



Culture, How to's

3 types of narcissists you might encounter at work

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Some experts say that narcissists might not always be bad for business. How can organisations capitalise on their strengths while keeping their faults in check?

Widely seen to be synonymous with self-absorption and arrogance, [narcissism](#) is not a term most managers would wish to be associated with.

With that being said, many people with narcissistic tendencies embody characteristics that recruiters look for when hiring for leadership roles. Often self-assured, charismatic and able to make difficult decisions without holding back, a narcissist might come across as the ideal candidate for a managerial position – on the surface.

Indeed, famous leaders from Napoleon Bonaparte to Steve Jobs have shown us that narcissists are capable of much more than fruitless self-indulgence.

However, as the events of the last two years have reminded us, employee wellbeing must always be at the forefront of HR's agenda. If an organisation hires a leader whose personality makes them prone to hostility or exploitative behaviour, the detrimental impact on employee [mental health](#) could far outweigh the strengths that a narcissistic personality brings to the table.

HRM spoke with Karen Gately, Founder of HR Consultancy Corporate Dojo, to discuss what narcissism looks like in the workplace and how HR should respond to it.

What actually is narcissism?

Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) is a diagnosable psychiatric condition characterised by an inflated sense of self-importance. It was named for Narcissus, a mythical Greek hunter who fell in love with his own reflection in a pool of water and stayed there staring at it until his death.

“We’ve got to be willing to recognise that irrespective of their expertise, or how hard they are to replace, these people can not only be incredibly damaging, but also limiting to the group’s potential.” – Karen Gately, HR consultant

“It starts with the mindset,” says Gately. “[Narcissists] tend to have a depth of self-belief that can be unwavering. They will also place a higher priority on their own needs. They’re less likely to listen to others and it’s very difficult to challenge and sway their perspective.

“They’re more likely to have a detrimental impact on people’s mental health and wellbeing, because they’re unlikely to have as much [empathy](#) as others, and they’re unlikely to recognise when they are undermining other humans. And if they’re in a position of power, that dynamic can become really unhealthy.”

NPD is not straightforward and can manifest itself in a number of different ways. Accordingly, there are several different forms of narcissism that organisations should be aware of.

Three types of narcissism

1. Grandiose narcissism

The [grandiose narcissist](#) radiates charisma, confidence and high self-esteem, and is likely to thrive in a leadership role. Their unwavering self-belief gives rise to their disregard for the opinions of peers and experts, making them prone to defensiveness or hostility if they are contradicted.

2. Vulnerable narcissism

Sometimes known as a 'covert narcissist', the [vulnerable narcissist](#) has a fragile sense of self and seeks constant approval from those around them. While they may not share the confidence of grandiose narcissists, their extreme sensitivity and preoccupation with self image can have a similar impact on others around them.

3. Malignant narcissism

When he coined the term in the 1960s, social psychologist Erich Fromm called [malignant narcissism](#) the "quintessence of evil". This form of narcissism is characterised by a Machiavellian indifference to morality and the feelings of others.



How to manage a narcissist

HR can employ a number of strategies to spot narcissism early on, and keep it from causing too much damage.

1. Structure your interviews carefully

To avoid a narcissist with harmful tendencies slipping through the cracks, it is essential to be on the front foot during the candidate screening process. While HR and recruitment teams are not qualified to diagnose a personality disorder, a simplistic interview process that focuses on charisma rather than the specific skills required for the position is a risky game to play.

“It doesn’t matter how technically competent you are, how much sales revenue you’re bringing in, or how hierarchically senior you are. Your capacity to engage constructively and effectively with other human beings should be non-negotiable.” – Karen Gately, HR consultant

When interviewing for a leadership role, Gately advises getting a clear idea of what success looks like to the candidate.

“It’s about assessing the aspects of their character that enable them to engage with other human beings – as a leader, are they in service to their team?”

“Narcissists are very self-focused, as opposed to focused on other people. [If we ask] for their key drivers of success, and the response is all about them, we need to be cautious.”

2. Establish clear boundaries and expectations

Particularly in a leadership role, a narcissistic personality type is liable to get swept up in their mission to serve their own interests. This is likely to come at the expense of their colleagues’ interests and those of the company as a whole. By offering clear guidelines on the culture and expectations of the workplace, HR can prevent a narcissistic employee from slipping out of control.

“There should be no exceptions to the rule,” says Gately.

“It doesn’t matter how technically competent you are, how much sales revenue you’re bringing in, or how hierarchically senior you are. Your capacity to engage constructively and effectively with other human beings should be non-negotiable. And in order to set people up for success, we need to clearly articulate what great behaviour looks like.”

Including these expectations in position descriptions and performance plans is also essential, she says.

3. Bring managers into the feedback process

Delivering feedback effectively to a narcissist is a tall order, due to the fact that they are inclined to disregard others’ opinions – particularly when they come from an unfamiliar third party such as HR.

For this reason, Gately suggests engaging a familiar face in the process.

“HR can only go so far towards influencing them. Ultimately, their manager needs to take the reins and lead the conversation,” she says.

“A lot of leaders who feel uncomfortable with certain conversations will avoid it at all costs, so we need to help the manager to feel ready to have that conversation.”

4. Approach issues diplomatically

Since narcissistic personalities are prone to becoming defensive when criticised, tactfulness is key. Although superficially they may seem confident and self-assured, an inflated sense of self makes narcissists fragile and prone to hypersensitivity when they perceive a threat or a critical comment.

It’s important to consider gentler forms of feedback that are less likely to provoke hostility, and equally important not to take any backlash personally.

“To the extent that’s possible, we need to help this person to feel safe and that it’s not a telling off or warning,” says Gately. “Because that will trigger defensive responses.

“If they feel safe and that HR is actually working with them to help them be better, they are more likely to bring down their defenses.”

Gately says organisations must ensure they are offering every employee opportunities to grow and improve, but that it might not always result in meaningful change.

“We should give them every opportunity, engage with respect and sensitivity and offer them coaching and support. But then, ultimately, if they can’t get there, we’ve got to make the tough call.

“We’ve got to be willing to recognise that irrespective of their expertise, or how hard they are to replace, these people can not only be incredibly damaging, but also limiting to the group’s potential.”