

Narcissists Look Like Good Leaders—But They Aren't!

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Narcissists rise to the top. That's because other people think their qualities—confidence, dominance, authority, and self-esteem—make them good leaders.

Is that true? “Our research shows that the opposite seems to be true,” says Barbora Nevicka, a PhD candidate in organizational psychology, describing a new study she undertook with University of Amsterdam colleagues Femke Ten Velden, Annebel De Hoogh, and Annelies Van Vianen. The study found that the narcissists' preoccupation with their own brilliance inhibits a crucial element of successful group decision-making and performance: the free and creative exchange of information and ideas. The findings will be published in an upcoming issue of [*Psychological Science*](#), a journal of the Association for Psychological Science.

The study recruited 150 participants and divided them into groups of three. One person was randomly assigned to be the group's leader; all were told they could contribute advice, but that the leader was responsible for making the decision. Then they undertook a group task: choosing a job candidate. Of 45 items of information about the candidate, some were given to all three, and some to only one of the participants.

The experiment was designed so that using only the information all three were privy to, the group would opt for a lesser candidate. Sharing all the information, including what each possessed exclusively, would lead to the best choice. Afterwards, the participants completed questionnaires. The leaders' questions measured narcissism; the others assessed the leaders' authority and effectiveness. All checked off the items among the 45 that they knew—indicating how much the group had shared—and rated how well they'd exchanged information. Experimenters tallied the number of shared items, noted the objective quality of the decision, and analyzed these data in relation to the leader's narcissism.

As expected, the group members rated the most narcissistic leaders as most effective. But they were wrong. In fact, the groups led by the greatest egotists chose the worse candidate for the job. Says Nevicka, “The narcissistic leaders had a very negative effect on their performance. They inhibited the communication because of self-centeredness and authoritarianism.”

Narcissism can sometimes be useful in a leader, says Nevicka. In a crisis, for instance, people feel that a strong, dominant person will take control and do the right thing, “and that may reduce uncertainty and diminish stress.”

But in the everyday life of an organization, “communication—sharing of information, perspectives, and knowledge—is essential to making good decisions. In brainstorming groups, project teams, government committees, each person brings something new. That's the benefit of teams. That's what creates a good outcome.” Good leaders facilitate communication by asking questions and summarizing the conversation—something narcissists are too self-involved to do.

Nevicka says the research has implications beyond the workplace—for instance, in politics. “Narcissists are very convincing. They do tend to be picked as leaders. There’s the danger: that people can be so wrong based on how others project themselves. You have to ask: Are the competencies they project valid, or are they merely in the eyes of the beholder?”