

The Rise and Fall of Narcissism

Whilst there are varying forms and nuances of narcissism, studies in various Western countries over the past two decades have shown that people who possess so-called 'narcissistic traits' are generally likely to 'get to the top'.

These are the people whose ego's seem to be insatiably hungry for recognition. Their lives are dedicated to exploring every opportunity to shine in other people's eyes, sometimes in very subtle ways. Depending on the things which interest them in life, the high persistence which accompanies their need to shine eventually lands them in an ideal niche - in both their professional and their private lives - where they are surrounded by people who constantly nourish their ego's.

Further recent studies have also revealed that many successful narcissistically-orientated personalities also profit from possessing 'cognitive empathy' or 'psychopathic empathy', which enables them to get what they want out of others.

It is no surprise that what underlies many of the selection criteria used by executive search companies is exactly this combination of 'narcissism' and 'cognitive empathy'. Here lie the apparent seeds of leadership and success ... in the short-term, at least.

In the long-term, could it be, however, that such selection criteria turn out to be the seeds for disaster rather than success? And if so, could this be true for both private and professional life?

It is a fact that the Western market economy has, until recent years, thrived by appealing to the materialistic and immediate needs of the individual. Through clothing, cars, mobile phones and all manner of commodities, industry and commerce have exploited the principle of '*strengthening the self-esteem of the individual*'.

This is, of course, hardly surprising if the people who have been running society and industry themselves function on exactly that same principle, i.e. are people who are driven by their own inner need to strengthen their self-esteem and who, in turn, implicitly manipulate others that they should do the same. The vicious circle is complete.

As we know, this trend has, in turn, opened up a whole industry for publishers, psychologists, therapists and coaches to cash in on those who have been led to believe that their own self-esteem is lacking. Self-awareness - which is also an integral part of most forms of therapy and coaching - has become such a key concept in society that people all over the Western world have become permanently concerned with wanting to know who they are. Smart businesses and authors have not been slow in providing a plethora of books and personality tests which help people to satisfy their occupation with themselves.

However, when one looks

1. at the rapidly increasing number of organisations and relationships in crisis
2. at all the people in various forms of depression, isolation, addiction, apathy or personal debt, and, most importantly,
3. at the premises which underlie the methods which are being used to restore organisations and people back to 'normal health',

one is compelled to reflect as to whether the selection criteria for senior positions in society and industry need to be seriously questioned.

But, the main challenge in trying to break out of this particular vicious circle lies in the fact that the narcissistically-orientated personality does not find it easy to genuinely question itself or to build a sustainable consensus with others.

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