



When it comes to leaders,  
which is the greater virtue?

# UBERTY OR HUMILITY?

**John Dame and Jeffery Gedmin recently wrote that “we live in an era of self-celebration. Fame is equated with success, and being self-referential has become the norm.”**

**Considering studies show that the rate of narcissistic tendencies has risen faster than obesity since the 1980s, it’s hard to disagree.**

**But is that necessarily a bad thing?**

# THE RISE OF THE

# NARCISSIST

Narcissism stems from people's belief that they are exceptional, the origins of which can be traced to adult caretakers providing continuous positive feedback without the discipline necessary for learning limits. As adults, narcissists are self-centered, exaggerate their talents and abilities, and lack empathy for others. Unfortunately, these qualities make them uniquely suited to climb the corporate ladder.

# THEY ARE AMAZING IMPRESSION MANAGERS

Psychologists recorded 73 first-year college students individually introducing themselves to the other participants. Researchers asked participants to rate one another's likeability, and compared those ratings to an assessment of narcissistic personality characteristics. The study found narcissists excelled at managing initial impressions. They used more charming facial expressions, a more confident speaking tone, were funnier, wore more fashionable clothes and had trendier haircuts.

**Narcissists great first impressions aren't limited to in-person impressions; that charisma translates online, too. A 2012 study showed that narcissists tend to have more followers and friends and higher Klout scores (a score measuring social media influence) on Twitter, Facebook, etc.**

# THEY TAKE CREDIT AND AVOID BLAME

Ben Dattner, author of *The Blame Game*, notes that narcissists “lead with the main purpose of receiving personal credit or glory. When things go wrong or they make mistakes, they deny or distort information and rewrite history in order to avoid getting blamed.”

Jeff Foster, Hogan vice president of science, and Dara Pickering, Hogan research consultant, studied the relationship between nearly 1,000 participants’ job performance and their narcissistic personality characteristics.

**“Narcissists excel at self-promotion,” Foster said. “Individuals who tend toward narcissism were more likely to be seen by their superiors as knowledgeable about their industry, excellent at taking initiative, managing their performance, and achieving results.”**

# THEY SEEM LIKE LEADERS

Ohio State University psychologist Amy Brunell and her colleagues presented two studies that showed individuals with narcissistic personality characteristics were more likely than non-narcissistic participants to take control of leaderless groups.

“It’s not surprising that narcissists become leaders,” Brunell said. “They like power, they are egotistical, and they are usually charming and extraverted.”

**“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. The problem is, they don’t necessarily make better leaders.”**

# FROM NARCISSISM TO HUBRIS

Narcissism is useful – some would argue necessary – for climbing the corporate ladder. And, once at the top, a small degree of narcissism may be good for leadership. A recent study showed managers with moderate narcissism scores outperform managers with high and low rates of narcissism. However, the same characteristics that enable narcissists to rise to the top of the corporate or political ladder are often responsible for their downfall.

# NARCISSISTIC PEOPLE ARE LIKELY TO BE

- **Aggressive and fearless** when facing difficult tasks, regardless of actual past performance
- **Impulsive**, and resistant to negative feedback
- **Unrealistic** in evaluating their abilities and competencies
- **Willing to make decisions** without seeking input from others
- **Feeling entitled** to leadership positions and special consideration
- **Intimidating** toward peers and subordinates, blaming them for performance issues

**“What you see with narcissistic people is self-confidence in its extreme form,” Foster said. “They overestimate their abilities, make decisions without consulting others, and scapegoat when they get it wrong.”**

# THE POWER OF

# HUMILITY

In the age of the rock star CEO (Jack Welch, Richard Branson, Steve Jobs, etc.), humility isn't a characteristic we often encounter in the upper echelons of corporate America. However, according to Dr. Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic, vice president of research and innovation at Hogan, people with low self-confidence hold several advantages over their more confident counterparts.

**“Many people get trapped in their optimistic biases, so they tend to listen to positive feedback and ignore negative feedback,” Chamorro-Premuzic wrote in the *Harvard Business Review*.**

**People with low self-confidence tend to be their own worst critic. However, when this quality is paired with ambition, it forces these individuals to evaluate their weaknesses and work tirelessly to improve.**

Those qualities are likely to benefit humble CEOs' employers. Jim Collins, a leading authority on management and author of *Good to Great*, spent more than 30 years investigating why certain organizations are more successful than others. Collins found that companies led by modest managers consistently outperformed their competitors, and tended to be the dominant players in their sectors. He also found humble leaders tended to stay at their organizations longer than their arrogant counterparts, and that their companies continue to perform well even after they leave because humble leaders often ensure a succession plan before they depart.

**“If you are serious about your goals, you will have more incentive to work hard when you lack confidence in your abilities,” Chamorro-Premuzic said. “And, people with low self-confidence are more likely to admit to their mistakes instead of blaming others, and rarely take credit for others’ accomplishments.”**

# FAKING IT

Although Collins's ideal leader is someone who possesses "genuine personal humility," for many, modesty doesn't come easily. In that case, says Chamorro-Premuzic, the best course of action is to fake it until you make it.

**“Here’s my advice,” Chamorro-Premuzic wrote in his book, *Confidence*. “When you are competent, fake modesty. When you are not, fake competence. And if you cannot fake competence, then try to fake confidence.”**

# SO HOW DOES ONE FAKE MODESTY?

John Baldoni, chair of the leadership development practice at N2Growth, wrote in a blog entry for the *Harvard Business Review* that there are three keys to displaying humility at work:

- 1. Temper authority** – Leaders should avoid pulling rank with their employees. People have a basic need to control their destiny, to have autonomy and access to resources. Allowing employees some degree of control over their work goes a long way.
- 2. Promote others** – Baldoni wrote, “a characteristic of successful managers is their ability to promote others, sometimes to positions higher than their own.”
- 3. Acknowledge what others do** – Alabama coach Paul “Bear” Bryant put it perfectly: “If anything goes bad, I did it. If anything goes semi-good, we did it. If anything goes really good, then you did it. That’s all it takes to get people to win football games for you.”

# THE BOTTOM

# LINE

Our society worships those who worship themselves, and individuals who are overly modest or unwilling to self-promote are unlikely to succeed. However, the negative consequences of hubris are well documented – more than 60% of employees dislike their jobs, most often because of a narcissistic boss. With some self-awareness, leaders can use their narcissistic tendencies to climb the corporate ladder to the top, and use humility to stay there.