

Narcissistic people most likely to emerge as leaders

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When a group is without a leader, you can often count on a narcissist to take charge, a new study suggests. Researchers found that people who score high in narcissism tend to take control of leaderless groups.

Narcissism is a trait in which people are self-centered, exaggerate their talents and abilities, and lack empathy for others.

"Not only did narcissists rate themselves as leaders, which you would expect, but other group members also saw them as the people who really run the group," said Amy Brunell, lead author of the study and assistant professor of psychology at Ohio State University at Newark.

Narcissists, by definition, are self-centered and overconfident in their own abilities.

The researchers found similar results in two separate studies involving college students, and one involving business managers in an MBA program.

And while narcissists are more likely to become leaders, results of one of the studies suggests that, once in power, narcissists don't perform any better than others in that leadership role.

"It's not surprising that narcissists become leaders," Brunell said.

"They like power, they are egotistical, and they are usually charming and extraverted. But the problem is, they don't necessarily make better

leaders."

The study will appear in an upcoming print issue of the journal *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*. It is currently available to subscribers online.

The first study involved 432 undergraduate students. They all completed assessments which measured various personality traits, including narcissism. They were then put in groups of four, and told to assume they were a committee of senior officers of the student union, and their task was to elect next year's director. Each person in a group was given a profile of a different candidate for the position, and each was to argue for their particular candidate.

Following the discussion, they voted on the director, and then completed a questionnaire evaluating the leadership of themselves and the other group members.

Results showed that students who scored higher on one dimension of narcissism – the desire for power - were more likely to say they wanted to lead the group, were more likely to say they did lead the group discussion, and were more likely to be viewed as leaders by the other group members.

The other dimension of narcissism – the desire for attention – was not as strongly related to leadership roles in the groups.

"It's not surprising, but the desire for power is what really drives narcissists to seek leadership positions," she said.

In a second study, 408 students were placed in groups of four and given a scenario in which they imagined they were shipwrecked on an uninhabited island and had to choose which 15 salvageable items that the

group should take ashore which will best help them survive.

After a group discussion, those who scored highest on the power dimension of narcissism again showed the most desire to lead the group discussion, rated themselves as leaders, and were viewed by other group members as the leaders.

This study went further, though, by seeing how well the narcissists performed as leaders. Researchers looked at the lists, prepared by each individual and group, of the 15 items that they thought would help them survive. They compared their lists to one prepared by an expert who has taught survival skills to the U.S military.

Results showed that narcissists did no better than others on selecting the items that would best help them survive. In addition, groups that overall scored highest on narcissism did no better than other groups on the task.

A third study involved 153 business managers enrolled in an executive MBA program at a large southeastern university. The managers were also put in groups of four and told to assume the role of a school board deciding how to allocate a large financial contribution from a fictional company.

Two trained observers – professors or doctoral students in industrial/organizational psychology – observed the groups and rated how much of a leadership role each participant assumed in their groups.

Results showed that the MBA students rated highest in narcissism were most likely to be identified as emerging leaders by the expert observers.

"Even trained observers saw narcissistic people as the natural leaders," Brunell said. "In addition, this study showed that narcissism plays a role in leadership among real-world managers."

Brunell said the studies took into account other factors – such as gender and personality traits like high self-esteem and extraversion – that may relate to leadership development. But even when these factors were taken into account, narcissism still played a key role.

It is important not to confuse narcissism with high self-esteem, she said.

"A person with high self-esteem is confident and charming, but they also have a caring component and they want to develop intimacy with others," Brunell explained. "Narcissists have an inflated view of their talents and abilities and are all about themselves. They don't care as much about others."

Brunell said she believes the results apply to many parts of life, from the politics of the presidential race to Wall Street.

"Many people have observed that it takes a narcissistic person to run for president of the United States," she said. "I would be surprised if any of the candidates who have run weren't higher than average in narcissism."

The same is true for the leaders of Wall Street firms that have made and lost millions of dollars in the past few years.

"There have been a lot of studies that have found narcissistic leaders tend to have volatile and risky decision-making performance and can be ineffective and potentially destructive leaders," she said.

However, that doesn't mean all the troubles in Washington or Wall Street can be blamed on narcissistic leaders.

"I'm sure some of these leaders had to be overconfident and too sure of their abilities. But there's a lot more behind the troubles of government and business than the personalities of their leaders."

Source: Ohio State University

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