

Learn to spot narcissistic leadership

Lois Nantais - September 2023

We seem to be talking a great deal about narcissism these days, and it's true: the "narcs" seem to be everywhere. Because of my academic background, I've studied the clinical behaviours of both antisocial and prosocial behaviours and their implications for individuals and for others who are connected to them. I have been known to give fair warning to people about narcissistic behavioural patterns I've sussed out, but equally I've fallen prey to perceptions of well-versed people with hidden toxic intentions.

While I was finishing up my grad work, I was also teaching at the same time. The one ethics course I was taking had a message to its students: narcissism and psychopathology is increasing on the world stage. This was many years ago and at the time I was teaching psychology to some practical nursing students. I decided to ask them if they agreed with this statement: "Do you think it's true that people exhibiting antisocial behaviours is increasing?" Maybe this is what Marilyn Gladu meant when she said that academics are "out of touch" in one of her recent social media posts: my students denied this and said life has always had a balance between those with good intentions and those with bad ones. But in their defense, they were going into a helping profession so they might have needed to focus on the good and what needs healing in this world. Because I teach about narcissism, I keep up to date on many videos and articles in popular culture about the phenomenon. There are a lot of "experts" on the matter who throw labels around with the self confidence of gurus in the field. The narcs recognize opportunities here and many have gotten in on the act by passionately leading the pack, calling themselves experts without qualifications. Such people point fingers at others and feign "attacks" to build the perception of their heroism. Battles for "justice," "equality," and "liberty" But these are the wolves in the herd, wearing their pearl white coats.

So how do we spot the wolves flashing those pearly whites? The question can be more practically framed: how do we spot an inherently selfish person who will do whatever it takes to get ahead? I have come to recognize patterns where I have the good fortune to see them. If we look closely, we can see problematic behaviours in someone who consistently blames others and projects the qualities they find threatening in themselves onto others; this is a pattern. Such people are also incapable of compassion for their opposition and cannot publicly grant others any consideration for their struggles, their suffering – their very humanity. Because if they admit the qualities of value in their opponents, they feel attention goes from them and attention is the goal. To a deeply insecure person, who is often identified as narcissistic, keeping the spotlight on themselves is the same as winning. To someone who uses a narcissistic playbook, life is a game to be won by dominance by encouraging people to see life dualistically, where one side is good and one is evil. They encourage us to believe they are the heroes for the good team. To really see that dynamic clearly, we must appreciate the bitter truth that this playbook sees empathy as a feature in others to use to gain acceptance, and they will use their own victimization to manipulate prosocial feelings in others.

I get frustrated when people say to me they "like" a politician who has helped them personally. If I am blunt, I will say "that's their job. You applaud them for just doing the basics of their responsibilities." They get paid well to listen to us and their work is to make a positive difference in the communities they represent through decision-making in their leadership roles. The question I have, but often keep to myself when people are going on about how a politician personally helped them, is why do you close your eyes to the bigger picture simply because something personally benefited you? I believe there are greater priorities – focusing on concerns for the community's economic prosperity, entrepreneurial innovation and sustainability, transportation, and other means of connectivity (including technological networking and effective internet), community care and support for those who are struggling.

Some politicians are out doing the barbecues and taking photos at all the socially appropriate community outings. We call it the "ABCs" of politics: "Always Be Campaigning." I'd suggest, instead of prioritizing the surface-level impression management skills politicians possess to win your vote, you ask them about the prosocial policies they've championed for all people in their ridings, judging on substance and not flash. Change the game by asking for the truth about what they do for their constituents instead of the ones that simply support their own personal agenda. If we did that more often, maybe the narcs wouldn't win powerful positions of influence so often.