

Can narcissistic managers fake that they care?

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Relationships at work matter greatly to our well-being, and perhaps no work relationship affects us more strongly than the one we have with our manager. In fact, people who leave their job frequently report that their manager is their [most important reason for doing so](#).

Managers' narcissistic tendencies are often a key issue that troubles their relationship with their employees. Although narcissists tend to make a good first impression, their true nature unfolds over time and [reveals](#) that they care above all about themselves, not about others.

Our recent [studies](#) show that narcissistic managers are poorly equipped to develop good, sustainable relationships with others because their selfish behavior and disregard for others erodes what is the basis of all good relationships—trust.

My fellow researchers and I therefore wondered: Could some narcissistic managers develop the ability to camouflage their lack of concern for others and make others trust them by creating the impression that they care?

How do narcissistic managers erode others' trust in them?

Narcissistic individuals display a [range of self-centered characteristics](#), including selfishness, entitlement, arrogance and the exploitation of people for personal gain. They consider themselves as more important, talented, and attractive than others, but they are also insecure about themselves and have a strong need to be admired. Narcissists thus simultaneously crave other people's reaffirmation and validation of their inflated self-image, and feel entitled to attention and admiration.

This duality of craving and feeling entitled to admiration leads narcissistic individuals to consider themselves born to be leaders and to feel entitled to leadership positions, positions in which they may be [seen and admired](#). Unfortunately, we tend to interpret a narcissistic individual's overconfidence as a signal that they are, in fact, competent and that they would make a good leader. So narcissists' aspiration for

leadership positions combined with the good first impressions that they make can cause them to rise in hierarchies, which results in narcissistic traits being [relatively common among managers](#).

Although narcissistic individuals may make a good impression initially, they can be ill-suited to leadership positions, because effective leadership requires developing collaborative, reciprocal, trusting relationships with others. Instead, as our research consistently finds, narcissistic managers are considered less trustworthy by those who work for them. This is because developing trust requires integrity and caring about others, neither of which come natural to narcissistic individuals.

In fact, narcissistic managers are likely to put their own interests ahead of those of others and may even step on others when doing so is needed to achieve personal gain. Consequently, as our studies confirmed, a narcissistic, untrustworthy manager will make people feel unsafe to take risks, make mistakes, and express themselves openly.

Is it easy to spot a narcissist?

Because the effects of narcissistic leaders are likely to come out and their true nature may be revealed over time, it is tempting to think that we could easily detect a narcissistic manager. If this is the case, we may simply—through selection tests in organizational recruitments, for example—try to detect them and ensure that they're not selected for leadership positions.

Such efforts certainly hold merit, as narcissistic individuals are typically not shy about admitting that they want to be admired or even that they overlook the interests of others. Indeed, in general, narcissists [do not present themselves as agreeable or modest](#). However, narcissists are not incompetent and they have the *capability* to learn that they may be even more effective in attaining their selfish goals if they present themselves

in a socially acceptable way or, in other words, if they camouflage their lack of care and fly under the radar.

A consistent finding in our studies is that some narcissistic managers engage in techniques to manage the impression that others have of them—they actively seek to behave in ways that makes them *appear* sincere to others. Moreover, our findings indicate that these impression-management techniques can be successful: employees perceive highly narcissistic managers that try to make themselves appear sincere as more trustworthy than their highly narcissistic counterparts who do not engage in this impression management behavior and, because of this, their employees feel safer to express themselves openly. In a nutshell, they can fake that they care and be successful in doing so.

What might this fake caring look like?

When someone behaves in a way that seems caring, it can be difficult to tell whether or not they are faking it. Fortunately, there may be some signs. In general, the fact that narcissistic individuals need to learn how to give others the impression that they care, means that they cannot rely on spontaneous behavior and responses. This means that their seemingly sincere behavior is likely to appear awkward or scripted. For example:

Someone who is truly caring is likely to spontaneously ask you how you are doing, and is likely to be aware of what is going on in your life. In contrast, a person who does not really care is less likely to ask you spontaneously. Instead, it could be that they only ever ask how you are after you have just asked them. It could simply be that your question reminded them to express caring about you in return. Moreover, they may be unlikely to ask follow-up questions after having shown their superficially caring behavior. After all, they are not truly interested in you.

Someone who is truly caring is likely to listen and be more empathic. In contrast, if you find yourself telling a story about your own experience and the experience suddenly appears to be about them, their seemingly empathic response to your story might be only an opportunity for them to tell a story about themselves. Similarly, it is possible that their reaction to your story is not empathic at all, remains superficial, and only sticks to the facts.

At the same time, however, if they only let you talk and never share or relate to what you are saying, it may well be that they have made you believe that they are interested in you but that they do not actually care. Someone who is caring and trustworthy is likely to express trust in you as well—for example, by sharing about their own life—because trustworthy people are likely to see relationships as a two-way street.

Most people have a [natural inclination](#) to trust others who show signs of caring, so we are vulnerable to the assumption that narcissists have [good intentions](#), especially those narcissists who engage in extra effort to appear sincere. Some awareness of this effect and the ways in which we might recognize fake caring is helpful to protect well-intentioned people from being exploited and manipulated.

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