

# The Wrath of the Narcissistic Leader: An Empirical Study on the Trauma Bestowed onto Employees

Dr. Giselle A. Castillo, PhD, MBA, BSBM

Leadership Style and Leadership Theory Subject Matter Expert (SME), University of Phoenix Mentor  
Southern New Hampshire University, College for America Reviewer

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**Abstract:** This research focused on the researchers' personal experience and observations of two important leadership and employee variables; the narcissistic leader and the trauma bestowed onto employees by narcissistic leaders. This study reveals the definition of a narcissistic leader which encompasses the desire to be the center of attention through the destruction of both professional and personal lives. The wrath of the narcissistic leader is devastating not only to the employee that is being targeted but also to the organization that employs such a monster. The trauma is brutal and debilitating, one that must cease immediately for the well-being of the affected employee.

**Keywords:** Narcissistic Leadership, Abusive Supervision, Mental and Physical Health Trauma, Workplace Distress.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

According to Setter (2017), one's work environment has an enormous influence on one's personal life. A remote or office job where you are valued and appreciated for your contributions to the organization gives an employee a sense of peace and well-being. It also impacts positively on his or her self-esteem. But when you work under a narcissistic leader one can forget about peace, well-being and career advancement (Setter, 2017). Hence, the wrath of the narcissistic leader when he or she feels challenged can and often is devastating to the employee that for the most part is simply abiding by the organization's policies', procedures, and regulations. There is rarely any ill intent by the employee; however, the narcissistic leader interprets the employee's actions very differently; and even feels threatened by the employee; hence, severe distress is bestowed onto the employee. This damage is indicative of the control the narcissistic leader believes they are entitled to, at whatever the expense. The price that the employee pays is a deadly one; which includes abusive and emotionally taxing behaviors.

## 2. WHAT IS NARCISSISTIC LEADERSHIP

A narcissistic leader is characterized by traits such as dominance, self-confidence, a sense of entitlement, grandiosity, and low empathy. There is growing evidence that individuals with these characteristics often emerge as leaders, and that narcissistic leaders may make more impulsive and risky decisions (O'Reilly, Doerr, Caldwell, & Chatman, 2014).

According to "Signs of Narcissism in the Workplace and What You Can Do" (2018)...

...“The narcissistic leader considers themselves superior, want their wishes attended to immediately and do not tolerate dissension or criticism. Therefore narcissistic leaders typically surround themselves with people who will treat them in the way they want. Oftentimes these leaders actually control and manipulate these people into treating him or her this way, to get their way” (para. 7).

Well-known author and Narcissist Expert, Sam Vaknin (2015) (himself a diagnosed Narcissist and Psychopath) explains that there are two types of Narcissistic leaders: an overt one and a covert one. An Overt narcissistic leader tends to be a show-off (the “Self-proclaimed know-it-all”). If they do not possess these things and are not intellectually comfortable, they will certainly pretend to be. They are also quite prone to name-dropping and procuring their allies (they appear very generous and are keen to impress and gain trust). On the other hand, the Covert Narcissistic leader will appear more humble and a “do-gooder” in the organization (think charity fund-raiser, church-goer, school sports team coach, and etcetera). Both types are controlling, manipulative and dangerous individuals. Vaknin (2015) adds that no matter what kind of narcissistic leader you are dealing with, they all follow the same pattern, according to mental health professionals. It’s like they all went to the same narcissistic leader school.

### 3. THE CORE STAGES OF NARCISSISTIC LEADERSHIP ABUSE

Setter (2017) argues that there are three distinctive stages:

1. Idealization
2. Devaluation (Gaslighting and Gossiping).
3. Rejection

#### ***Idealization:***

In the beginning you will be subjected to a lot of compliments and flattery. The narcissistic leader will do anything to “seduce” you. Most employees will respond very positively to this type of adulation. You will feel valued and appreciated and may counter respond with equal amounts of flattery to the narcissistic leader (which is exactly what he or she wants because this forms part of his or her “narcissistic supply”). You may often be told how great you are, how proud he or she is of you, etcetera (Setter, 2017); I sure was.

Moreover, Setter (2017) states that the Narcissistic leader will gain your trust in manipulative ways through any means possible, including telling you supposed secrets and intimate details of his or her personal life which is designed to make you open up to him or her.

Note: Anything you tell him or her in confidence will later be used against you, guaranteed. In a work setting he or she will appear like a trusted friend, perhaps saying he or she cares about you, your success, your career and or your future (Setter, 2017). This is simply a ploy to seek ammunition to use against you when he or she eventually begins to belittle and ostracize you.

#### ***Devaluation (Gaslighting and Gossip):***

At this stage, the narcissistic leader has gained your trust, and you are sharing professional and personal details of your life with him or her. The devaluation will begin in very subtle ways that at first, you may not even notice. He or she will make subtle little digs at you, masked in "sarcastic remarks" but as time progresses he or she will begin picking at your vulnerabilities (Setter, 2017).

This stage is also interspersed with Gaslighting, which tends to happen very gradually in the leader/ subordinate relationship; in fact, the narcissistic leader actions may seem like just a harmless misunderstanding at first. Over time, however, these abusive behaviors continue, and an employee can become confused, anxious, isolated and depressed while losing all sense of what is happening (The National Domestic Violence Hotline, 2017). He or she does this by denying things he or she said and did and making out that you are lying, fabricating, or concocting what happened.

Dr. Orloff, MD (2016) states that the Narcissistic leader is a master gossiper. They love talking ill of people behind their backs and think nothing of repeating whatever gossip they hear, adding their exaggerations and lies for added effect. You can sense how much pleasure they get out of gossip. By the time the devaluation is in full swing, he or she is accumulating so much ill-treatment on you that you may dread reporting to work, you may become alienated by your peers, you may even begin to feel ostracized, excommunicated, and blacklisted, and your emotional and physical health may start to suffer due to the high levels of stress you are under.

**Rejection:**

The narcissistic leader has no interpersonal skills and no empathy (Emotional Intelligence), once he or she no longer has a use for you, he or she will begin to reject you, as useless and incompetent. In a work environment that might mean being randomly excluded from a particular group or excluded from group duties, roles, correspondence designed to compromise your job. The rejection phase perpetually accompanies the spread of malicious rumors and lies about you. He or she will get his peers and or direct reports to spy and or monitor you and report back to him or her with confidential details of your work, so that he or she can maintain control over you.

**4. THE EFFECTS (TRAUMA) OF NARCISSISM IN THE WORKPLACE**

In time your self-esteem, motivation, emotional clarity, over-all wellness may deteriorate, and you may start to suffer from general anxiety, stress, and depression. Bouts of blatant abuse may transpire, finding fault with everything you do, and he or she will seek reasons to challenge you. The Narcissistic leader will even go as far as to create problems where there are none.

Conflicts are often interfused with the narcissistic leader's rage. Verbal altercations are common. The narcissistic leader will also be prone to psychosis - imagining things that are unreal despite evidence to the contrary (Vaknin, 2017), to establish unreliability and unethical practices on your part to destroy and tarnish your career. Dr. Abdul Sahd, a Clinical Psychologist (2017) explains that the sympathetic nervous system is affected and causes overall physical, autoimmune, and mental disorders. Additionally, such stress slows down the metabolic rate due to the chronic stress causing metabolic disorders in the employee. Hence, the trauma is brutal, debilitating, and even life-threatening. No employer is worth your health!

**5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR AVOIDANCE**

In closing, Sarkis (2017) inquires, so how do you protect yourself from a narcissistic leader in your workplace? Here are some tips. (Note: If you have any questions about your legal rights in the workplace, consult an attorney.)

1. Documentation in writing (for validity purposes): If you are given verbal instructions at work, ask for them to be emailed to you. The best defense is to have documentation of what the narcissistic leader said and when they said it. You can also write down his or her instructions and review your notes with them for accuracy. Consider keeping written documentation of issues with the narcissistic leader- date and time of the event, what happened, and as much verbatim quotes as possible. If you need to consult with a Union Steward, Attorney, and or upper management later on, you will have everything already written down (Sarkis, 2017).
2. Avoid an argument: Sarkis (2017) argues that the narcissistic leader looks for ways to take and break you down emotionally, personally, and professionally whether it is by ostracizing you, getting you demoted, and or even fired. Avoid giving them that opportunity. Narcissistic leaders are notorious for finding your weaknesses and exploiting them to the point of depreciation and humiliation. This means that they seem to have a special power in finding what other people are sensitive about and then uses this as ammunition against you. In addition, if the narcissistic leader feels you have "injured" them in some way, they may make a comment just loud enough for you to hear, questioning your ability to be a good subordinate. Keep in mind that this type of individual is sick and evil; stand your ground and challenge every effort they make to tarnish your career and reputation.
3. Recognize it is not personal: The narcissistic leader usually zeros in on people who are performing and or are better, or more intelligent than them within the workforce environment. Hence, you may have the misfortune of being their main target. The narcissistic leader hates anyone that is perceived as "better" than them.

Therefore keep the following in mind, to preserve your composure, mind-set, and emotional stability:

1. The narcissistic leader's behavior towards you has nothing to do with you — it is all about them, and the deep insecurity they feel. Yes, that's right; the narcissistic leader is deeply insecure- even though they appear to be the exact opposite. Realizing the narcissist's behavior is not a personal attack can make it easier to walk away.

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## 2. Have a witness.

If your narcissistic leader requests to speak with you privately, consider bringing someone with you as a witness (i.e., a Union Steward and or another leader). Having a witness present may make him or her think twice about saying or doing something.

## 3. Avoid contact.

This is an effective step, but can be one of the hardest to do. One of the best ways not to get sucked into the narcissistic leader's game is to refuse to engage with them. Granted, if you must interact, keep information to "just the facts."

4. Know your legal rights (Federal and Local rights, as well as Union, if covered by a Collective Bargaining Contract). Narcissistic leaders will now and again do just enough without it being illegal- they know very well what they are doing. However, many times they wind up crossing that legal line. It is important to know your legal rights in the workplace especially if the narcissist is your direct report leader and or an executive leader (if in government this could be a Deputy Director, Director, and or Chief). There is a power differential there and the narcissistic leader may use it to their advantage. According to the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC, 2018), generally an employer is not allowed to discriminate against you or treat you differently based on age (if you are 40 and older), race, beliefs, national origin, disability, genetic information, or sex (this includes your sexual orientation, gender identity, and pregnancy). The EEOC also states that generally your employer is also not allowed to make your work conditions so intolerable that a reasonable person would find it impossible. Rules can differ by employer.

Note: Harassment is also a violation of your employee rights, according to the EEOC. This includes being harassed for reporting violations by your employer. The EEOC site also gives the steps they recommend if you feel your rights are being violated. In addition, there are labor attorneys with whom you can consult.

You can find out more from the EEOC at <https://www.eeoc.gov>

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