

# ***ME, MYSELF AND I***

## **The Thinking Environment as a framework for limiting the destructive behaviours associated with Narcissistic Personality Disorder and their impact in organisations**

*By Christopher Spence, May 2008*

Narcissus, beautiful son of Cephius in Greek mythology, fell in love with his own reflection in a fountain, supposing it to be a nymph, leading him to worship at the shrine of his own beauty and perfection, eventually pining away for sheer love of himself. Apart from the lovely spring flower which bears his name, his legacy is the psychoanalytic understanding of extreme narcissism as a state of abnormal, malignant love of, and admiration for, oneself.

This essay is about that dysfunctional end of the spectrum of narcissism and in particular its destructive effects in organisations. But at the outset, it's important to emphasise that not all narcissism is either pathological or dysfunctional. At the functional end of the spectrum, narcissism is a necessary component of self-belief, self-esteem, pride in oneself and in one's motivation to make a difference in the world. Narcissism ensures that we care about how we look, how we present ourselves and the values we stand for to the world, as well as about what others may think of us. Without a degree of narcissism, it is probable that we would 'nothing venture, nothing gain', remaining passive observers of the world around us.

Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD), then, is a pathological form of narcissism (excessive self-love and self-absorption, coupled with lack of empathy for others), affecting up to 1% of the population, mostly men. Here I will briefly summarise the causes and characteristics of NPD, describe a range of NPD behaviours in an organisational context, explore the challenge of managing people with NPD, discuss the Thinking Environment as a framework for limiting the negative impact of these behaviours within the organisation, make suggestions about how to avoid hiring such people in the first place and touch on the issue of treatment.

### **CAUSES OF NPD**

The exact cause of NPD is unknown. Researchers have identified childhood developmental factors and parenting behaviours which may contribute to the disorder, as follows:

- An oversensitive temperament at birth;
- Over indulgence and valuation by parents;
- Being valued by parents, but as the means to manage their own self esteem;

- Excessive admiration unbalanced by realistic feedback;
- Unpredictable, unreliable care-giving by parents;
- Severe emotional abuse in childhood;
- Being praised by adults for perceived exceptional looks or talents;
- Learning manipulative behaviour from parents.

## **CHARACTERISTICS OF NPD**

There are nine key, recognised characteristics of NPD, as follows:

- Grandiosity, self importance and self absorption;
- Obsessive fantasies of one's own omnipotence, brilliance and rightness in all things;
- Conviction of one's own uniqueness which can only be understood by, or expected to interact with, other special, high status people and/or institutions;
- Excessive craving for attention and admiration; or, failing that, for notoriety and the need to be feared;
- A sense of entitlement to special or favourable treatment, as well as to full compliance with one's own expectations, especially from subordinates;
- Interpersonally exploitative behaviour – ruthlessly using, or preying upon, other people for one's own ends;
- Total lack of empathy and interest in, or concern for, the feelings and needs of others, together with an inability to say either 'thank you' or 'I'm sorry';
- Chronic envy of others, together with a conviction of others' envy of oneself;
- Arrogant and haughty conduct, coupled with rage and punishing treatment of others when frustrated, contradicted or confronted (received as 'narcissistic injury' – this occurs when someone fails to act as a dependable 'narcissistic feed', by challenging or disagreeing with the individual).

## **NPD BEHAVIOUR IN AN ORGANISATIONAL CONTEXT**

People with NPD, while often exceptionally able and gifted, as well as articulate and apparently plausible, tend to cause havoc in the organisations in which they work. Behaviours are likely to include:

- Putting themselves above the law – acting as if organisational policies and procedures do not apply to them, unless and until they can be invoked as a means of putting someone else in the wrong;
- Inability to fulfill the managerial task in terms of providing direct reports with support, supervision, appraisal or opportunities for thinking through their needs for professional development;
- Lack of interest in, or sympathy for, colleagues who may be dealing with any kind of personal difficulty;
- Over identification with whoever is head of the organisation, expressed in an obsequious need to be seen to be close to, approved of by, and influential with, that person;

- Pursuit of vendettas against people they perceive to have caused injury or offence – this will invariably include systematic briefing against such people, undermining the value/quality of their work;
- Envy and greed ('I want some of that') - wanting for themselves, or for their function or their team, whatever is currently attracting attention and praise, and being seen as successful;
- Chaotic delivery of work – activity which involves communication/collaboration with others who are currently out of favour will not get done, but it is they who will be blamed for this;
- Inability to think through the consequences of how they behave and what they do;
- No consideration for other colleagues, their priorities and workloads – this will include:
  - setting impossibly tight timelines;
  - ignoring other people's deadlines;
  - arbitrary changing of goal posts e.g. in the allocation of budgets;
  - lack of response to others' requests for permission, information or clarity;
  - demand for much more time and attention from superiors than that given to his or her peers;
- Disregard of the need for, or agreements about, confidentiality – confidential discussions will be routinely disclosed to others, always 'spun' to put them in the most favourable light and, by implication, others in a bad light – e.g. 'I am the only member of the management team who values the x project and if it weren't for me it would get axed'; or, 'I know for a fact that x would like to get rid of y – I've done what I can but it's just a matter of time';
- Dominating conduct in meetings, particularly when they are in the chair: the thinking of others will not be genuinely sought and anyone who expresses a view that differs from their own view, usually expressed very dogmatically, will be interrupted, argued with, bullied and sidelined;
- Combative and aggressive behaviour in dealings with representatives of other organisations, with consequent reputational damage which will then need to be cleaned up by others;
- Competitive behaviour – talking up of their leadership and own area of work, whilst belittling other people's leadership and contribution to the organisation ('My section is the only one in the organisation really delivering the goods');
- Systematic undermining of all efforts to ensure the sustainability of the organisation; they cannot be counted on to champion initiatives agreed by the Board and/or management team, nor actively to implement policies/strategies aimed at sustainability.

## **MANAGING PEOPLE WITH NPD**

People with NPD are severely damaged human beings and it is easy to feel sad at the emptiness of their lives – emotionally numb, they tend to have few close relationships and to lead a restricted inner life, to lack a healthy work-life balance, to have an obsessive, though apparently joyless, drive to succeed at all costs, behaving in competitive and exploitative ways which make people fear, dislike and distrust them, yet yearning for recognition and applause for their achievements.

But, as a manager, it is vital, 'to be sad at a distance, because your responsibility is to protect the organisation and its people from the damage that this pathology, unchecked, will inevitably cause' (Maria Gilbert). You need to be aware that the presence of someone with NPD, particularly at a senior level, puts your organisation at risk of upheaval, turmoil, conflict and reputational damage.

People with NPD are extremely difficult to manage. They tend to fantasise, lie, blame others and, in terms of their own behaviour, to defend the indefensible. They do not appear to possess the capacity to gauge the impact of their behaviour on others, either individuals or groups, and to adapt accordingly. They do not perceive themselves to be in need of help, training, personal or professional development (or indeed therapy). They are not therefore open to the developmental aspect of the managerial process.

Since they do not appear to have any insight into their own conduct and its effect, attempts to use managerial supervision to focus on the behaviour, its impact and the need for change, rarely result in any significant or sustained change. Personal development opportunities may be offered, but they are unlikely to be followed up.

While it's important to put in writing agreements and requirements, this does not guarantee that they will be acted upon or kept. Anyone who manages someone with NPD should expect to have to deal with a continual stream of people, complaining about the difficulties of working with the individual concerned and expressing consternation at the impact of their conduct on them and their teams, as well as on external stakeholders.

While the managerial process cannot usefully be focused on the individual's development and capacity to change, it can, however, at least be used for containment and damage limitation, with some chance of success, particularly in the context of a Thinking Environment. The Thinking Environment cannot of course stop the behaviour and its negative impact altogether, but it can ameliorate matters and may even result in the person concerned taking some action to mend broken fences.

## THE THINKING ENVIRONMENT

The Thinking Environment, with thoughtful application of its Ten Components, provides a dependable framework for ensuring that in managerial supervision difficulties can be addressed directly, without inflicting narcissistic injury, given certain preconditions, as well as for limiting the destructive behaviours associated with NPD in meetings with colleagues.

## MANAGERIAL SUPERVISION IN A THINKING ENVIRONMENT

While there will be limits to what can be achieved in managerial supervision, the creating of a Thinking Environment can increase the chances of some good outcomes, even though the individual's assumed superiority and consequent lack of equality results in difficulty with the giving and receiving of attention, as well as with the release of feelings.

Points it's useful to remember are as follows:

- As in all supervision, the starting point must be the manager's deep respect for the human being and sympathy in their struggles;
- This will be evidenced by attention for, a real interest in and caring about, the individual concerned and the totality of who they are, both personally and professionally;
- It will mean regularly finding out how the person is, together with a willingness to listen at length and without interruption, even when the content of what is being said may well be a distortion of the truth;
- It will mean offering managerial supervision on a regular basis, with a generous allocation of time;
- It will mean giving the individual both private appreciation and public recognition for their specific strengths and contribution when this is merited;
- It will mean keeping your own needs completely out of the picture – you must expect *nothing* back from the person with NPD and you will have to look elsewhere for any support you may need.

From this solid base of consistent and dependable attention, interest and support, it will be possible for the manager to confront difficulties and bad behaviour, as well as to be explicit about what is unacceptable and to impose concrete requirements about actions which must be taken to repair damage, usually to working relationships.

It is important to maintain a complete written record of events, incidents, requirements and agreements made along the way. This will provide an objective, accurate account of what has occurred over a period of time, essential when the time comes, as it inevitably must, for a parting of the ways.

At this stage, since a person with NPD is likely to turn on the manager who decides to end their employment, becoming vicious and even litigious, it is wise to make sure that all the salient facts are fully recorded and indisputable, that your actions are consistent with employment law and that your own conduct has been beyond reproach.

## **WHEN THE THINKING ENVIRONMENT IS THE ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE OF CHOICE**

The behaviours associated with NPD have much less opportunity to do damage when a Thinking Environment is the organisational norm, particularly in the conduct of meetings. The person with NPD may not be able to engage actively in *creating* a Thinking Environment, but the framework which enables everyone to have their turn to speak on every issue and in which people are listened to with respect and without interruption, as well as being appreciated, will limit opportunities for outbreaks of the kind of dysfunctional behaviour described above. And at moments when they do occur gentle but firm insistence on compliance with the tenets of a Thinking Environment will generally have good results.

## **HOW TO AVOID EMPLOYING PEOPLE WITH NPD IN THE FIRST PLACE**

It is clear that employing people suffering from NPD is extremely costly for any organisation in all sorts of ways. It is therefore worth considering how to ensure that employment interviews are structured in such a way as to maximise the chances of spotting a candidate displaying NPD characteristics, so that you can decide not to employ them in the first place.

In interviews watch out in particular for the following:

- **Grandiosity:** both in the application form and at interview the candidate is likely to make inflated, self-regarding claims both about their previous achievements and about the exceptional strengths and experience they would bring to your organisation; there is likely to be an absence of modesty in their account. Do not be afraid to probe and challenge the picture the candidate is painting – and notice their emotional response when you do this. It will almost certainly show anger, even if they attempt to disguise this.
- **Lack of empathy:** as interviewer, make some small personal disclosure and notice whether or not the candidate responds and, if so, whether they do so empathetically; then notice too how well the candidate makes a personal connection with each member of the interview panel, rather than only with the person chairing it.

The following lines of enquiry can also be very revealing. Ask the candidate:

- How they habitually find out what their staff are thinking and feeling – does their reply include any reference to asking and listening?
- When and how did they take action as a result of the thinking of their subordinates?
- For examples of how their own management approach has enabled someone they manage to make significant professional and personal changes?
- For examples of how they have changed their own behaviour in the light of negative, critical feedback from others, or of complaints?

These are all issues that a person who lacks empathy, as well as the humility to learn from others, will find it very hard to talk about.

- References: look very, very critically at what the reference is *not* telling you about the candidate and their record. If in doubt, follow up a written reference with a telephone call, asking further questions – again, listen for what the referee is *not* telling you about the candidate.

## **TREATMENT OF PEOPLE WITH NPD**

Most people with NPD are not amenable to treatment, though detailed discussion about treatment is outside the scope of this article. Just as people with NPD are not open to the developmental potential of managerial supervision, they are also not open to the therapist-client relationship, or to the therapist's questions or comments.

If such people do agree to therapy, they're likely to engage with the therapist in their usual mode of grandiosity and self-regard. When the therapist questions the reality of that self-image, or problems with particular behaviours, they may then react defensively. They will then tend to devalue – or even dismiss - the skill and ability of the therapist and/or discontinue treatment.

## **CONCLUSION**

People with NPD are, of course, human beings. As such they deserve to be treated with dignity, respect and consideration, even though they are incapable of responding in kind.

In an organisational setting, however, a manager has to maintain a clear distinction between the human being and the behaviour. The human being with NPD has legitimate rights and needs and is fully entitled to expect the organisation to fulfill all its obligations as an employer, acting in line with its stated principles and duty of care. At the same time, the manager also has a clear duty to act in the best interests of the health of the organisation and of all the people it employs. This means that the pathological behaviour of the person with NPD, and its repercussions, has to be challenged and managed, fairly but firmly. This is likely to mean that at some stage a judgement has to be made that the person's employment is no longer viable and must be brought to an end.

It can be seen that this is no easy task and managers attempting it will need to think well about their own need for support. But it's worthwhile to become familiar with the literature about NPD (easily accessible on the internet - a Google search results in 1,100,000 entries) and to learn about its likely manifestations. Armed with this understanding, if managers engage with the person concerned with integrity, dependability and compassion, ensuring that a Thinking Environment is maintained at all times, they will be off to a flying start. Without question, they will then be in for a roller coaster ride in meeting what may very well be the toughest challenge of their managerial career.

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