

# Study provides academic support for new Steve Jobs portrayal

March 24 2015

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It's no surprise that some of the most celebrated leaders in the business world also happen to be self-promoting narcissists.

New research from Brigham Young University's Marriott School of Management finds those strong characteristics are not such a bad thing—as long as those [leaders](#) temper their narcissism with a little [humility](#) now and then.

"Just by practicing and displaying elements of humility, one can help disarm, counterbalance, or buffer the more toxic aspects of narcissism," said Bradley Owens, assistant professor of business ethics at BYU. "The outcome is that narcissism can possibly be a net positive."

One of the most prominent examples of this type of leader was Steve Jobs. In fact, the study mentions the former Apple CEO by name: "Although Jobs was still seen as narcissistic, his narcissism appeared to be counterbalanced or tempered with a measure of humility, and it was this tempered narcissist who led Apple to be the most valuable company in the world..."

The study, published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, supports the softer portrayal of Jobs that appears in the new biography, "Becoming Steve Jobs" released today. Specifically, the research finds when leaders self-regulate their narcissism with humility, employees are more engaged, perform better and perceive their boss to be more effective.

Narcissistic leaders are typically self-centered, extremely self-confident and believe their ideas are superior to others. They have bold visions and grand plans and often swing for the fences. Owens says these people do not value marginal or incremental changes but want to be involved with paradigm-shifting, industry-shaping, disruptive-technology-types of changes.

"However, the very traits that enable a leader to successfully launch a startup or enable a leader to emerge, can be the very traits—if not tempered—that cause a leader to derail," said Owens, lead author on the study.

How do narcissists show a little humility? Study authors say they should admit mistakes and limitations, spotlight the strengths and contributions of others and model teachability. Do enough of those things along the way and the most toxic aspects of narcissism can be avoided. This allows the less toxic, potentially beneficial aspects of leader narcissism to yield positive outcomes.

"Humility is not meant to replace strong or typical leadership characteristics, but rather complement them in an important way," Owens said. "It's meant to help temper them, help counterbalance them.

For the study, Owens and colleagues from Arizona State University and SUNY-Buffalo surveyed 876 employees at a large Fortune 100 health insurance company. Employees rated 138 leaders in the organization on their humility and effectiveness, and then answered questions about their own engagement:

- Humility: "My leader admits when he/she doesn't know how to do something."
- Effectiveness: "My leader influences the performance of others in achieving goals..."

- Engagement: "I am immersed in my work." Or "I am enthusiastic about my job."

Researchers measured the narcissism of leaders through questions directed at those leaders. Leaders chose between statements that best described themselves ("I am an extraordinary person," versus, "I am much like everybody else.").

Study results show leaders with high [narcissism](#) and high humility were perceived as more effective leaders with more engaged followers. Fortunately, Owens said, humility can be developed.

"We are finding that virtues such as humility are subject to development or deterioration depending on a willingness to practice them," he said. "In this way, they are like moral muscles."

Provided by Brigham Young University

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