

Narcissists are drawn to leadership theories

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The more narcissistic the leader, the higher their interest in leadership theories, according to University of Queensland research.

UQ School of Psychology researchers examined the extent to which a leader's narcissism was associated with their endorsement of, and

motivation to learn about, leadership theories.

Dr. Nik Steffens said the findings build on previous research showing leadership was an activity that appeals to, and boosts, people's inflated sense of self.

"The more narcissistic individuals are, the more they endorse various theories of leadership and the more they want to learn about them," Dr. Steffens said.

"This in turn suggests that what motivates some people to engage with leadership [theory](#) is more a personal concern for the self than a social concern for the greater good. Our findings chime with an emerging body of work which suggests that narcissists desire to be the center of attention and that one way in which they are able to feed this ambition is by striving for positions of responsibility and power over others. It would appear that those who have self-serving tendencies not only have an elevated motivation to lead and exert their influence but are also those who are most keen to learn about contemporary theories of leadership."

Professor Alex Haslam said while a lot had been written about the toxic effects of narcissistic leaders, there had been less reflection on the leadership theories that support and fuel their self-absorption.

"Theories of leadership tend to celebrate what makes individuals superior to others and propose that it is this superiority that allows organizations and societies to flourish," Professor Haslam said.

"One consequence of this is that most prevailing leadership theories appeal directly to leaders' narcissism. In a time where there are low levels of public trust in corporate and [political leaders](#) this is an arresting finding, as it suggests that rather than leadership and leadership theory being the solution to our current woes, they may actually be their cause.

If the people who are drawn to the study of [leadership](#) are primarily interested in looking after themselves, we should not be surprised if they use their learning to do precisely this."

The research is published in *American Psychologist*.

More information: Niklas K. Steffens et al. The narcissistic appeal of leadership theories., *American Psychologist* (2020). [DOI: 10.1037/amp0000738](#)

Provided by University of Queensland

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