

Narcissism—to a point—can make a more effective leader, researchers find

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Illinois professor of psychology Emily Grijalva and her research team analyzed past research studies on narcissism and its relationship to leadership to find that the most effective leaders have moderate levels of narcissism. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

Although Narcissus himself might not have been able to step away from his reflection in the mirror to get to the office, when it comes to leadership, a moderate amount of narcissism can go a long way.

So says a new [study](#) published in the journal *Personnel Psychology*.

According to University of Illinois psychology professor and study leader Emily Grijalva, narcissists have an exaggerated sense of their own self-importance, an exaggerated need for others' admiration and a lack of empathy.

"They can be preoccupied with thoughts and fantasies of their enormous success, power, attractiveness and intelligence," Grijalva said. "They are addicted to others' admiration. And in the long term, they're not very good at maintaining positive, [interpersonal relationships](#) with others."

Many previous studies have focused on [narcissism](#)'s relationship with leadership effectiveness, but Grijalva said these results were "relatively inconsistent," with different studies showing "a significant relationship," but, "just in opposite directions." Because the data were conflicting, Grijalva and her team set out to determine exactly how narcissism is tied to leadership, analyzing the results of previous studies that examined narcissism's relationship with both leadership emergence and leadership effectiveness.

They found that although narcissists are more likely to emerge as group leaders, after a certain point, too much narcissism is likely to undermine a person's effectiveness as a leader.

"Narcissists tend to be extraverted, and that is leading to the positive relationship between narcissism and leader emergence," Grijalva said. "But you have to keep in mind that although narcissists are likely to emerge as the group leader, over time, the more negative aspects of narcissism tend to emerge."

She said that these negative characteristics include "being exploitative, arrogant and even tyrannical," adding that these attributes "aren't really

prototypical of effective leadership."

Study co-author Peter Harms, a professor of management in the College of Business Administration at the University of Nebraska, said those with moderate levels of narcissism have achieved "a nice balance between having sufficient levels of self-confidence, but do not manifest the negative, antisocial aspects of narcissism that involve putting others down to feel good about themselves."

These new findings could have interesting applications for the business world; according to Grijalva, in the future, personality tests that measure narcissism "need to be interpreted differently for [leadership](#) selection or development."

"These results could really shift the focus of the discussion, because instead of asking whether or not [narcissists](#) make good leaders, we are asking how much narcissism it takes to be the ideal leader," Grijalva said. "We confirmed that narcissism is neither fully beneficial nor harmful, but it's really best in moderation."

Grijalva said that her research will continue to focus on narcissism, but will break the complicated trait down even further to focus on its positive and negative subcategories, while looking at particular leader-employee interpersonal relationships.

"It would be interesting to try to determine what kinds of employees can work well with a narcissistic leader, because some employees seem to be able to maintain their levels of satisfaction even when they are working with someone who is difficult," Grijalva said. "There might be a trade-off between narcissistic leaders' needing a subordinate who is confident enough to earn the leader's respect, but also deferential enough to show the leader unwavering admiration."

More information: "narcissism and leadership: a meta-analytic review of linear and nonlinear relationships," *Personnel Psychology*:
[onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10 ... /peps.12072/abstract](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/peps.12072/abstract)

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