

DESTRUCTIVE NARCISSISM – THE CYCLE OF DECLINE, PART II

In our last blog, we discussed the beginning of the cycle of decline for a narcissist. Today, we will continue down that path. As a reminder, our discussion started with healthy self-assurance and well-founded confidence that moves to overconfidence and superiority; then from superiority to grandiosity; and finally to emotional isolation. What happens when the downward spiral hits emotional isolation?

4- FROM EMOTIONAL ISOLATION TO DEFENSIVENESS AND/OR AGGRESSION.

It's not only lonely at the top. It's slippery and dangerous as well. The grandiose and isolated destructive narcissist lives in a world full of enemies and disloyal followers ready to challenge their authority or deliver disconfirming messages about their leadership performance.

The destructive narcissist's only option—as least as they see it—is hyper-vigilance, and as necessary, aggression.

Wary and distrustful, they go on the defensive, and “circle the wagons,” guarding against any perceived or real threat to their superiority. They keep most people at arm's length. They are deaf to complaints. They reject counsel. Increasingly hypersensitive to criticism, they become paranoid of enemies. They harbor grudges against those who dare to dissent.

If need be, they are perfectly willing to “crack a few eggs to make an omelet,” and do whatever is necessary to defend their power and status.

5- FROM AGGRESSION AND/OR DEFENSIVENESS TO CONTROL AND DOMINATION.

Viewing the world through the lens of emotional insecurity, the destructive narcissist feels compelled to drive away the stronger people from the organization, and seek out more and more dependent and deferential followers. They are now “forced” to work with those they are confident they can impress, dominate and control. They gravitate to one-up-one-down relationships with competent but compliant subordinates who fuel their esteem and grandiosity.

After a narcissist enters the control and domination phase, the negative transformation from constructive to destructive narcissist is complete. The appropriately self-confident, assertive, creative, visionary constructive narcissist has become a defensive, grandiose person more interested in pursuing a self-serving agenda and controlling others, than in developing people and serving the organization.

Still energetic, creative and visionary, but now a true believer only in themselves, isolated and resistant to feedback, they are now a hazard to the welfare and progress of the organization.

They resist input and counsel. They not only ignore critics, they silence them. Risk prone and relying solely on their own judgment, they need to “raise the stakes” to keep things interesting. They begin making unilateral and spontaneous strategic decisions and vigorously defend their leadership performance, even if it flies in the face of the facts. Over time—and it may take years—without the feedback to make adjustments to stay effective, the destructive narcissist loses credibility as they fail to deliver on promises and live up to expectations.

A FINAL POINT OF CLARIFICATION.

A point of clarification is in order. I have compared and contrasted constructive and destructive narcissism to highlight the distinctive elements of each, and to keep us from throwing out the proverbial baby out with the bathwater. Not all narcissism is bad, and in fact there is such a thing as a healthy dose of narcissism. But narcissism is healthy only to the degree that it is embedded in the attitudes and behaviors associated with emotional maturity. And here is where it can, understandably, get a bit murky. The question of whether a narcissist is of the constructive or destructive sort is more accurately stated as a question of where the individual leader resides along a spectrum ranging from constructive to destructive attitudes and behaviors. Most narcissists establish an emotional center of gravity that situates them more or less on either the constructive or destructive end of the spectrum, hence the designation of an individual as a constructive or destructive narcissist. But some constructive narcissists can drift in and out of the dark patterns of destructive narcissism. And correspondingly,

it is entirely possible that some destructive narcissists now and then manifest some elements of constructive narcissism, even though their emotional center of gravity and the trajectory of their leadership is located in destructive narcissism.

CONSTRUCTIVE AND DESTRUCTIVE NARCISSISTS SUMMARY

There is often a fine between noble aspiration and raw ambition, vision and grandiosity, self-confidence and arrogance. A fine line, perhaps, but the line is not invisible. The following descriptors can help the organization determine if a leader has crossed over the line into destructive narcissistic territory.

CONSTRUCTIVE NARCISSIST

Risk embracing
 Visionary
 Creative
 Attractive
 Assertive
 Striving
 Focused
 Self-confident
 Courageous
 Relentless
 Wants to lead
 Influential
 Aspirational
 A star performer
 Appreciates affirmation

DESTRUCTIVE NARCISSIST

Adrenaline addicted
 Grandiose
 Quixotic
 Seductive
 Aggressive
 Over-reaching
 Rigid
 Arrogant
 Foolhardy
 Ruthless
 Needs to lead
 Manipulative
 Ambitious
 THE star performer
 Needs affirmation