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Gleanings

By Gerald R. Chester, Ph.D.

The Plague of Narcissistic Leadership

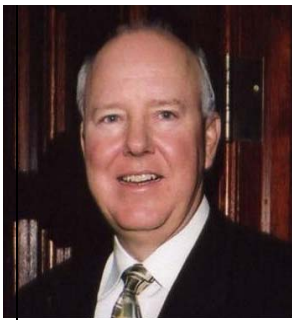
The dictionary definition of *narcissism* is “excessive self-admiration and self-centeredness” (source: *Encarta*).

Every human being is self-centered to some degree. Specialists in human behavior have determined that excessive self-centeredness is abnormal and label it narcissism. (The term *narcissism* is rooted in Greek mythology.)

One of the most visible expressions of narcissism in organizations can be found in senior leaders. For example, consider the strategic planning process that is requisite for any organization seeking excellence. Vision casting is a key element of strategic planning. If the vision of an organization is defined for the most part by one person—for example, the most senior leader—what would you expect of that vision? You would expect the vision to reflect the strengths and weaknesses of the leader.

Everyone has strengths and weaknesses. That is a challenging truth of the human condition. A narcissistic approach to vision casting might be effective if the senior leader had all the human gifts and perspectives and no weaknesses or blind spots, but sadly, that is not reality.

Charles Fishman asked a very poignant question in his article on SAS founder and CEO Jim Goodnight: “How did a quirky guy like Jim Goodnight come to have such a well-managed company?” Mr. Fishman’s conclusion was that Mr. Goodnight created an organization that reflected his strengths, without being hindered by his weaknesses. (Charles Fishman, “Sanity, Inc.,” *FastCompany*, 21 January 1999, 84.)



Every senior leader must face the humbling truth that he or she is rife with weaknesses or limitations. Each person is given a personality and set of aptitudes at birth. For each of us, our particular inventory of human qualities can be developed to a degree, but is largely unchangeable. For example, if one is an introvert, it is difficult, if not impossible, to become an extrovert. If one is not naturally inclined to mathematics, it would be difficult to become a world-class mathematician.

Given the complexity of the world and the reality of human limitations, does it make sense that anyone could have enough gifting and ability to be the sole vision caster of an organization?

In Sydney Finkelstein’s well researched book *Why Smart Executives Fail*, chapter nine outlines the “Seven Habits of Spectacularly Unsuccessful People.” “They think they have all the answers” is Habit #3 (223). What pride and presumption to believe that anyone could be effective as the sole vision caster of any organization!

Truly wise leaders are humble, recognize their limitations, and develop an equally yoked team of senior leaders who then cast the vision for the organization. Such equally yoked leaders defeat the narcissism that plagues organizations today by embracing the strengths of each member of the team.

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