

The Narcissist in the Workplace

By Sam Vaknin

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To a narcissist-employer, the members of his "staff" are Secondary Sources of Narcissistic Supply. Their role is to accumulate the supply (in human speak, remember events that support the grandiose self-image of the narcissist) and to regulate the Narcissistic Supply of the narcissist during dry spells (simply put, to adulate, adore, admire, agree, provide attention and approval and so on or, in other words, be an audience). The staff (or should we say "stuff"?) is supposed to remain passive. The narcissist is not interested in anything but the simplest function of mirroring. When the mirror acquires a personality and a life of its own, the narcissist is incensed. When independent minded, an employee might be in danger of being sacked by his employer (an act which demonstrates the employer's omnipotence).

The employee's presumption to be the employer's equal (friendship is possible only among equals) injures the latter narcissistically. The employer is willing to accept his employees as underlings, whose very position serves to support his grandiose fantasies. But the grandiosity rests on such fragile foundations, that any hint of equality, disagreement or need (that the narcissist "needs" friends, for instance) threatens the narcissist profoundly. The narcissist is exceedingly insecure. It is easy to destabilise his impromptu "personality". His reactions are merely in self-defence.

Classic narcissistic behaviour is when idealisation is followed by devaluation. The devaluing attitude develops as a result of disagreements OR simply because time has eroded the employee's capacity to serve as a FRESH Source of Supply.

The employee, taken for granted by the narcissistic employer, becomes uninspiring as a source of adulation, admiration and attention. The narcissist always seeks new thrills and stimuli.

The narcissist is notorious for his low threshold of resistance to boredom. His behaviour is impulsive and his biography tumultuous precisely because of his need to introduce uncertainty and risk to what he regards as "stagnation" or "slow death" (i.e., routine). Most interactions in the workplace are part of the rut – and thus constitute a reminder of this routine – deflating the narcissist's grandiose fantasies.

Narcissists do many unnecessary, wrong and even dangerous things in pursuit of the stabilisation of their inflated self-image.

Narcissists feel suffocated by intimacy, or by the constant reminders of the REAL, nitty-gritty world. It reduces them, makes them realise the Grandiosity Gap (between their self-image and reality). It is a threat to the precarious balance of their personality structures (mostly "false", that is, invented) and treated as such.

Narcissists forever shift the blame, pass the buck, and engage in cognitive dissonance. They "pathologise" the other, foster feelings of guilt and shame in her, demean, debase and humiliate in order to preserve their sense of grandiosity.

Narcissists are pathological liars. They think nothing of it because their very self is FALSE, an invention.

Here are a few useful guidelines:

Never disagree with the narcissist or contradict him;

Never offer him any intimacy;

Look awed by whatever attribute matters to him (for instance: by his professional achievements or by his good looks, or by his success with women and so on);

Never remind him of life out there and if you do, connect it somehow to his sense of grandiosity ("These are the BEST art materials ANY workplace is going to have", "We get them EXCLUSIVELY", etc.);

Do not make any comment, which might directly or indirectly impinge on his self-image, omnipotence, judgement, omniscience, skills, capabilities, professional record, or even omnipresence. Bad sentences start with: "I think you overlooked ... made a mistake here ... you don't know ... do you know ... you were not here yesterday so ... you cannot ... you should ... (perceived as rude imposition, narcissists react very badly to restrictions placed on their freedom) ... I (never mention the fact that you are a separate, independent entity, narcissists regard others as extensions of their selves, their internalisation processes were derailed and they did not differentiate properly)..." You get the gist of it.

Can the narcissist be harnessed? Can his energies be channeled productively?

This would be a deeply flawed – and even dangerous – "advice". Various management gurus purport to teach us how to harness this force of nature known as malignant or pathological narcissism. Narcissists are driven, visionary, ambitious, exciting and productive, says Michael Maccoby, for instance. To ignore such a resource is a criminal waste. All we need to do is learn how to "handle" them.

Yet, this prescription is either naive or disingenuous. Narcissists cannot be "handled", or "managed", or "contained", or "channeled". They are, by definition, incapable of team work. They lack empathy, are exploitative, envious, haughty and feel entitled, even if such a feeling is commensurate only with their grandiose fantasies. Narcissists dissemble, conspire, destroy and self-destruct. Their drive is compulsive, their vision rarely grounded in reality, their human relations a calamity. In the long run, there is no

enduring benefit to dancing with narcissists – only ephemeral and, often, fallacious, "achievements".

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Grandiosity Bubbles

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As one Source of Narcissistic Supply dwindles, the narcissist finds himself trapped in a frantic (though, at times, unconscious) effort to secure alternatives. As one Pathological Narcissistic Space (the narcissist's stomping grounds) is rendered "uninhabitable" (too many people "see through" the narcissist's manipulation and machinations) – the narcissist wanders off to find another.

These hysterical endeavors sometimes lead to boom-bust cycles which involve, in the first stage, the formation of a Grandiosity Bubble.

A Grandiosity Bubble is an imagined, self-aggrandizing, narrative involving the narcissist and elements from his real life – people around him, places he frequents, or conversations he is having. The narcissist weaves a story incorporating these facts, inflating them in the process and endowing them with bogus internal meaning and consistency. In other words: he confabulates – but, this time, his confabulation is loosely based on reality.

In the process, the narcissist re-invents himself and his life to fit the new-fangled tale. He re-casts himself in newly adopted roles. He suddenly fancies himself an actor, a guru, a political activist, an entrepreneur, or an irresistible hunk. He modifies his behavior to conform to these new functions. He gradually morphs into the fabricated character and "becomes" the fictitious protagonist he has created.

All the mechanisms of pathological narcissism are at work during the bubble phase. The narcissist idealizes the situation, the other "actors", and the environment. He tries to control and manipulate his milieu into buttressing his false notions and perceptions. Faced with an inevitable Grandiosity Gap, he becomes disillusioned and bitter and devalues and discards the people, places, and circumstances involved in the bubble.

Still, Grandiosity Bubbles are not part of the normal narcissistic mini-cycle (see the resources in the section titled "Also Read" below). They are rare events, much like trying on a new outfit for size and comfort. They fizzle out rapidly and the narcissist reverts to his regular pattern: idealizing new Sources of Supply, devaluing and discarding them, pursuing the next victims to be drained.

Actually, the deflation of a grandiosity bubble is met with relief by the narcissist. It does not involve a narcissistic injury. The narcissist views the bubble as merely an experiment at being someone else for a while. It is a safety valve, allowing the narcissist to effectively cope with negative emotions and frustration. Thus cleansed, the narcissist can go back to doing what he does best – projecting a False Self and garnering attention from others.

Sam Vaknin (<http://samvak.tripod.com>) is the author of Malignant Self Love - Narcissism Revisited and After the Rain - How the West Lost the East. He served as a columnist for Central Europe Review, PopMatters, and eBookWeb , and Bellaonline, and as a United Press International (UPI) Senior Business Correspondent. He is the the editor of mental health and Central East Europe categories in The Open Directory and Suite101.

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