



## Reflections from the field

### Grappling with the gods: Reflections for coaches of the narcissistic leader

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#### Abstract

While the general research literature has addressed narcissistic behaviours in executive leaders, the effect of its presence on the success of the executive coaching process has not been explored. The predominance of narcissism in our executives, however, has been established--making it likely that coaches will deal with these types of behavioural tendencies. Drawing from interviews, an organizational survey and observations at a single organizational site, as well as broader coaching experiences, this article offers a practical reflection of narcissism in the organizational environment and presents core issues that coaches may face. It also suggests some possible guidelines for coaching this type of client and considers how much we as coaches should endeavor to assist our clients in changing this aspect of themselves.

**Keywords:** leadership, executive, coaching, narcissism, personality

#### Introduction

One of the less attended to, and less comfortable, discussions of coaching by either researcher or practitioner is the occasional failure (e.g., failure to reach reasonable goals, failure of client to engage, failure to establish trust, etc.). While individual instances may leave even the most experienced of coaches a bit befuddled, I have found that the next client is typically already outside the door leaving little opportunity to reflect or study these perhaps rare, but important, occurrences for the insights they may offer to the field. Then I experienced “the big failure,” one with resounding effects for a client company - and that one stuck with me for months because, based upon the situation and generally accepted coaching practices, it had every reason to be a resounding success.

As formally noted by Grant and Cavanagh (2004, p5), the rapid growth of the coaching industry has far outpaced the related research. A current task for the maturing industry “is to mine [the] rich depths [of other established fields], all the time adapting and refining this knowledge for coaching contexts.” Their statements became profound when unrelated research took me deeply into the research literature on executive narcissism. Now in possession of additional knowledge from the field of behavioural sciences, I believe the reasons for the earlier coaching failure were related to my lack of understanding and management of the narcissistic tendencies of the client. My journey to increased understanding, presented within this article, may have important insights to reveal about the finely tuned, and sometimes delicately wired, ‘thoroughbred’ executives whom we call clients.

#### Narcissism as defined by the research literature

Narcissism in executive leaders has been studied for some time and it is generally well accepted that there is a disproportional number of narcissistic individuals who attain executive leadership positions (Coutu,

2004; Lubit, 2002; Post, 1993; Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006; Travis, 2003). Indeed, “it is probably not an exaggeration to state that if individuals with significant narcissistic characteristics were stripped from the ranks of public figures, the ranks would be perilously thinned” (Post, 1993, p. 99).

While narcissism may be considered a personality disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2000), my concern is about narcissistic characteristics as an established dimension of personality (Chatterjee & Hambrick, 2006) as presented within the context of coaching. The large majority of executive coaches do not have the need, the training, or the desire to diagnose their clients with psychological conditions; for the purposes of coaching the understanding of narcissistic leadership can be more general including, on a continuum of concern, clients who have healthy levels of narcissism for effective leadership to those who may, indeed, be diagnosable as clinically narcissistic. Somewhere in between are those who possess deeply embedded philosophies or practices that fuel narcissistic leadership practices within their organizations.

In laymen’s terms significant narcissistic characteristics result from a fragile or damaged sense of self esteem or self worth that most often has its origins in childhood - although some research shows that narcissistic behaviours can also be learned (Lubit, 2002). There is ample evidence within the psychobiographies of well-known leaders that the motivation to lead does have its roots in early childhood. Woodrow Wilson, Winston Churchill, Lenin, Gandhi, Stalin and Hitler are among those whose leadership (without regard to the morality of their agendas) has been linked to childhood experiences (Popper, 2000, 1999), most related either to an early absence of a father figure or “insufficient adoration” of the child (Popper, 2000, p. 735).

As a coach, however, the key understandings from the literature are perhaps threefold: (1) narcissism is wired in from childhood and is very difficult to impossible to “fix,” even by trained therapists, (2) narcissism causes the individual to have an internal and often overwhelming drive to continuously shore up his or her external value, and (3) the existence of narcissistic qualities and behaviours may negatively influence management, leadership, the balance of personal and professional life and, at the upper levels of organizations, the organizational environment itself. Although coaches may more frequently run into client psychological factors such as depression (Brooks & Wright, 2007), increased narcissism and narcissistic behaviours at the executive levels has long since been established (Chatterjee & Habrick, 2006; Coutu, 2004; Diamond & Allcorn, 2004; Kets de Vries, 2007, 2004, 1989; Lubit, 2002; Post, 1993; Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006; Travis, 2003). The intent of this article is to provide a uniquely rich opportunity for coaches at the executive level to consider the factors associated with narcissism and their implications for coaching.

### **Data sources**

In addition to the coaching engagement itself, this article uses information from two additional organizationally-specific data sources:

(1) A qualitative research study on the role of personally-held leader values in the level of trust granted by followers (Kearney, 2008). The coaching client was a voluntary participant in this study, which had a unique participant consent clause that granted the researchers the ability to reveal his name to other participants to whom he was linked. Generally accepted qualitative methods such as semi-structured one-on-one interviews, organizational observations, and structured card sorts were used in the study. Although

not its original intent, the data later provided rich insights about the challenges faced in the failed coaching engagement.

(2) Excerpts from an unrelated organizational survey for which the manager participation was a striking 100%.

All of these activities occurred within slightly less than one calendar year at the headquarters of U.S.-based international service organization. I was involved either as a project lead or a team member in all efforts. From a research perspective, qualitative focused coding of all data was later used as a foundation for discussion in this article. Written consent (in addition to the original research participant consents) that allowed the use of both additional sources of information was provided by the organization.

### **Anatomy of a failed executive coaching experience**

In my third year of consulting with an international service organization, the leadership team was assigned executive coaches as a part of a larger organizational development effort. While this decision was approved by Luke Dawson, a senior leader in the organization for over 15 years who was also slated for movement into the top position, he deemed himself ‘uncoachable’. (Luke Dawson is a pseudonym used in this article to protect the identity of the client.) After several organizational events increased a collective pressure on Dawson, he reluctantly agreed to a coach. With a belief that I was too “native” to the organization, I declined Dawson’s request to serve as his coach. With Dawson’s participation, we brought in a top executive coach who had tremendous experience and a sterling reputation.

Throughout the preparation process, including in-person meetings with his coach, Dawson became observably more detached from his impending coaching process. He delayed finalizing specific plans for the coaching and was adamant that it not occur near the organization’s site. While he remained outwardly willing to participate, he did not appear fully engaged and certainly not enthused about this opportunity. Conversations with him did not uncover any major problems other than a discomfort that I deemed as not completely unusual. I knew comfort sometimes arrived later in the process and as trust was built. I was confident in the quality of his coach, our preparations and in her ability to draw him into the process.

As requested by Dawson, the formal kick-off meeting with his coach was held well away from the organization’s site. Extended time was deliberately provided to allow casual rapport building and trust. Part of two days (deliberately shortened to combat fatigue) included debriefs of several individual assessments. The desired, although flexible, outcome of these early meetings, was a working draft of goals for the coaching engagement. Initial reports from the coach were that things went well. Dawson reported that things were “fine.” However, in the three months that followed, and despite numerous calls from his coach, he was never again ‘available’ for coaching.

### **A failure of efforts to identify ‘the problem’**

Follow up with Dawson fell to me. Although I spoke with him on several occasions about what went right or wrong and how the process could be modified to best serve him, no truly actionable information was ever shared. Instead Dawson talked about his desire to have more linkages explained among the assessments and feeling “on the spot” about his coach’s questions about his long-term career desires and questions about his priorities in his personal life. During these conversations, Dawson would generally

refuse to meet my eyes and would smoothly avoid any clear responses. Equally unusual for him, I noticed that his eyes would dart around the room, seeming to focus on nothing but suggesting extreme nervousness or discomfort, almost an underlying panic.

In spite of his personal reactions, Dawson allowed coaching to continue for the other leaders and consistently and publicly expressed pleasure with their growth. Eventually, with no other apparent options and a looming sense that I had missed something very important, I formally closed the relationship with Mr. Dawson's coach. Reports today, 12 months after the close of the coaching engagement, continue to include potentially destructive leadership behaviours by Dawson that we regularly and successfully address through executive coaching. Why did this critical coaching engagement "fail"? It was a question that continued to haunt me until I gained greatly deepened insights from the aforementioned quest into the research literature on executive narcissism.

### **Narcissistic leadership in the organizational environment**

When considering narcissism and narcissistic tendencies in our organizational leaders, I found the work of Kets de Vries to be foundational. Kets de Vries points out that ". . . all people – especially leaders— need a healthy dose of narcissism in order to survive. It's the engine that drives leadership. Assertiveness, self-confidence, tenacity, and creativity just can't exist without it" (in Coutu, 2004, p. 68). In the same interview, Kets de Vries goes on to say that:

... the trouble is, much of the business literature on leadership [. . .] starts with the assumption that leaders are rational beings [. . .] yet irrationality is integral to human nature, and psychological conflict can contribute in significant ways to the drive to succeed. (p. 65) [However,] the nonrational personality needs of decision makers can seriously affect the management process. (p. 67)

Kets de Vries' perspectives on narcissism seemed a fitting foundation for considering narcissistic leadership within the context of executive coaching where "good" and "bad" as well as "productive" versus "unproductive" are often relative terms and highly dependent upon the role of the leader and his or her organizational context.

Other consultants, coaches and researchers, both live and through publication, also contributed greatly to my burgeoning understanding of executive narcissism. Rosenthal and Pittinsky (2006) present an "exploratory" list of characteristics that may be foundational in narcissistic leaders: "arrogance, feelings of inferiority, an insatiable need for recognition and superiority, hypersensitivity and anger, lack of empathy, amorality, irrationality and inflexibility, and paranoia" (p. 619). Narcissistic leaders and managers "do not respect others' rights and are frequently arrogant, devaluing, and exploitative in their interaction with others" (Lubit, 2002, p. 128). The very nature of narcissistic behaviours and needs detract from the ability of the leader to work effectively on teams as well as to contribute to the development of others. In fact, "narcissistic leaders set very little store by mentoring" (p. 250) or mentoring others (Maccoby, 2006). Because of their own needs, leaders with narcissist characteristics tend to be authoritarian by nature and often are unwilling to delegate to others.

I found it important to note, however, that the term narcissism, while socially often seen as a negative, can actually be *positive* depending upon a number of factors both individually- and organizationally-based. Lubit (2002) describes healthy narcissism as being:

... based on relatively secure self-esteem that can survive daily frustrations and stress. Failure to attain desired goals, criticism, and seeing the success of others may cause disappointment, but it does not threaten the self-image of healthy individuals as worthwhile, valuable people. (Lubit, 2002, p. 128)

Maccoby (2001) points out that in some industries a set of skills called “strategic intelligence,” often found in narcissistic leaders, may outweigh the need for emotional intelligence. In recent years, emotional intelligence has become an industry phrase, made popular by Goleman (2006), to describe a set of empathy and related skills perceived to be a key component in successful leadership. Arguably it is the opposite end of the continuum from narcissism. Maccoby (2007) identifies Jack Welch, Steve Jobs, Herb Kelleher and Bill Gates as “productive” narcissistic leaders who have led organizations successfully. Others were initially productive but reached a point at which their narcissistic tendencies toppled them (e.g. Bernie Ebbers and Bill Clinton).

It is the degree to which productive narcissists use the strengths of narcissism that in part differentiates their sustained successes. Often found strengths of productive narcissistic leaders include vision, independence and risk taking, perseverance, charisma, voracious learning, passion, alertness to threats and humor with an emphasis on vision (Maccoby, 2007). In addition, overt self confidence is a commonly observed characteristic of the narcissistic leader and, of course, a healthy dose of self confidence would be deemed critical for an executive by any coach. Lubit (2002) differentiates healthy and unhealthy self-confidence by saying that:

although both healthy and destructive narcissism provide outward self-confidence, they are very different phenomena. The grandiosity of [narcissistic] managers may appear to be due to high levels of self-confidence, but it is not. Rather, it is frequently a reaction to (an attempt to seal over) fragile self esteem. Lacking healthy, stable self-esteem, [narcissistic] individuals tend to devalue and envy others and sometimes develop a grandiose self-image. When under stress that threatens their fragile self-esteem, they can suffer a serious decline in functioning and become depressed or enraged” (Lubit, 2002, p. 128).

Considering the number of narcissistic leaders purported to be at the tops of our organizations, it is likely that most executive coaches relate to at least some portion of these lists of descriptors; however, this creates the danger of suggesting that these characteristics are easily identifiable in a client. Despite outward appearances, leaders with strong narcissistic tendencies do not have good contact, understanding or comfort with their own feelings. However, by definition, their roles require that they are able to present the “proper” face, and a designer suit, high levels of overt confidence, obvious success and proper manners in the boardroom can initially fool even an experienced executive coach. Previous authors have called these people normopaths (Jorstad, 1996).

The intense individual focus that is an inherent part of the executive coaching process may be viewed by any client as stressful. However, for the narcissistic leader, I wonder if it appears as a real threat to their sense of well being and is associated with greatly increased stress. In this case, the design and intent of the process itself may work against the desired goals. Such seemed to be the case with Luke Dawson.

### **An emerging understanding: practical indicators of narcissistic leadership**

In hindsight I suspect that factors at work within Dawson and a lack of understanding by his coach and by me combined for a confusing failure that, because of his position and coaching goals, had long-term implications for the organization. The warning signs, as independent pieces of information, were not unusual in organizations or with executives. Taken together, however, and viewed through the lens of narcissistic leadership, perhaps the warning should have been very clear to me:

#### *The leader's need for a captive audience*

In Coutu's (2004) article, Kets de Vries describes a leader who essentially holds the organization's people hostage to his narcissistic needs. A number of similar instances were observed in this organization. Dawson regularly arrived 15, 20, even 30 minutes late to meetings because of "important" demands on his time. His delays in arrival were often not communicated to the other participants who would be sitting (outwardly) patiently in the designated room. The only times he appeared to be fully engaged in meetings, regardless of their significance, were when he, or his boss, had the floor. Large meetings with external vendors were held in primarily resort areas where the meetings were commonly referred to as the 'Luke show' and well-established, million-dollar contractors would jockey and maneuver to be Dawson's "choice of the day." In essence, narcissists are exhibitionists (Raskin & Terry, 1988) and these types of events and behaviours may allow for unceasingly craved attention. While all of these instances were irritating, sometimes entertaining and often discussed by our team, we wrote them off to the compelling idiosyncrasies of a leader who had garnered considerable power in his organization. Dare I say that some of us even occasionally grudgingly respected his apparent lack of concern for anyone else, his overt success and his obvious freedom to do as he pleased.

#### *The leader and ambition*

Other descriptors of narcissism in leaders include a "driving ambition and a lack of restraint [that] can make them masters of organizational politics" (Lubit, 2002, p. 130). In a research interview, one employee said that despite the fact that his trust of Dawson was less than for other leaders, "if I had a major issue that I need to take care of, I would go to [Luke] in a heartbeat." The participant went on to say that Dawson had the political power and the drive to make things happen. Another participant struggled to define that element of Dawson that accounted for his drive, first discounting courage and finally settling on unrelenting "drive for recognition" with real "forward motion" attached to it.

#### *The leader and values*

As a part of the research study protocol (data source 1), leaders completed a card sort that led to their personally held values. Followers completed the same card sort based on their perspectives of the leader's values. Direct comparison of the choices were not intended (except as a point of curiosity), however, the behaviour and comments that accompanied the card sorts were of great interest.

Dawson's sort of the values contained an anomaly not previously seen in hundreds of card sorts I completed with leaders in this and other organizations. While the process, by design, continuously funneled the cards toward more deeply held values, Dawson returned to the previously *unselected* set of cards for identifying his deepest level of values. The two researchers at his interview observed nonverbal signs that suggested an unusual (in comparison to other experiences) struggle or discomfort with

identifying values (responding to a requested repeat of instructions by sitting back in his chair with a frown, sighs, reshuffling of the cards after selections had been made, refusing eye contact after completing the exercise). Card sorts and interviews with his followers resulted in repeated struggles to identify his values. Followers described Mr. Dawson as hard to know and, repeatedly, as a man who is all about the job. One participant said that dealing with him is like walking into a dark room; you just have no idea what's in there. Another participant, who admitted to knowing Dawson for over 20 years, said it would be hard to identify personal values for Dawson. A third participant said "From my point of view, I would never know what drives [Luke] other than work. I think his work drives him . . . I think that has driven him his entire life."

It seems that Lubit (2002, p. 128) may provide some explanation for this set of data when he states that "the overwhelming focus of [narcissistic] individuals on reinforcing their self-esteem undercuts any deep attachment to values and leads them to betray convictions in the pursuit of self-interest." One of the study participants said "[Luke is] one of those types of people that will succumb to the ideal of trying to get the [goals] accomplished, because he knows the importance of the mission." Another participant said "he is a visionary person and he'll say and do anything" to get the job done. In Dawson's case I later wondered if he was truly unable to identify his core values - an unsettling thought for an executive coach.

#### *The leader and change*

In both the organizational survey and the research study, participants reported a lack of clarity in the organization's vision as well as fatigue and frustration from continuous changes in direction. Narcissistic leaders, when considering strategic choices, will tend toward those that are unique and untried believing success to be good for the organization and for themselves. In their willingness to take big risks, they will tend toward the extremes – either big winners or big losers (Chatterjee & Hambrick, 2006). Dawson was a visionary person who exhibited, at some observable level, all of the traits Maccoby (2001) describes as comprising strategic intelligence: "foresight, systems thinking, visioning, motivating, and partnering" (p. 58). One research participant said, "He's not risk-averse, he will take risks and pushes folks . . . without and within the . . . organization . . . to make those things happen."

A commonly noted challenge, however, was that employees would just get started working toward a set of goals with associated progress to celebrate and the goals would completely change before they succeeded, causing them to abandon their work. About Dawson, one participant said in visible frustration "So he told me to do something, gave me a task, I was right on it. Five minutes later, 30 minutes later, a day later, he would change his mind." Others reported that sometimes the goals would change even before progress was made.

Lubit (2002, p.129) says that the inherent desire of the narcissistic leader to feed their own self esteem "and lack of attachment to a set of values" leads to rapid changes in course and "neglect [of] the details of plans, causing confusion and poor follow-through" (p. 135). One study participant seemed to unknowingly support this when he said:

I think [Luke] is . . . concerned about [Luke]. . . I still believe that he is fully committed to the mission, whatever that mission is at the time . . . But I think, within the context of that, [Luke] wants to make sure [Luke] is taken care of. . . . As soon as some other mission fills those values more than the mission we're given, he's going to that . . . When you've got a set of values that are a little bit more . . . me-centered . . . you're going to try

to fill those. If the mission you're in does that, then fine. But if it doesn't and another organization, or some deviation of your mission fills that [it's to there that you go].

This participant went on to say that this is a result of not really having personal values other than "to take care of yourself." Lubit's description, and participant reports, seemed to suggest that narcissistic tendencies in Dawson may work against otherwise great strengths in strategic intelligence. Such shifts may have had little to do with organizational goals and, outwardly, reflected little concern for the energy and disrupted commitment of the employees. However, in reality, it is difficult to know how many of these instances were valid changes in direction because of changing conditions and how many were a product of narcissistic tendencies.

#### *The leader and control*

Mr. Dawson was often described by his colleagues and employees as a "control freak." The leadership study was filled with participant reports that said he exhibited a continuing resistance to generational knowledge transfer – a repetitive lack of willingness to teach the next generation or delegate real tasks. Study participants reported that he truly had "expert" power within the organization but he clung to it, hoarded it, which added to fear within the organization about what would happen if he left the organization. One study participant said that in meetings he will say "Well, there's some stuff going on but you don't need to know." The participant said:

No, we do need to know, because it actually involves us . . . let us know what's going on, and ask us, how would you handle this, and then say, this is how I'm handling it, so it gives us an idea of what the thought processes are, and the types of information that they're using. I don't know what they do with money. Nothing at all . . . You know this is probably going to be one of the most devastating things for our organization if [Dawson] decides to leave.

Participants in the organizational survey also steadily reported frustration with the lack of delegation and mentoring from top managers. Lubit (2002) notes that "especially destructive to their organizations is [the narcissistic leader's] tendency to cling to power rather than hand it over to the next generation in a timely fashion" (p. 129).

#### *The leader and paranoia*

Dawson's need to know everything that was going on, what was being said, and who said what was continuously in clear view. Participants in the research study reported that he was unduly concerned about anyone's interaction with or access to his superior, regardless of the reason. And even I experienced his interruptions of confidential coaching or research meetings with other organizational leaders for seemingly inane reasons. He appeared to have a very strong need to be included in and have knowledge of every detail.

As noted previously, Dawson appeared to possess many of the attributes of strategic intelligence as defined by Maccoby (2001). Also as noted previously, the well-known concept of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2006) is generally negatively associated with narcissism. Maccoby (2001) says that "a person with foresight," a component of strategic intelligence, "but without emotional intelligence is vulnerable to paranoia because he lacks a sense of other people's intentions and may imagine the

worst” (p. 60). Lubit also address this facet of narcissistic leadership saying they “. . . sometimes have a strong paranoid streak . . . They can be suspicious, mistrustful, hypersensitive, argumentative, and prone to ascribe evil motives to others. They are preoccupied with the hidden motives of others and exaggerate threats” (Lubit, 2002, p. 128).

I wondered if this facet of Dawson made him particularly vulnerable to manipulation because of the predictability of his actions based on his apparent need to know.

### **The impacts on the executive coaching engagement**

While many more examples can be provided, in essence, the outcome would be the same. It seems I was provided with many clues as to the suspected internal drivers of Dawson. Both his resistance to coaching for himself and his stress in talking about the experience were quite possibly foreseeable reactions of a narcissistic leader feeling stress from a process that might suggest that he was less than perfect. This seemed further affirmed by his desire for me to serve as his coach rather than bring a visibly new individual into the process. Instead, the path I took placed him in exactly the position that a narcissistic leader would most fear – a visible, personal position on the organization’s radar screen with the threat of exposure of his internal world.

### **Additional considerations for executive coaches who suspect narcissism**

The organizationally-critical and failed coaching engagement with Dawson, the unexpected link discovered in the narcissism literature, and my natural drive to understand what happened led me to devise a possible set of guidelines, or new understandings, for dealing with the disconcerting behaviours of a possibly narcissistic client. It is my hope these will lead to greater discussion, and increased insights, among coaches and researchers:

#### **1. Reconsider what may be generally accepted coaching strategies**

Generally accepted coaching practices should be reconsidered for their potential impact, and coaches must be willing to make mid-game adjustments. While coaching may move more slowly as a result, a narcissistic leader who is driven into a panicked and self-protective stance will make no progress at all. Lubit says that “a skilled executive coach providing a combination of empathic support and training in how to work with others can help a narcissistic manager contain some of the most damaging manifestations of narcissism” (Lubit, 2002, p. 136). Creative and attuned executive coaches who are *patient* about establishing deep trust with the client may be able to devise strategies and approaches that position them to slowly and gently coax the narcissistic leader toward real growth.

#### **2. Look for cumulative information, not single instances**

Lubit (2002) says that “one of the best tools for early recognition of [narcissistic] managers is 360-degree feedback, since they are unlikely to contain their problematic behaviours when dealing with subordinates and colleagues” (p. 136). However, it seems the narcissist behaviour of the leader may also cause subordinates to be afraid to be honest. (Some scales of the CPI and the MMPI have also shown correlations with narcissism [Wink & Gough, 1990]. The Narcissism Personality Inventory, however, may only be used for research purposes and has experienced questions about its validity.) As I did with Dawson, coaches may at first attribute narcissistic signs to other causes and the pattern may be missed. Rather than a single instance, it is the cumulative information about the leader’s behaviours, perhaps fueled by the coach’s sense that something isn’t right, that is most likely to suggest narcissism.

### **3. Assess whether the client is the right leader at the right time**

The complexities of coaching suggest that the belief that the leader is narcissistic is not necessarily bad. The “need” for a narcissistic leader can be time and context bound. Perhaps the best example is the restructuring or turnaround CEO who makes his/her way from one organization in crisis to another, a visible event ideal for feeding the narcissist, but is wise about not remaining to manage the organization once the change is accomplished, the crisis fixed and the spotlight faded. It is feasible that if a narcissistic leader is the right fit for now, or holds skills or knowledge critical to the organization, coaching goals may be appropriately different than typical executive coaching in “normal” times or under different conditions.

### **4. Consider the alignment of the client’s needs with the organization’s goals**

Rosenthal and Pittinsky (2006) say that the actions of narcissistic leaders “are principally motivated by their own egomaniacal needs and beliefs, superseding the needs and interests of the constituents and institutions they lead” (p. 629). While this may be true, I wonder if it’s not just a bit too simple an explanation for the executive coach. Rosenthal and Pittinsky’s description does not allow for the times that the narcissistic leader’s needs and interests are in strong alignment with the organization’s. When the narcissistic leader sees the organization as a true vehicle for meeting his/her needs, amazing things can happen in organizations. During those times, it may be quite risky for a coach to question the leader’s commitment (in lieu of him/herself) to the organization.

### **5. Realize that the underpinnings of narcissism create a lack of realization, or concern, for the need to make change**

Two of the foundational components in creating individual change are that the person realizes that something needs to change and that the individual is motivated to change. Within these two components lies a major challenge of coaching a narcissistic leader. Narcissistic “individuals often do not realize that their behaviour is a problem for others and are not concerned about their behaviour’s detrimental impact on others if they are aware” (Lubit, 2002, p. 128). Narcissistic leaders can be blissfully unaware of the impact of their self-perceived “specialness” on others. I can easily recall a relatively recent example when the U.S. automotive executives flew their private, corporate jets to Washington D.C. to lobby Congress for bailout money for the automotive industry. As the current leaders of the companies they had, arguably, led into financial crisis, it either did not occur to these executives that there was a serious disconnect between their actions and their request, or they simply did not care.

### **6. Approach direct feedback with caution**

To further complicate things, the nature of narcissism makes these leaders highly resistant to any feedback that puts them in a less than perfect light. This could make a coaching process very challenging to perhaps impossible. But, to return to our auto executives, they did in fact drive hybrid vehicles on their next trip to ask for money in D.C. However a wise coach understands that for the narcissistic leader, “filters at a deeper [personality] level will control what new prescriptions are to be applied and the manner of their implementation” (Lubit, 2002, p. 35). This most certainly requires a patient, well-attuned coach who is creative about framing feedback, devising feedback strategies and abandoning and/or creating new strategies based upon the leader’s responses.

### **7. Be attuned to your own responses**

Finally, this experience and the narcissism literature caused me to further question myself--after all executive coaches are also quite human and fallible. Much like the employees of narcissists who can become invested in the leader’s golden light, narcissistic clients may also intentionally or inadvertently

play on the narcissistic needs of their executive coach. Some executive coaches are “fed” by engagement with executives who are viewed as highly successful or pre-eminent in their fields. When the narcissistic needs of the executive coach are in play, the clarity of how she sees the client and her ability to be effective as a coach would seem to be in serious jeopardy. And, in return, a coach who has become subservient and malleable for an executive leader furthers the leader’s felt competence and specialness . . . and the cycle goes on. While Kets de Vries was not speaking to the roles of executive coaches in his following comments, it seems that he defines a very clear need for an *autonomous* role vis-à-vis narcissistic leaders.

. . . even if [the employees] did give genuine feedback, it’s unlikely they could express it in a way that would pierce the leader’s narcissistic armor. That’s why I like to make the case for having an organizational fool. . . . The fool shows the leader his reflection and reminds him of the transience of power. . . . Leaders in all organizations need someone like this who is willing to speak out and tell the leader how things really are. . . . To be effective, organizations need people with a healthy disrespect for the boss—people who feel free to express emotions and opinions openly, who can engage in active give-and-take” (in Coutu, 2004, p. 70).

## Conclusion

This article truly is a “reflection from the field’ and a product of a coincidence of multiple events. It may provide only a very small starting point from which to consider the implications of narcissistic behaviours in our clients. Clearly there is still a great deal that we do not know about the impacts and roles of narcissistic leaders, and real guidance for coaching with adaptation for narcissistic leaders is somewhat uncharted territory.

As with most aspects of executive coaching, there is no right or clear answer that consistently applies and the complex issue of narcissistic leadership is no exception. However, armed with a basic knowledge of this characteristic in many executive leaders, it seems the executive coach would greatly heighten the opportunity for success in some of the cases that may most matter. It is my hope that through this reflection, I bring related questions to the forefront of discussion for executive coaches and perhaps for empirical study by researchers. One thing that my journey to increased understanding definitely taught me is that dealing with someone of narcissistic tendencies requires a realization that perfection or “fixing” this aspect of the leader cannot be the goal. The questions and thoughts I have posed about coaching and narcissism relate more to how to manage the tendency so that other types of growth may occur. In the end, Kets de Vries probably states a caution about any desire to coach toward the perfect leader when he says, “In the end, I . . . hope . . . that we can accept that we need a little madness in our leaders, because I happen to believe that those who accept the madness in themselves may be the healthiest leaders of all” (in Coutu, 2004, p. 71).

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