as we explain how and why leaders high in narcissism typically feel, think, or behave the way they do in interpersonal relationships.

Narcissism is a complex personality trait that does not consist of a single defining feature, but rather different facets. Instead of painting narcissists as universally good or bad, a facet approach provides us with a nuanced understanding of narcissism. In this paper, we use a widely studied set of three key facets (Leadership and Authority, Grandiose Exhibitionism, and Entitlement and Exploitativeness) to describe narcissism. Accordingly, we define narcissists or narcissistic leaders as individuals who exhibit moderate to high levels of some or all these facets. We discuss each of these three facets below.

The Three Facets of Narcissism

The Leadership and Authority Facet ("Authority")
This facet characterizes the desire to lead, take charge, persuade, and influence others. In this paper, we henceforth refer to this facet as the Authority facet or Authority. People with high levels of Authority tend to also have high levels of extraversion and self-confidence. This enthusiasm and drive to influence others enable the narcissist to emerge as leaders either by advancing through the hierarchy at work or by starting their own companies as entrepreneurs (convincing others of the utility of their ideas). This facet is considered as a relatively adaptive (helpful) aspect of narcissism for effective leadership within an organization.

The Grandiose Exhibition Facet ("Grandiosity")
This facet characterizes vanity, the desire for attention, and ostentatious displays of their perceived superiority to others. We henceforth refer to this facet as the Grandiosity facet or Grandiosity. Narcissists high in Grandiosity tend to value prestige and power; indeed, they inflate attributes related to these two values. Further, they believe that they are more intelligent, popular, attractive, and creative compared to others. They readily express this inflated opinion of themselves to others even when it is socially inappropriate (e.g., flaunting their health in front of a sick person). Narcissists high in the Grandiosity facet actively engage in self-enhancing tendencies to maintain their inflated self-worth by seeking positive feedback, ignoring negative feedback, and expecting admiration from others.

The Entitlement/Exploitativeness Facet ("Entitlement")
This facet characterizes narcissists' tendency to believe that they deserve more than others and to take on an instrumental view of others. We henceforth refer to this facet as the Entitlement facet or Entitlement. Narcissists high in Entitlement consider themselves as special, unique, and more deserving than others; accordingly, they expect to be recognized as such by others and demand favorable treatment. They also expect to be catered/pandered to and are puzzled or furious when this does not happen. The exploitative aspect of this facet is linked to a lack of concern for others and Machiavellianism—the willingness to manipulate others, believing that the ends justify the manip-

ulation tactics employed to achieve their goals. The Entitlement facet is usually considered as a more maladaptive (harmful) facet of narcissism, resulting in dysfunctional and nonproductive outcomes. For example, this facet is more likely to be apparent in leaders who act in ways that harm their employees (e.g., aggression and hostility when frustrated) and organizations (e.g., withholding effort or expecting others to cover their work for them).

Narcissism as a Continuum and Combination of Facets

Viewing narcissism through the lens of facets (Authority, Grandiosity, and Entitlement) and treating them as a continuum is useful for understanding how these narcissistic aspects of a leader can result in success or failure. We can understand narcissism not merely as a dichotomous diagnosis (whether they are narcissists or not) or a single continuum (low to high levels of narcissism), but rather as a profile of these different facets—a person can be *low to high* in *some or all* these facets. Neither all facets nor all levels of narcissism are equally destructive across situations. Put differently, the negative impact of a narcissistic leader to their organization depends on the level of each narcissism facet they have (i.e., continuum and combination). For example, a leader with a moderate level of Authority who also has low levels of Grandiosity and Entitlement would generally be less destructive compared to another leader who has a low level of Authority with high levels of the other facets. Relatedly, when leaders engage in narcissistic behavior, we can more meaningfully describe the facets influencing their behavior. For example, Grandiosity would be the main driving influence when a narcissist spends a great deal of resources on decorating his or her office rather than the other facets; Grandiosity *and* Entitlement would be the main driving influences when a leader claims all credit from a team's innovative idea to enhance others' perception of the leader's creativity.

NARCISSISM IN LEADERS

Anyone can have a degree of narcissism in his or her personality, but narcissism is especially prevalent among people in powerful positions such as key governmental figures (agency directors), prestigious professionals (doctors and lawyers), and organizational leaders (chief executive officers). In the business setting, several studies have discussed many examples of narcissistic leaders: Jack Welch, Larry Ellison, Steve Jobs, Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk, and Adam Neumann, to name a few. In this section, we delineate why leaders (more so than subordinates) tend to show higher levels of narcissism and why some levels of narcissism can actually help leaders be effective, while too high a level of narcissism can be harmful.

Leader Emergence

Three reasons may explain why we see higher levels of narcissism among leaders. The first reason involves an antecedent factor: more narcissistic people are drawn to leadership positions. They seek the power, prestige, and praise associated with these positions. Indeed, the romance of leadership—people tend to ascribe the positive outcomes of a company to the leader—motivates narcissists to climb up the hierarchy and become leaders of groups, communities, or organizations. In the process, they can receive the admiration and attention they desire.

Secondly, the success that led narcissists to their leadership positions reinforces the Grandiosity in their narcissism. People who made it to a leadership position tend to possess the required capabilities and qualities in their fields. Thus, for narcissists, ascending to a leadership position serves as an indirect indicator and evidence of their merits and supports their self-view about having the ideal characteristics of a good leader. A leadership position also provides narcissists with a higher status, which then confirms their belief that they are superior and more powerful than others. Further, narcissists are not limited by their own successes in enhancing their narcissism; indeed, they tend to attribute the successes of their organization to their managerial prowess. Therefore, their success (or the success that happens around them) both contributes to and maintains their self-importance and sense of superiority.

Lastly, it is not merely leadership positions that enable narcissists to indulge in their behavioral tendencies, but also the influence and adoration provided by their followers and the media. Kets de Vries, a management scholar and psychoanalyst, explored leader-follower relationships in his book, *Leaders, Fools and Impostors: Essays on the Psychology of Leadership*, and suggested that "ideal-hungry" followers and narcissistic leaders live in a symbiotic relationship. Some followers idealize their leaders and endow them with unrealistic powers and attributes, which in turn makes them feel protected by these powerful leaders. Additionally, the media show a strong propensity to develop romantic views of leadership. For example, the media often give credit to a leader for a firm's successful performance or strategic moves to deliver a simple and interesting story to the public. By doing so, the media portray a romantic or heroic picture of a leader, which then serves to reinforce the leader's confidence and sense of entitlement. Through this process, leaders can grow into larger-than-life figures to their followers and themselves.

Leader Effectiveness

Narcissistic leaders are a double-edged sword to organizations. Researchers have argued both perspectives, as some highlight the positive side of narcissistic leaders, while others underscore the negative aspects. On a bright note, narcissistic leaders and CEOs tend to be visionaries who perform well in crisis management. They are likely to be hard workers who have the confidence to take on risk by going into untapped markets, leveraging nascent technology, and creating yet unheard-of innovations. Nonetheless, their hubris can lead to wrong strategic decisions and risky investments for their firms. Narcissistic leaders can also exhaust firms' resources for their personal use, perks, or self-promotion, and can engage in unethical or deceitful decisions for self-serving purposes (*See* Case in Point *for an example*).

CASE IN POINT: Adam Neumann's Time at WeWork

Adam Neumann, the co-founder and former CEO of WeWork, was pivotal in WeWork's early success, especially in building the firm's brand recognition and acquiring major capital investments. Like many other leaders with a narcissistic personality, Neumann inspired quite a few investors and followers with his charismatic leadership and vision. Even though WeWork's business essentially consisted of leasing shared office space, he referred to his business as a "physical social network." Neumann advocated a new way of working and a new way of living: the dawn of a new corporate culture where work is 24/7, coworkers are friends, the office is home, and work is life. This vision of Neumann was loved by many investors, one of whom said to Neumann, "You are not selling coworking, you're selling an energy I never felt."

Unfortunately, high levels of the Grandiosity and Entitlement facets of narcissism were also reflected in Neumann's behaviors. Ignoring senior managers' advice to be cautious in business expansions, he expanded WeWork's business in multiple industries (e.g., WeLive, apartment rentals, and WeGrow, an early education program) and made expensive acquisitions (e.g., Meetup.com for $156 million), while its existing WeWork business was still not generating any profit. Neumann also discussed introducing WeBank, WeSail, and WeSleep (airline) as new business avenues. Moreover, evidence of self-dealing, substance abuse, the company's partying culture, and his extravagant lifestyle all pointed to a poor moral compass and excessive pursuits of vanity. This example illustrates what researchers mean when referring to narcissistic leaders as a double-edged sword for firms. Neumann created a major opportunity for WeWork, which was once valued next to Uber and Airbnb, but his overpromising to investors, overconfidence in his capabilities, and self-serving unethical practices led to the firm's downfall—from $47 billion to $7 billion. Despite the loss he incurred to investors, Neumann took a prodigious amount of money from the firm in his exit package, while the employees of WeWork either incurred huge value losses in their stock options or had to forgo all their options during layoffs——another clear sign of Entitlement.

Recently, Emily Grijalva and her colleagues examined the results from multiple studies (i.e., a meta-analysis) to investigate how different levels of narcissism influenced a leader's effectiveness in managing their subordinates to achieve an organization's or a team's goals. They found that a leader's narcissism had an inverted-U shape relationship with leadership effectiveness: leadership effectiveness *increases* as levels of narcissism rise to a point. However, beyond that point, a higher level of narcissism leads to *decreased* leadership effectiveness. In other words, there is an optimal, moderate level of narcissism in leaders, and leaders with this moderate level of narcissism are more effective in their roles than leaders with either very high or very low levels of narcissism. This inverted-U relationship is also likely true for each of the three narcissism facets. To illustrate this, we provide examples of the adaptive and maladaptive beliefs (attitudes) of narcissists, derived from the measures of narcissism for each of its three facets (*See* Table 1 *for the list of examples*).

For the Authority facet, leaders with a moderate level might believe that they have "a natural talent for influencing people"—an adaptive belief and attitude for effectively leading others compared to leaders who doubt their ability to influence. In contrast, leaders with too high a level of Authority may instead believe: "If I ruled the world, it would be a much better place"—a maladaptive belief linked to hubris.

For the Grandiosity facet, leaders with a moderate level would typically "like to be complimented." A leader's willingness and desire for compliments can be adaptive, given their beneficial role. For example, compliments coming from subordinates signal to the leader that his or her followers appreciate and acknowledge the leader's direction/choices in management. Compliments coming from other sources in the form of feedback from clients (or even competitors) can boost confidence in leaders. In contrast, leaders with a very high level of Grandiosity tend to believe that they "know they are good because everyone keeps telling them so"—a maladaptive and unlikely belief. This belief indicates a leader's selective attention to only positive feedback, at the exclusion of potentially useful negative feedback.

For the Entitlement facet, leaders with a moderate level might believe that they are "entitled to get into the career they want"—an adaptive belief because it signals confidence, assertiveness, and a *higher* drive. A moderate level of Entitlement is necessary, especially in situations when leaders need to be assertive such as when negotiating or ensuring that their organization will not be taken advantage of. At a very high level of the Entitlement facet, a leader might believe that he or she "should not have to work as hard as others to get what I deserve"—a maladaptive belief because it signals the *lack* of willingness to put in effort toward his or her goals while expecting personal gain at the expense of others.

Taken together, the inverted-U relationship suggests that a leader with a moderate level of narcissism is likely to be the most effective. Effective leaders are high enough in the narcissism facets to want to direct and drive their employees to realize their visions and goals; however, these leaders are not at such a high a level of narcissism that they ignore dissenting (but valuable) input from their employees based on expertise beyond the leaders' knowledge and abilities.

INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIP AROUND NARCISSISTIC LEADERS AT WORK

In this section, we pay particular attention to the interpersonal relationship between narcissistic leaders and their subordinates, and the role of *time* in turning initially positive perceptions of narcissists into negative ones. Specifically, we

Table 1 Examples of adaptive and maladaptive narcissism facet attitudes

	Adaptive	*Maladaptive*
Authority	• I have a natural talent for influencing people. • I will be a success.	• If I ruled the world, it would be a much better place. • I have a strong will to power.
Grandiosity	• I like to start new fads and fashions. • I like to be complimented.	• I am apt to show off if I get the chance. • I know that I am good because everybody keeps telling me so.
Entitlement	• I deserve to be treated with respect by everyone. • I am entitled to get into the career that I want.	• I shouldn't have to work as hard as others to get what I deserve. • I deserve more success in my life than others who have had it easy.

Note. Examples of attitudes for Authority and Grandiosity facets are based on items with trait estimates from Ackerman and colleagues (2012). Examples of attitudes for Entitlement facet are from Lessard and colleagues (2011).

discuss in detail what draws executives and employees to work with/for narcissistic leaders and why their relationships eventually lead to bitter frustration for these colleagues and subordinates. W. Keith Campbell, a social psychologist with expertise in narcissism, and his colleagues suggested that relationships with a narcissist can be described as eating a "chocolate cake"—initially, there is excitement at the prospect of intense gratification, which is later replaced with apprehension, and finally deep aversion. Building on this idea, we propose that subordinates' perceptions of narcissistic leaders (the chocolate cake) can change over time.

The Initial Attraction

Below, we illustrate three characteristics of narcissistic leaders that draw followers to work for these leaders and create positive energy in these relationships: being charismatic/inspiring, being socially skillful, and pursuing media attention.

Charismatic/inspiring
Narcissists are very charismatic. Their confidence in achieving ambitious goals and persuasive words captivate their followers, ensure their cooperation, and generate enthusiasm in others. Narcissistic leaders have clear visions of how they want to make the world a better place. Elon Musk shared his vision for Tesla: "to accelerate the world's transition to sustainable energy," and Adam Neumann of WeWork stated his vision for the firm: "to elevate the world's consciousness." Not only do their visions seem heroic, but narcissistic leaders can also articulate their visions in ways that gather, excite, and convince others to follow them. For example, Neumann famously convinced Masayoshi Son, one of the world's richest and most important investors, to invest several billions of dollars into WeWork in just a few short encounters. Elizabeth Holmes of Theranos, a now defunct healthcare technology firm, raised billions of dollars from well-known investors through a poignant speech about how she started her business to help others easily conduct blood tests with a small amount of blood at a low cost so that "fewer people will have to say goodbye too soon."

Narcissistic leaders' sheer confidence in their capabilities, power, and intelligence works as the foundation for exuding charisma. Due to their confidence, they dare to try strategies that other leaders avoid and may accomplish extraordinary outcomes, even though some attempts end in utter failure. In times of trouble and turbulence, their confidence can hold a company together by helping employees feel more secure and safe to work toward a leader's goals for the organization, redirecting attention that would otherwise be wasted on worrying (*See* Sidebar *for what distinguishes a narcissistic leader from charismatic and transformative leaders*).

Socially skillful
Narcissists who are high in the Entitlement facet are socially skillful at developing superficial relationships and manipulating others by engaging in Machiavellian behaviors. Because narcissists are energetic, extraverted, socially confident, and entertaining, they find it easy to strike up conversations with strangers and entice others with humor and charm. Perhaps due to their sheer confidence, coupled with eloquence, some view narcissists as physically more attractive. Narcissists are good at office politics and putting on a

> **SIDEBAR: Narcissistic versus Charismatic Leaders**
> Narcissists have similar characteristics that a charismatic leader possesses, such as being bold, confident, and persuasive. A recent study suggested that narcissistic leaders can also appear to be transformational leaders (i.e., those who are innovative, inspirational, and capable of motivating others to join their vision of making a better world). Despite the similarities, what distinguishes narcissistic leaders from charismatic or transformative leaders is their attention to egocentric values (e.g., ambition, intelligence, and extraversion) rather than communal values (e.g., cooperativeness, nurturance, and morality). At the core, narcissistic leaders' drive for

innovation and success is themselves, and they view the success of the organization they lead as their personal success. Narcissistic leaders would view their organization and followers as the means to achieve success for themselves. On the other hand, a motivation for transformational or charismatic leaders is their commitment to collective goals, and they strive to achieve these goals by relying on communal values. In sum, narcissistic leaders and charismatic/transformational leaders may overlap in having high levels of the Authority facet in narcissism but show little similarity in their levels of the Grandiosity and Entitlement facets.

poker face to get their way. When narcissistic leaders need to convince others to commit to their goals, they will use charm to portray themselves as great colleagues to work with. Although narcissists are generally uninterested in emotional closeness and intimacy and have difficulty in developing long-term relationships, they are competent in quickly establishing numerous shallow relationships. Independent of being charismatic and inspiring, being socially skillful allows narcissistic leaders to recruit many star players in the industry to their firms because these players assume that these leaders are great people to work with, based on their brief encounters.

Pursuing media coverage

Narcissists love attention: that is why narcissistic leaders actively seek and enjoy getting the media spotlight. Studies show that one indicator of narcissistic CEOs is how much time they spend on things that are irrelevant to their work/firm such as engaging in public speaking, writing books, and being interviewed by the media. Narcissistic leaders can increase their prominence and reputation by being featured on the cover of business magazines, in newspapers, on TV, and in other media outlets. Some become celebrity leaders by embracing a persona larger than the companies they run. For example, some people are more interested in Elon Musk's personal life than the latest developments in Tesla or SpaceX. Musk is not shy about sharing his personal life with the public, and he tweets multiple times almost every day to share what he has to say with the world. A leader's fame can be used to attract followers, be they employees or customers. Some senior managers choose to work with high-profile leaders, hoping that some of the spotlight will spill over to them, thereby increasing their own value in the executive labor market. In fact, studies have shown that senior managers who work with award-winning CEOs (e.g., CEO of the Year) are more likely to be promoted to CEO positions later in their careers.

The Subsequent Repulsion

Despite the great start in the beginning of the work relationship, the dark side of narcissism pushes collaborators away from narcissistic leaders. The initial attraction to narcissists dissipates over time, resulting in a pattern where narcissists have more frequent relationships, but of shorter duration

and with less emotional intimacy. Below, we elaborate on the negative aspects of narcissism in leader-subordinate relationships: a lack of empathy/exploiting others and hostility to criticism/negligence of others' suggestions.

Lack of empathy/Exploiting others

One of the key characteristics of the Entitlement facet is a lack of empathy. Narcissists who are high in Entitlement tend to be unwilling to recognize others' feelings or needs. They are particularly prone to being insensitive to others and treating others as expendable resources to achieve their goals. Those useful to the narcissist are retained as valuable resources, while those who are no longer useful are discarded. One former Amazon human resources director said that Amazon's culture can be described as "purposeful Darwinism," where winners are rewarded, losers are fired, and employees step on their colleagues to survive. The *New York Times* reported that some employees who experienced acute health issues or chronic medical conditions (e.g., miscarriages or cancer) and other personal crises did not receive a fair evaluation of their performance, and subsequently lost their positions at Amazon. Such an impersonal organizational culture likely originates from the narcissism of organizational leaders at the top, creating and reinforcing an inhospitable work environment spanning the entire hierarchy.

In the book *The Everything Store: Jeff Bezos and the Age of Amazon* by Brad Stone, the author describes how Bezos is ruthless in his criticism of anyone who does not meet his standards or shows poor work quality by asking rhetorical questions such as, "I'm sorry, did I take my stupid pills today?" "Are you lazy or just incompetent?" Stone also provides a long list of belittling quotes that Bezos gave after watching employee presentations or receiving their reports, a few of which we illustrate here:

> [After someone presented a proposal.] "We need to apply some human intelligence to this problem."
> [After reviewing the annual plan from the supply-chain team.] "I guess the supply chain isn't doing anything interesting next year."
> [After reading a narrative.] "This document was clearly written by the B team. Can someone get me the A team document? I don't want to waste my time with the B team document."

Narcissists may not be intentionally callous, nor do they necessarily enjoy being vile; nevertheless, they are often unaware of how their actions and words can hurt others and do not deeply contemplate their behavior.

Further, narcissistic leaders expect great dedication from their subordinates. This expectation can result in narcissistic leaders overworking them but doing so without providing their subordinates with sufficient support/resources. Should subordinates meet the high expectations of narcissistic leaders, they are unlikely to receive gratitude or be consistently rewarded. Narcissistic leaders high in the Grandiosity and Entitlement facets are likely to take the commitment and contributions of their subordinates for granted and have no problem asking for more to achieve their goals. When these narcissistic leaders do not get everything they ask for, they may conclude that their supporters have forfeited their

place in the organization. In biographies of visionary leaders such as Ashlee Vance's *Elon Musk: Tesla, SpaceX and the Quest for a Fantastic Future*, Walter Isaacson's *Steve Jobs* and Brad Stone's *The Everything Store: Jeff Bezos and the Age of Amazon*, these leaders are portrayed as successful geniuses who are/were ruthless and abusive with respect to treating their employees. As a *New York Times* article puts it, it is alarming "how unnecessarily cruel and demeaning [these leaders] could be to the people who helped make their dreams come true."

Hostility to criticism/Negligence of others' suggestions

Narcissists can be hypersensitive to criticism. If possible, they resist change by avoiding negative feedback altogether. When they cannot avoid negative feedback, they respond to it with anger and aggression. They are likely to derogate the source of the negative feedback with personal attacks, scapegoating, and other blame-deflecting behaviors, considering the source to be jealous of them. For instance, at WeWork, employees knew well enough not to stand up to Adam Neumann; those voicing opposing ideas to Neumann's risked being ignored, and those who argued with Neumann were subsequently barred from further meetings with him. According to WeWork executives, Neumann humiliated a senior manager who tried to convince Neumann to proceed more cautiously with his expansion strategy.

Such an aggressive response to criticism is due to the narcissists' Grandiosity facet and the paradoxical vulnerability in their self-image. Narcissists have a grandiose sense of their self that is not supported by objective reality. To maintain this grandiose self-view, narcissists require validation from others supporting their superiority through constant admiration. They expect to be applauded for their achievements (or even the achievements of others) and actively seek attention and praise if not given. Criticism or failure is viewed by the narcissist as a threat to his or her ego. Narcissists draw on several tools to protect and reinflate their sense of self-worth. They may shift the blame to others as the reason behind the failure, or they may compare themselves with someone worse off or inferior. They are even willing to engage in slander or express disdainful patronizing attitudes to maintain their self-esteem.

Moreover, due to narcissistic leaders' sense of superiority, they often believe that their opinions and decisions should overrule others'. They dominate discussions, disregard other people's opinions or advice, and fail to acknowledge others' positive contributions. For example, Jack Welch was known to dictate management reviews, micromanage other executives' work, and even revise other executives' presentations, charts, and scripts.

Consequences

As illustrated by the chocolate cake model, many subordinates initially find it exciting to work with narcissistic leaders and are drawn to these leaders' charm, persuasiveness, and inspiring visions. However, as time passes, the initial attraction often transforms into regrettable repulsion because working with a narcissistic leader can be a frustrating experience for subordinates. As people interact more closely with the narcissist over time, the narcissist's sense of superiority and vanity becomes evident.

In some cases, poor relationships and cruel treatment from leaders may be tolerated to a degree by employees if these leaders are exceptionally talented and are therefore somewhat justified in their grandiose views of themselves. One former Amazon vice president recounted that his task-force presented its work to Jeff Bezos on creating algorithms to use at Amazon's fulfillment centers, only to be shattered by Bezos's devastating critique. About the incident, he said in Brad Stone's book on Amazon, "It would be easier to stomach if we could prove he was wrong, but we couldn't. That was a typical interaction with Jeff. He had this unbelievable ability to be incredibly intelligent about things he had nothing to do with, and he was totally ruthless about communicating it." Similarly, Ashlee Vance, author of Elon Musk's biography, stated, "Numerous people interviewed for this book decried the work hours, Musk's blunt style and his sometimes impossible expectations. Yet almost every person—even those who had been fired—still worshipped Musk and talked about him in terms usually reserved for superheroes or deities."

Unfortunately, not all CEOs are like Bezos or Musk. In fact, many narcissistic leaders reveal themselves to be more of a liability than an asset to their firms. For most, working with a narcissistic leader can be a discouraging experience. Subordinates' suggestions do not get a fair hearing; they get blamed if things go bad, and their credit is taken away if things go well; they must constantly praise their leaders or risk the leaders' ire; they work in an environment where a lack of reciprocity and being exploited are commonplace. This poor treatment by and relationship with a narcissistic leader are made worse when serving a leader whose grandiose sense of superiority is coupled with lackluster capabilities and a refusal to heed advice from capable well-meaning subordinates. Such a work environment generates resentment, mistrust, and cynicism among subordinates. Many subordinates will eventually find working for a narcissistic leader intolerable and react by resisting the leader's direction covertly (e.g., speaking behind the leader's back) or overtly (e.g., interfering with the leader's work). Some will even sever ties with narcissists by leaving their jobs, leading to an outflow of valuable human capital from organizations.

Michael Maccoby, an anthropologist and psychoanalyst who wrote a famous *Harvard Business Review* article on narcissistic leadership, provided some tips on how to survive working for a narcissistic leader. Some of these tips can be disheartening to subordinates. For example, he said 1) "Always empathize with your boss' feelings, but don't expect any empathy back. Look elsewhere for your own self-esteem" and 2) "Give your boss ideas, but always let him take the credit for them." It is no surprise that sooner or later, people interacting with narcissistic leaders tend to feel stressed, exhibiting decreased productivity and cooperation, and increased absenteeism and turnover.

RECOMMENDATIONS

What can be done to curtail the damaging effects of narcissism? Although personality traits are relatively

stable, recent studies have shown that there is some potential for trait malleability and change. Ideally, self-aware narcissistic leaders would recognize the negative consequences of their personality traits and make efforts to appreciate and retain their valuable employees. However, it is unrealistic to expect *all* narcissistic leaders to be aware of their narcissistic tendencies, much less to be motivated to change. Narcissistic leaders in positions of power are especially resistant to influence because they can surround themselves with people who are strongly loyal to them (e.g., family) and employees who always agree with them.

More realistic efforts can come at the systematic level, initiated by the board of directors and/or top management team, with the help of external professional entities (e.g., human resource management consultants, leadership coaches, etc.). Specifically, we highlight three broad categories of recommendations to ameliorate the destructive tendencies of narcissistic leaders: the three Cs—coaching, culture, and checks. These three recommendations work synergistically by complementing and strengthening each other. We explain each of these recommendations in detail below.

Coaching

Organizations can implement coaching systems to address leaders' narcissism in two ways: (a) coaching narcissistic leaders to change their negative behaviors, and (b) coaching organizational members who work with narcissistic leaders to have a better understanding of their leaders' characteristics and adjust their expectations accordingly. Studies suggest that narcissistic leaders can become more effective leaders through coaching. Indeed, coaching can be an especially potent way to reduce narcissistic leaders' negative behaviors because it can target specific areas for individualized improvement, depending on the narcissistic profile of the leader. For instance, coaching can help narcissistic leaders be more inclusive in their team's decision-making process, practice perspective-taking in their daily interactions with organizational members, develop a more accurate self-view, appreciate others' contributions, or mentor their subordinates. To reveal specific behaviors or difficulties that narcissistic leaders pose on their interpersonal relationships, the coach could use 360-degree feedback to pinpoint specific examples. Simply having a coach or a mentor to oversee the leaders' decisions can encourage them to make fairer and more ethical choices and can hold them accountable for their decisions.

The caveat in coaching narcissistic leaders concerns objections from narcissists about being coached because narcissists tend to be poor listeners, react badly to criticism, and generally dislike being directed. To tackle narcissistic leaders' opposition to being coached, organizations can conduct personality tests for all organizational members/leaders and include the index for narcissism in the tests (e.g., the Narcissistic Personality Inventory developed by Raskin and Hall is the most commonly used measure of narcissism). This allows organizational members to at least be aware of their level of narcissism. The organization can then require or provide coaching to anyone with high levels

of narcissism. Once a narcissistic leader agrees to be coached, it is critical to pair the right coach with the leader. Studies suggest that narcissistic leaders will be more willing to accept suggestions and criticisms when a coach is someone they can trust or someone with whom they are on friendly terms. They are more likely to consider opinions and information when coming from someone with whom they share commonalities (e.g., sharing the same birthday, graduating from the same university, etc.) because commonalities enhance agreeableness in narcissists. Thus, introducing a coach who shares similarities with the narcissistic leader is a good strategy for making the leader more amenable toward inputs from the coach.

Members of the organization or direct subordinates can also be coached to have a realistic view of their leader. An organization with followers too enamored with their leader and the leader's agenda risk developing groupthink, thereby reducing the likelihood of dissent and divergent opinions even when it is crucial for the organization's long-term good—e.g., when leadership engages in unethical behavior or risky business strategies. One way to help followers (and board members) develop a more realistic view of their leader and ascertain whether their leader can deliver what he or she proposes is by coaching/training organizational members on the qualities that narcissists are more likely inflate (i.e., deceive). Narcissists, especially those with high levels of Grandiosity and Entitlement facets, self-inflate their capabilities and their power/status (how unique, skillful, and impactful they are compared to others) and project these self-views to others. Accordingly, employees/board members can receive coaching on narcissists' tendency to self-enhance. This training can be undertaken as a general training proficiency for all organizational members. This serves three purposes. First, it is unlikely to invoke resistance from narcissistic leaders because the training does not single out any particular (narcissistic) leader. Second, knowing what characteristics a narcissistic leader will inflate helps others assess whether their leader, manager, or supervisor does indeed have high levels of narcissism. Finally, followers will be able to evaluate more accurately any claims that their leader makes—thereby reducing the potential for a romanticized view of the leader and making appropriate *discounts* on the leader's claims, as necessary.

Developing a Communal Organizational Culture

Narcissistic leaders do not exist in a vacuum but are embedded within the organization they wish to lead and draw admiration from. The likelihood of a personality trait being expressed varies according to the environment; thus, organizational culture can serve to curtail narcissistic leaders' blatant pursuit of self-interests. An organizational culture that emphasizes the success of most of its members and rewards reciprocity rather than individual success can suppress the self-focused facets of Grandiosity and Entitlement, consequently reducing the destructive effects of narcissism. This phenomenon is observed in both collectivistic countries and subcultures (e.g., Asian Americans).

Empirical studies have shown that nudging people to shift their orientation to a community (away from themselves)

reduces their level of narcissism. Specifically, researchers have found that when people are made to recall and think of concepts or incidents related to caring about others such as situations emphasizing compassion, gratitude, collectivism, agreeableness, empathy, and perspective-taking (i.e., a communal orientation), they are situationally less narcissistic. This is because the intervention (i.e., priming with a communal orientation) shifts a narcissist's egocentric qualities (e.g., superiority, competence, and power) to more communal qualities (e.g., warmth, agreeableness, and kindness). For example, experiment participants who repeated, "I am a caring person" or recalled a time when they were caring showed lower levels of narcissism, especially in the Entitlement facet, compared to how narcissistic they were before, and compared to a group of participants who were not primed with a communal orientation.

In practice, firms and organizations can implement this kind of intervention by fostering a culture with a communal orientation. Some researchers suggest that a communal emphasis can be adopted by using simple slogans in organizations such as "servant leadership" and "there is no 'I' in team." For instance, the U.S. Air Force stresses "service before self" as its core value. Slogans that remind organizational members to care for others, be fair and ethical, and work with humility can lower narcissism, even in narcissistic leaders, due to the repeated exposure to a communal focus over time. Further, these slogans help build an organizational culture that is accepted as the norm and as a shared understanding of how things are done at the firm. Firms can subsequently develop an organizational system emphasizing the success of most of its members and rewarding reciprocity rather than individual success. An organizational emphasis on a communal orientation encoded in slogans, values, and social norms can motivate narcissistic leaders (in their self-interest for admiration) to project humility and care for others, exemplifying the prototypical leader admired in a communal culture. This does not need to necessarily be disingenuous, as narcissists are capable of being empathetic if they intend to do so. The key is to draw out the communal nature of narcissistic leaders by making it beneficial to engage in empathetic attitudes and behaviors. The caveat of developing a communal culture is the time it takes to develop such a culture and the difficulty in changing an individualistic culture deeply entrenched in the organization. However, firms can find opportunities for change while searching for new leadership or through board initiatives. For instance, when hiring new leadership, the board can emphasize that diverse perspectives in decision-making is valued at the firm; the board can also emphasize the well-being of the firm's multiple stakeholders (including employees) and ethical business practices. Additionally, a concerted effort in the firm can be made to instill communal values through slogans, organization-wide announcements, and building systems to uphold valuable inputs from any level of hierarchy.

Enforcing Checks and Balances

Narcissists who are high in the Grandiosity facet develop a sense of superiority and self-importance but often lack an accurate assessment about themselves. To objectively evaluate narcissists' capabilities and value to organizations, firms can incorporate accountability measures into their system. Such measures include reporting relationships, performance evaluations and monitoring, and clear reward and disciplinary systems, among others. These mechanisms require documentation of the decision-making process, the division of tasks, and the outcomes of each decision. Researchers suggest that these measures help clarify one's input and output, increase ethical awareness in decision-making, and decrease self-enhancement. Firms can use 360-degree evaluation on a regular basis to collect diverse assessments within an organization about the leaders and to link the evaluation with a compensation structure. The 360-degree evaluation is useful in obtaining a holistic view of narcissistic leaders because these leaders tend to appeal to their superiors with their charms while exploiting and bullying their subordinates. Further, accountability measures encourage narcissistic leaders to recognize the good work of their subordinates by reducing the ambiguity in all organizational members' contributions. Checks within a decision-making system (e.g., using anonymous inputs from members) open opportunities for organizational members to make suggestions and provide potentially valuable perspectives that would have otherwise been ignored by a narcissistic leader. The obvious limitation of checks and balances is the need to convince narcissistic leaders to be transparent in their actions and decisions, and to be subjected to others' inputs. Thus, it is important for organizational members to make a concerted effort to implement such a system and involve external entities (e.g., consulting firms) or a task force (e.g., a committee) to execute these checks and balances.

Furthermore, firms can implement activities such as town halls, open meetings, and flattening the corporate hierarchy to enhance accurate assessments by a leader's followers. Specifically, by increasing opportunities for subordinates to interact with their leader and observe how their leader interacts with others, subordinates are more likely to bypass the narcissist's initial charisma and develop a more realistic evaluation of their leader. Narcissistic leaders are likely to respond favorably to these activities because they help increase the leader's visibility and appeal to their desire for attention. Although this does not directly reduce the harmful consequences of narcissism on the organization and subordinates, it serves as an important step in dispelling the idealized/heroic visions of leaders that their followers might have. If narcissistic leaders engage in unethical behavior, their subordinates may be less likely to be blinded by the idealistic visions of their leaders and more likely to censure them accordingly. This increased visibility is important, as the likelihood of corporate fraud increases with leader narcissism.

In sum, organizations can help minimize the negative effects of narcissistic leaders by coaching them and their organizational members on the facets of narcissism, when and where harmful narcissistic behaviors are apparent, and how to manage these behaviors. Fostering a culture within the organization centered on community rather than on the individual makes it difficult for a leader to violate the collectivistic norms of a company when he or she tries to pursue only his or her personal agenda and gains. Finally, holding a leader's behaviors accountable by implementing

checks at different levels of the organization prevents active exploitation by leaders and unwarranted claims regarding their achievements. The three Cs—coaching, culture, and checks—can be employed independently but will be more effective if they are applied together due to the synergy they create. For example, a coach can use the information gathered from the checks and balances system to guide narcissistic leaders; leaders are more likely to accept such a system when their organizational cultures emphasize communal values; the organizational system that supports checks and balances helps consolidate a communal culture.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The narcissism of people in general and leaders in particular has led to considerable scientific investigation and research. This paper seeks to highlight the nuances of narcissism in leaders by treating narcissism as a continuum and a combination of different facets. Doing so can facilitate a better understanding of when a leader's narcissism may help or harm in being an effective leader and in interpersonal work relationships. Narcissism is not unequivocally good or bad. In fact, effective leaders typically demonstrate a moderate level of narcissism across all facets (Authority, Grandiosity, and Entitlement) because these leaders will have some desire to influence and direct people, but not everyone in all matters or situations (Authority); some readiness to take the spotlight to declare what they have accomplished, but not constantly seek attention or admiration (Grandiosity); and some willingness to believe that they and their organizations deserve the fruits of their potential and productivity, but not when doing so would be unfair or at the cost of someone else (Entitlement). The three Cs we recommend (coaching, culture, and checks) can reduce the negative effects of unbridled narcissism. Understanding the continuum and combination of narcissism facets, together with the implementation of coaching, culture, and checks, would be an important step for organizations to hinder the harmful effects of narcissism while harnessing its helpful potential.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

For a review on narcissism in organizational contexts, see: Campbell, W. K., Hoffman, B. J., Campbell, S. M., & Marchisio, G. (2011). Narcissism in organizational contexts. *Human Resource Management Review*, *21*(4), 268-284. For more information on the three facets of narcissism, read: Ackerman, R. A., Witt, E. A., Donnellan, M. B., Trzesniewski, K. H., Robins, R. W., & Kashy, D. A. (2011). What does the narcissistic personality inventory really measure? *Assessment*, *18*(1), 67–87.

For a meta-analysis on narcissism and leader effectiveness, read: Grijalva, E., Harms, P. D., Newman, D. A., Gaddis, B. H., & Fraley, R. C. (2015). Narcissism and leadership: A meta-analytic review of linear and nonlinear relationships. *Personnel Psychology*, *68*(1), 1-47. For a discussion on how others respond to a narcissist, read: Paulhus, D. L. (1998). Interpersonal and intrapsychic adaptiveness of trait self-enhancement: A mixed blessing? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *74*(5), 1197. For a discussion on how the different facets of narcissism influence negative work outcomes, see: Grijalva, E., & Newman, D. A. (2015). Narcissism and counterproductive work behavior (CWB): Meta-analysis and consideration of collectivist culture, big five personality, and narcissism's facet structure. *Applied Psychology*, *64*(1), 93–126.

For seminal papers on narcissistic leaders, see: Rosenthal, S. A., & Pittinsky, T. L. (2006). Narcissistic leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly, 17*(6), 617-633; Maccoby, M. (2000). Narcissistic leaders. *Harvard Business Review, 78*(1), 69-77; and Kets de Vries, M. F., & Miller, D. (1985). Narcissism and leadership: An object relations perspective. *Human Relations, 38*(6), 583-601.

For more recent academic works on narcissistic leaders, read: O'Reilly, C. A., & Chatman, J. A. (2020). Transformational leader or narcissist? How grandiose narcissists can create and destroy organizations and institutions. *California Management Review, 62*(3), 5-27; Nevicka, B. (2018). Narcissism and leadership: A perfect match? In *Handbook of Trait Narcissism* (pp. 399-407). Springer, Cham; Cragun, O. R., Olsen, K. J., & Wright, P. M. (2020). Making CEO narcissism research great: A review and meta-analysis of CEO narcissism. *Journal of Management*, *46*(6), 908-936; and Chatterjee, A., & Pollock, T. G. (2017). Master of puppets: How narcissistic CEOs construct their professional worlds. *Academy of Management Review, 42*(4), 703-725.

For more information on our "Three Cs" recommendations and personality change, read: Sedikides, C., & Campbell, W. K. (2017). Narcissistic force meets systemic resistance: The energy clash model. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *12*(3), 400-421; Jordan, C. H., Giacomin, M., & Kopp, L. (2014). Let go of your (inflated) ego: Caring more about others reduces narcissistic tendencies. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, *8*(9), 511-523; McMahon, G., & Rosen, A. (2009). Narcissism at work. *Training Journal*, 64-67; and Roberts, B. W., Luo, J., Briley, D. A., Chow, P. I., Su, R., & Hill, P. L. (2017). A systematic review of personality trait change through intervention. *Psychological Bulletin*, *143*(2), 117-141.

To learn more about the examples discussed in this article, read: Stone, B. (2013). *The everything store: Jeff Bezos and the age of Amazon*. Random House; Vance, A. (2015). *Elon Musk: Tesla, SpaceX, and the quest for a fantastic future*. HarperCollins; Isaacson, W. (2011). *Steve Jobs*. Simon & Schuster; Farrell, M., Hoffman, L., Brown, E., & Benoit, D. (2019, Oct 24). The fall of WeWork: How a startup darling came unglued. *Wall Street Journal (Online)* Retrieved from https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-fall-of-wework-how-a-startup-darling-came-unglued-11571946003.

Citations made in the Table 1 are: Ackerman, R. A., Donnellan, M. B., & Robins, R. W. (2012). An item response theory analysis of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, *94*(2), 141-155; Lessard, J., Greenberger, E., Chen, C., & Farruggia, S. (2011). Are youths' feelings of entitlement always "bad"?: Evidence for a distinction between exploitive and non-exploitive dimensions of entitlement. *Journal of Adolescence*, *34*(3), 521-529.

CREDIT AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Yoonhee Choi: Conceptualization, Writing — original draft, revised draft. **Wei Ming Jonathan Phan:** Conceptualization, Writing — original draft, revised draft.

Acknowledgment

Yoonhee Choi (PhD, University of Minnesota) is an Assistant Professor of Management and Human Resource Management at California State University, Long beach. Her research interests lie at the intersection of strategic management and organizational theory, with a focus on star CEOs, innovation, institutional investors, and institutional complexity. Email: yoonhee.choi@csulb.edu. (Corresponding author).

Wei Ming Jonathan Phan (PhD, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign) is an Assistant Professor of Management and Human Resource Management at California State University, Long beach. His research covers a range of topics: individual differences, career fit, workplace health, cross-cultural psychology, and psychometrics. Email: jonathan.phan@csulb.edu.