

THE NARCISSIST WHISPERER: 10 SECRETS TO OUTMANEUVERING A WORKPLACE NARCISSIST - A CASE REFLECTION FROM A MANAGEMENT CONSULTING FIRM

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Received: 05 January, 2024

Revised: 22 February, 2024

Accepted: 06 March, 2024

Published: 15 March, 2024

ABSTRACT

In workplaces worldwide, navigating the complexities of interacting with narcissistic individuals poses significant challenges. This article, a case reflection from a management consulting firm, unveils invaluable insights into effectively managing such encounters, offering ten strategic secrets to outmaneuvering workplace narcissists. Drawing upon psychological principles and real-world experiences, it provides actionable advice for professionals seeking to mitigate the disruptive effects of narcissistic behavior. From establishing boundaries to leveraging empathy, these techniques empower individuals to maintain control and foster healthier workplace dynamics in the face of narcissistic influences.

Keywords: Narcissist Whisperer, Workplace Narcissist, Management Consulting Firm

INTRODUCTION

Rule Number One: Do not attempt to reason with a narcissist.

It was a mistake of mine to reason with Adam (narcissist), a narcissistic employee in one of my previous organizations. I thought when we discussed issues that he was listening, that he was open to other ideas or could be persuaded to take a different view of an issue when evidence suggested that his perspective deserved examination.

A narcissist is not open to other people's ideas.

A thing to become conscious is that the narcissist views every situation as a "zero sum game". If you receive praise, then there is less for him. If he concedes an argument, then that means he "lost" and you "won". If he accepts criticism, it humiliates him. He must admit that he was wrong if he allows himself to be held accountable.

The point is that narcissist must feel better in every situation, regardless of its context, if he is to accept the outcome. This of course, is unlikely – let's be candid and confess that it is impossible – and therefore conflict is inevitable.

A normal person cannot understand the rage a narcissist feels, because normal people do not perceive every comment as potential personal attack,

particularly well anticipated criticism. On other hand, the narcissist overreacts to even the mildest criticism. He will spend hours writing long letters and rambling emails to rationalize his actions or misbehavior. He will attack others ruthlessly without warning or justification. Being confronted about misconduct for the narcissist is a combination of losing an argument, being criticized, and accepting accountability. It turns out that confronting a narcissist is fraught with potholes, and if not handled can lead to verbal combat and upshots for the one who tries, even gently, to raise an issue that questions the proficiency or intentions of the narcissist.

This leads me to Rule Number Two.

Rule Number Two: Never confront a narcissist about his misconduct when the two of you are alone.

I was taught that fine managers do not criticize their subordinates publicly. It harms the morale of the person as well as of the organization's because of the impression that public correction may make on others. Taking your subordinate aside and quietly confronting him alone was deemed the right approach.

Let me be candid. This well-considered approach to managing people does not apply to a narcissist. Narcissists always criticize others openly and in public, and the same technique must be used on them to have effect.

After my first “counseling session” with Adam (Narcissist) in one of the HR consulting firms I worked for, I should have backed out to meet with him alone. Unwisely, I continued to apply management tactics that were not enough for the situation.

Confrontation when tried alone may also leads to a situation where the narcissist misinterprets what was said. With his penchant for spreading his displeasure when it suits his agenda, his perception of the conversation will become common knowledge very quickly. If you take issue with his explanation after having had a private conversation, it becomes your words against his.

Neither are you likely to gain any ground by confronting the narcissist with even the most convincing argument or the most persuasive evidence when you have a one-on-one dialogue. This is because the narcissist does not dialogue, he monologues.

For the narcissist, facts are debatable. Anecdotal evidence that the narcissist “wants” to believe is more compelling than any objective analysis.

When confronted with his misconduct, the narcissist will try to change the subject and make the debate about something that he believes will put his adversary on the defensive. He will ignore the point you are trying to make, or perhaps more accurately will fail to see why your point even matters.

To break through the barrier that a narcissist erects around himself, confrontation should always be done in groups of at least three (the narcissist plus two), and larger settings such as meetings are even better. There is wellbeing in numbers, and by confronting the narcissist in a group, others who identify with your frustration will be able to find their voices and back your assertions. You will also be insulated from counterattacks, and the “leader” of the meeting can judge and keep comments from getting out of hand.

For example, a participant at a meeting might refer to a particular behavior of the narcissist, while not referring to him directly. I should have in one of the senior consultant meetings raised etiquette in the auditorium and how I believed it was rude for people in the audience to talk while someone was giving a presentation. That would have allowed others to

agree and reinforce my initial comments while offering their own perspective on the issue and for senior consultant to “decree” that talking in the auditorium should be the exception. Hence Adam’s behavior could have been confronted as unacceptable, and the twinge of trying to convey this privately avoided.

If at all possible, managers should also avoid confronting narcissists alone. It is more of use to pick a battle and raise the issue in a meeting. Even if it makes the group uncomfortable because the comments may be personal, only the “weight” of the group can bring about change.

Senior consultant used his meetings effectively in this regard. He focused on the tasks for which Adam was responsible and never attacked Adam directly. He treated the situation as if each task has a life of its own independent of Adam, which allowed him to press Adam hard for results. If Adam chose to make the issue personal, senior consultant was then free to join in kind and suggest that Adam should restructure either his schedule or his team as necessary to get the job done.

If the manager chooses a private setting for confronting the narcissist, he should be prepared for disappointment and for counterattacks. He must also be prepared to take independent curative action when confrontation has no effect, which is the most likely outcome of a personal discussion aimed at changing behavior.

Senior Consultant’s private meetings with Adam inevitable led to verbal combat. He had more success when he brought the same issues to his weekly meetings for discussion in front of the group. The open setting required Adam to behave himself and address the matter at hand.

Sometime the narcissist will approach others, even managers, when they are alone. He views it as an opportunity to antagonize those he does not like or of those he sees as threats to his self-esteem.

The narcissist may also decide that someone can be used in achieving his personal agenda. This person may not realize that he has been under fire and hence may be particularly vulnerable to the narcissist’s manipulation.

Half-truths and misleading statements are part of the narcissist’s arsenal, and his personal comments directed at you – no matter how truthful – should be kept

This leads me to mention the very important Rule Number Three.

Rule Number Three: *Set boundaries*

No one has to be a victim.

For managers, this means setting limits to avoid becoming the victim of a narcissist's inaction. Having said that, setting deadlines alone may not be enough to get the narcissist to do something that he believes lesser beings should be doing. Adam tried to justify his inaction by claiming that he had neither the resources nor the people to do his job. The manager will have to be prepared to announce in his meetings to the group that Task A is not being completed and to ask the narcissist directly what he is doing about it. The manager should keep a record of how many times he has asked the same question and announce this to the group as well. Whatever technique the manager decides to use, he should keep the narcissist in the spotlight until a satisfactory response is received.

If this sounds immature, that's because it is. Emotionally, a narcissist is like rebellious teenager who needs constant oversight and supervision. This is the price senior staff within an organization pays for not having the courage to remove the offender.

For his coworkers, setting boundaries refers to protecting their emotional wellbeing. Disrespect and antagonism do not have to be tolerated. Remember that it is not impolite to excuse oneself for an "appointment" or to use the restroom if the narcissist becomes hostile or his conduct becomes uncomfortable.

When I discovered that Adam was antagonizing Baber, I failed to realize the degree of it. And when it reached the boiling point, it was too late. Baber was only a level lower than Adam on the organizational chart, so he was well-seasoned. But like all of us, he had never faced a narcissist before. Ignoring Baber's professional ambitions, Adam destroyed Baber's motivation and ultimately weakened the organization.

Neither are you obligated to be the narcissist's friend. The danger of getting friendly with a narcissist is that he will be tempted to use you to accomplish his own agenda. You may find yourself getting dragged into conflict with others that you would never become involved in if given a choice.

Some of the staff under Adam found themselves getting between Adam and me, and I had to go to them personally to assure them that I understood they were not directly involved of their own accord.

The narcissist will do everything that he can to make professional arguments personal. The key, therefore,

to keeping the narcissist at arm's length is to keep your relationship strictly professional and avoid personal exchanges. After learning that he had criticized me openly while on tour, I no longer socialized with Adam unless we were attending the same event organized by others. While I was always cordial, I avoided making personal comments of any kind and kept our interaction focused on professional issues.

Avoiding the narcissist sounds cold-blooded, but the truth is that he does not belong in a workplace where teamwork and harmony are important to its efficiency and effectiveness. Protecting yourself should be your first priority.

If you find later that you want to "reach out" to the narcissist that of course is your prerogative. But when you find yourself listening to criticism of others that is unjustified or just downright ugly, you will have to address it. This of course, is Rule Number Four.

Rule Number Four: *Let no negative action go unchallenged.*

The difficulty presented by Rule Number Four is that by the time you discover that the narcissist has conducted himself unprofessionally or unethically, a significant period of time may have already passed.

When my old boss called to tell me Adam's misconduct on the tour (strategic off-site), I should have asked him to call senior consultant directly and the onus on the guy at the top to address the problem. In retrospect, there was a conflict of interest, and I never should have dealt directly with Adam until the situation was set on above my pay grade. But I confess that the idea that Adam would do what my old boss accused him of struck both Al and me as bizarre, and because I had already planned to speak to him about other issues, senior consultant happily let me to talk to Adam. I also have to admit that I believed once Adam realized that what he said was reported back to me, he would be embarrassed and never do it again.

I have to admit that I don't recall Adam being embarrassed or ashamed of his actions, only surprised that I found out he was being openly critical of me. In one of his very last email before I left, Adam referred to the incident with my former boss and called it "gossip by a bystander in a party conversation". Having first the gall to refer to a former senior executive of the company as a mere bystander and a gossip, and second having never

denied that what was reported to me was true, he still viewed the account of his inappropriate conduct as hearsay.

Sara, who came to me with the intent to file a complaint with HR, had the right idea. She had every intention of taking Adam to task for his actions. The fact that I convinced her to talk to Adam first to diffuse the situation was something that I had done many times before in other workplaces to avoid escalating what might have been a mere misunderstanding, to a level where both parties may have regretted their actions.

Adam was not only ill-suited but should not be granted the privilege to work in our office. But the management strategies that we all learn are deeply embedded as we make our way to the top.

This leads me to suggest Rule Number Five.

Rule Number Five: *Normal management techniques do not work.*

When it comes to handling a narcissist, throw out the book on management techniques and break out the book on leadership.

The military academies are leadership laboratories that teach leadership skills. The military is very good at establishing “zero tolerance” for certain actions: sexual harassment, fraternization, drug use, disrespect for others, a lack for integrity, and what the Uniform Code of Military Justice calls conduct unbecoming an officer.

Many times there aren't legal grounds for taking action against an offender. But a military officer has both the responsibility and obligation to create an atmosphere where every individual under his authority has an opportunity to reach his potential and to perform his very best. Anything less hurts the team and in a combat setting can endanger lives. So when someone comes in and maliciously undermines the atmosphere, it is ground for punitive actions. This takes many forms and can even result in the reassignment of the individual if the offense warrants outright removal.

Zero tolerance should be the rule when dealing with a narcissist, and removal from the workplace should be management's first instinct. Delaying removal will only make it harder to justify terminating employment later. Extenuating circumstances must be convincing if there is to be a reprieve.

And if a reprieve is given, then I suggest that you follow Rule Number Six.

Rule Number Six: *Keep a record.*

How many of us, you ask, have time to keep a journal that details the misconduct of someone else? Do I want someone keeping a journal about me that might be used to show that I should be fired?

Perhaps this rule is best directed at managers, but co worker would be wise to keep a “bulletized” record of dates and incidents when they find themselves into conflict with a narcissist. Supporting emails should be retained and kept in a separate file.

Adam told me that he had piled up an entire notebook on me. Senior consultant was smart enough to build a notebook detailing all that Adam had said to him. I was the only one who wasn't prepared if the situation blew up into a formal investigation.

A record is what the legal counsel of your corporation will require, and an accurate record of events from your perspective will protect you from unfair repercussions.

One of the senior technical experts who worked for Adam came to me and said that he was “ordered” by Adam not to support me in any fashion. This, despite the need for us to collaborate on technical initiatives. Fortunately for me, he refused to be bullied and stated in no vague term that he would reject what he considered immoral directions from a superior. This was one of the few times when Adam met his match, but he still went after the technician indirectly by giving the identical order to his supervisor. He, too, refused to follow Adam's direction.

If you make the conscious decision to defy the narcissist then to keep your sanity you will need to remember Rule Number Seven.

Rule Number Seven: *Expect criticism.*

There is no more savage critic than a narcissist who has decided that he does not like you.

You will be greatly disappointed when you hear about the criticism.

You will wonder why it is so incessant.

You will wonder at its ugliness.

You will want to cry, or to quit, or you will feel defeated.

It will frustrate you that your management will not stop you.

When you cannot prevent it you will be upset.

You will wonder what you did to cause it.

If you are not careful, you may lose sleep over it and even develop health problems.

Let me assure you that the criticism of you by the narcissist is not justified and this leads me to write Rule Number Eight. Please read it carefully.

Rule Number Eight: *if the narcissist does not like you, do not worry – it is not about you.*

Narcissism is a personality disorder. Maladaptive behavior. Mental illness.

This is the good news, but it is to maintain your composure and “be yourself” when you know that someone is being allowed to criticize you and tarnish your reputation – regardless of whether he cannot help himself. Normal people do not enjoy unvarying clash with others. We all want and seek harmony, particularly in an office where we are obliged to work closely as one. When there is one person who continuously shows friction, it is uncomfortable and even devastating. It harms the efficiency of everyone and may even damage the collective reputation of the group.

When I tried to establish a constructive relationship with Adam he considered it as weakness and seemed to intensify his efforts to undermine me and my position. When I confronted his every action, he lashed out madly in all directions. When I backed off from confronting him regularly, it made him bolder and more contentious.

There was no disposition, no approach, and no posture that was workable.

I say this so if you find yourself helpless to find middle ground. No compromise. This is the narcissist in full flower, and it’s not about you. It’s about him. I was at a conference and met a colleague of Adam’s. When I told him of our struggles, he told me that “Adam has done this with all his bosses.” I guess I was more horrified that it had been allowed to go on for so long than I was surprised at this “revelation”. So let me say it again. It is not about you. And this leads me to Rule Number Nine.

Rule Number Nine: *It is OK to feel relief, even joy, when you and the narcissist finally part company.*

In hindsight, senior consultant’s predecessor was probably a narcissist, too.

I overlapped with senior consultant’s predecessor for about two months, and he was difficult. Back then I did not know what a narcissist was, but the giveaway in retrospect was that he spoke only in monologue. The only way I learned to have a conversation, was to ask questions to guide the exchange so that he

would eventually monologue about what you needed to know.

When we had staff meetings - he never willingly shared information and staff meetings were rare I remember when we had staff meetings he “monologued” the entire time, not asking for feedback or whether anyone had any issues they wanted to raise. He just was not interested. I was the one asking questions, but as long as he was the only one giving answers; he did not seem to mind.

He treated people extremely poorly and had very few supporters in the organization. My predecessor, who worked with him for three years, was depressed. His counterpart on the support side had been completely pushed aside, and the boss openly disdained him. If my predecessor had not liked the other people in my office so much, he told me it would have been a hopeless situation. He got to the point where he often took initiative without informing the boss, because the boss refused to delegate even the most elementary decisions.

A colleague from outside the office referred to senior consultant’s predecessor as “The King”. It was truly *apropos*.

It finally came time for senior consultant’s predecessor to leave. There was a tradition that all of us who had worked for him would line the hall from the elevator on the first floor to the exit leading to the street out in front of the building. It was sort of gauntlet, and the boss walked through it, shaking hands with everyone and sharing a few personal words with each of us while *bidding adieu*. It was typically an emotional experience for the one leaving, and this was no exception. By the time senior consultant’s predecessor got through the gauntlet, he had tears in his eyes and could hardly speak. He walked out the door and waved bravely, choking back the emotion, as the car drove off.

I must admit being shocked at the time, but I have to tell you that when I finally left the office after a full two years of dealing with Adam, I felt such great relief that I, too, celebrated the end of a difficult and personally harmful relationship.

I guess I am saying that sometimes our human nature gets the better of us. But we can’t help ourselves when the tyranny is finally gone. *So I suggest that it’s OK to feel relief, even joy, when the narcissist parts company.*

This leads to Rule Number Ten.

Rule Number Ten: Pick up the pieces and don't look back.

I wondered when I took my next job if I could rejoin the workplace and enjoy it. I did not realize how much Adam affected me and how invasive his negative influence had become until I left.

In my new job I kept waiting for the disharmony to come spilling out. I kept waiting for people to criticize and fight among themselves because of the friction created by one individual in a key position. But it has not happened. I am enjoying working again; finding myself having professional disagreements that do not become personal. Issues can be discussed and worked out as there is reasonable discussion and compromise. Situations are no long zero sum games, and we are working toward a common goal. It is a pleasure.

So when the narcissist and you finally part company, you will enjoy your work again, your professional life is not over because of the narcissist. *Maybe in some ways, because of your experience, the real fun and enjoyment and appreciation for a healthy work environment has just begun.*

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