Narcissistic leaders in times of crisis

Are narcissistic leaders effective in times of crisis?

Juliet Paternotte

Universiteit van Amsterdam

Bachelorthesis ‘Arbeid- & Organisatiepsychologie’

Begeleider Barbora Nevicka

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Abstract

Narcissism contains many positive as well as negative characteristics. These characteristics have major influence on leadership effectiveness. This paper unraveled the phenomena of narcissism in association with crises. The main question was; are narcissistic leaders effective in times of crisis. We found that narcissistic leaders due to their many flaws are probably not effective in times of crisis.
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Introduction

“Our environment has become a more crowded world and as the population increases pressures such as urbanization, the extension of human settlement, and the greater use and dependence on technology have perhaps led to an increase in disasters and crises” (Richardson, 1994).

The September 11 attacks were one of America’s biggest disasters that led to a massive crisis. In 2001 the United States of America got struck by a series of coordinated suicide attacks by al-Qaeda causing the death of nearly 3000 American citizens and an instant crisis in the whole country. Remarkable is the fact that president George W. Bush began his presidency with approval ratings near 50%, but in the time of the national crisis following the September 11 attacks, polls showed ratings higher than 85%, and in October 2001 the poll even showed an approval rating of 92%. So this suggests that people at that time saw President Bush as an effective crisis leader. But what made them see him as more capable during the crisis than before the crisis. President Bush is known for his arrogance and self-confidence, but also for his risk taking en often seen as egoistic decision making (Valenty & Feldman, 2002). These characteristic seem rather narcissistic, what raises the question if people might prefer a narcissistic leader when crisis struck. And can narcissistic leaders be effective in times of crisis.

A crisis can be seen as a period wherein threat and uncertainty have the upper hand. It is a time wherein urgent action must be taken to help the country or the organizations suffering from the crisis to overcome it. The distress people experience accompanied by the crisis will make people look for leaders to ‘do something’ (Boin & Hart, 2003). They look for someone to fix the problems the crisis causes and are in desperate need of someone to release them for their distress. As Sigmund Freud, 1921
suggested, leaders can serve as a substitute parent figure. And in times of uncertainty and threat it might be likely, that people need a parent figure more than ever.

The way we choose who will be a good leader, depends on in what extend we see a leader as the most leader-like. We prefer that the most leader-like person will be our leader (Hogan et al., 1994). This is especially the case with narcissistic leaders. Narcissistic leaders are those said to be high in self-esteem, need of power and need for admiration, risk taking behaviors, impulsive behaviors and lack of empathy, they are overconfident, dominant and frequently considered charismatic by their followers of narcissism (Paunonen et al., 2006). Supporters look up to them and perceive the narcissistic leader as superhuman, blindly believe them, follow them unconditionally, and give them endless emotional support (Post, 1986) But are these narcissistic super hero-leaders also suited as crisis leaders. Are these leaders able to fulfill the parent figure that people so desperately need in the unstable times of. And are they able to help a company or an entire country to recover from a crisis. Or to exemplify the main question, can narcissistic leaders be effective in times of crisis?

Narcissism has been linked to several psychological costs and benefits, and in research no real consensus has been found concerning the question if narcissism is generally positive or negative. Some theorists have found narcissism to be associated with maladjustment and misery, and others have found it to be linked to certain indicators of psychological well being (Rose, 2002). Furthermore there is a lack in research about the link between narcissism and effective crisis leadership.

This is important because the effectiveness of the crisis management will define the course the crisis will take. The crisis leader has to fulfill a role wherein he has to be the national public face that explains the crisis and the policy chosen, he has to take responsibility for all the accusations of wrongdoing, and has to justify and
explain choices made (Seeger, Sellow, & Ulmer, 2003). In addition the crisis leader has to remain calm and has to be able to make quick decisions and must posses a certain authoritarian style of leadership (Seeger et al., 2003). It is important for crisis leaders to take far-reaching decisions quickly in a context of threat and uncertainty (Hart, Tindall & Brown, 2008). And Boin et al., 2005 suggests that effective crisis management includes that the leader has a clear picture of the situation and assesses the impact and significance of the crisis rightly. And further is able to mobilize, facilitate and adjust a good crisis response and in addition is able to reduce collective stress by explaining the crisis and the following crisis response. It is also important to note that when the response-operation is going badly, the leader might lose his credibility (Hart, Tindall & Brown, 2008). So the right crisis response with the proper explanation is essential in crisis leadership effectiveness.

It has been suggested that narcissism can be a really important feature in effective crisis leadership. There are certain types of narcissistic leaders, who when combined with the right followers are a necessity in times of crisis. Furthermore in some cases it is the narcissistic feature that the leader possesses, that makes followers attracted to them and make them choose him as their leader (Gladwell, 2001). Volkan & Itzkowitz, 1984 say that during crises a “mirror-hungry” narcissistic leader looks for a group of “ideal-hungry” followers to be their leader and to let him resolve the “split in a wounded society”. These findings might raise the thought that people are more attracted to a narcissistic leader who has a clear ideal and is noticeable self-confident when they themselves are more vulnerable and anxious than ever because of the crisis. It seems like they are drawn to someone that is different than others, someone who stands out and is more capable than others to resolve the crisis, although they probably would not have chosen this over-confident, slightly arrogant
leader when crisis was absent. This idea is supported by the notion of Post (1993) that when crisis is present followers need a “larger-than-life” leader, but this need disappears when the crisis is gone. As earlier mentioned, no good research has been done about the question if narcissistic leaders are in fact effective in times of crisis, so that will be the main question in this paper.

In the first section narcissism and narcissistic leadership in general will be discussed. In the second section crisis en effective crisis leadership in general will be discussed and in the second last section the link between narcissistic leadership and crisis leadership will be made and finally in the discussion conclusions will be made about the link between narcissism and crisis leadership effectiveness.

**Narcissistic leaders**

The term narcissism comes from Greek mythology. The term stems from the story of a young man, Narcissus, who fell in love with his own reflection in a pond, which eventually led to his demise as a result of his vanity (Lubit, 2002; Wallace & Baumeister, 2002). Narcissism can be found in two sorts. Firstly the definition narcissism is used to describe a clinical condition wherein people diagnosed with the psychological disease are excessively preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power or beauty, seek excessive admiration from others, exploit others to gain personal desires and lack empathy towards others. This is a serious mental condition that will not be relevant as regards to the research question in this paper. On the other hand, narcissism as normal personality trait is the type of narcissism that will be closer examined. The narcissistic personality trait is characterized by arrogance, exploitive behavior, and lack empathy for others of narcissism (Paunonen et al., 2006). People who are high in narcissism also have inflated views of the self,
are self-regulated in maintaining positive self-views and might do this at the expense of others, they are often not interested in others but mainly in themselves what causes their relationships to lack warmth and intimacy of narcissism (Paunonen et al., 2006).

There is evidence that narcissists long for leadership roles (Brunell et al., 2008). Narcissists often have big fantasies of how they would lead as great leaders and how they would change the world. The narcissistic trait causes them to strive for power and status, something that is almost guaranteed in leadership roles. Narcissists are in fact found in leadership positions (Maccoby, 2000; Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006; Wasylyshyn, 2005). Furthermore Brunell et al., 2008 found that narcissists are more likely to emerge as leaders in leaderless groups. And narcissism in executives often has major effect on organizational outcomes, strategy, structure and staffing (Chatterjee & Hambrick, 2007). This is because of the fact that narcissists are said to be visionaries, what can make them great innovators (Deutschman, 2005). In addition, narcissistic leaders performance is known to be highly extreme and fluctuating what can have significant influence on the organizational outcomes (Chatterjee & Hambrick, 2007). And due to their overly positive self-views and extreme need for attention they will search for the novel and dramatic for their organizations’ purpose and for their own personal purpose (Chatterjee & Hambrick, 2007).

Certain narcissistic characteristics are associated with positive effect on leadership and others are suggested to have negative influence on leadership effectiveness. Characteristics that are found to be essential in leaders to make leadership effective, are also associated with narcissism. For example, high self-esteem, egotism, extraversion and interpersonal dominance are essential features for leadership effectiveness, but are also clear characteristics of narcissism (Paunonen et al., 2006) (Judge, Bono, Llief, and Gerhardt, 2002). In addition, Sedikides, Rudich,
Gregg, Kumashiro, & Rusbult (2004) found that narcissism is healthy and psychologically adaptive, particularly when the narcissist also has high self-esteem. And high self-esteem is associated with professional advancements (Chatterjee & Hambrick, 2007). According to Paunonen et al., 2006 it is reasonable to expect that people high in narcissism and with high levels of self-esteem are better leaders due to their better psychological health. On the other hand, narcissists are very confident about their task performances, to the point of being objectively overconfident (Campbell, Goodie, and Froster, 2004). The danger in narcissistic leaders being overconfident is that they might make risky or even wrongly decisions, which can severely damage the organization or country. Hogan & Hogan, 2001 support this view, suggesting that narcissist as leaders increase the risk of negative leadership consequences both for themselves as for their organization (Hogan & Hogan, 2001). And narcissism is indeed associated with impulsive, risky decision-making (Chatterjee & Hambrick, 2007).

Moreover, narcissistic leaders are also found to react negatively to feedback. They see themselves as perfect with little or no room left for improvement. Research has shown that they react to negative feedback with more anger and aggression than individuals low in narcissism (Chatterjee & Hambrick, 2007). Furthermore, narcissistic leaders have very low decision-making skills in a sense that the decisions are often limited by their own egocentric approach, because they are driven by personal goals rather than meeting other peoples needs (Blair, Hoffman & Helland, 2008). Another worrying fact is that Helland & Blair, 2005 have found narcissism to be associated with immoral leadership. This is because, as both empirical and theoretical evidence suggests, that narcissistic leaders lack integrity. In addition, integrity is not only found as an important feature of ethical leadership, but also plays an important role in the
effectiveness of leadership (Blair, Hoffman & Helland, 2008). Furthermore, narcissists are less likely than non-narcissists to experience guilt (Campbell, Foster, & Brunell, 2004), also leaving them more susceptible to engaging in immoral behavior (Brunell, Staats, Barden & Hupp, 2010).

On the other hand, because of the fact that narcissism is also found to be associated with low depression and low anxiety, narcissistic are also high in the needs for control, status, power and achievement, which are all characteristics that act in favor of leadership (Paunonen et al., 2006). But what seems to come hand in hand with these characteristics is that narcissistic leaders also tend to be manipulative and exploitative of their followers, and Paunonen et al., 2006 believed that manipulative narcissists are perceived as relatively poor leaders by their followers. But after searching for the truth behind this idea, they found that there was no significant correlation between manipulativeness and perceptions of leadership ability by their followers. But their results also showed that the narcissistic leader who received the highest ratings of crisis leadership from their followers were those having a strong sense of ego and high levels of self-esteem, but only when these characteristics were in the absence of manipulative behaviors.

Narcissists have also found to be highly creative, because narcissists are motivated to generate novel ideas as a way to “stand out”. The fact that narcissist long for attention for their contributions, might have as an effect that the competitive norm increases in a organization, what subsequently motivates idea expression in group settings (Dugosh & Paulus, 2005). This seems a very useful characteristic for a leader to be effective. In this way the leader is able to motivate his followers and increase the competitive norm, which will probably lead to positive outcomes for the organization or country. According to Oltmanns, Friedman, Fiedler, & Turkheimer, 2003
narcissists are also very socially extraverted and Kornor & Nordvik, 2004 found extraversion to be positive for leadership effectiveness. Although they are socially extraverted and although Oltmanns et al., 2003 found that during initial encounters, they are often liked by others, this initial liking does disappears over the course of time (Foster, Shrira, & Campbell, 2006). This is not really effective for leaders, because this indicates that followers will also soon lose their initial liking of their leader, what will probably lead to the decrease of leadership effectiveness over the course of time.

Finally it is important to note that researchers have made a distinction between two sorts of narcissism, that is, overt and covert narcissism. Overt narcissists have a grandiose self-view, demand other people’s attention, and are socially charming even though they are relatively oblivious of others’ needs. Covert narcissists, on the other hand, think they are profoundly inferior to others, and are also hypersensitive to others’ evaluations (Cooper & Ronningstam, 1992; Gabbard, 1989). In addition, an important difference between the two kinds of narcissism is, that overt narcissism is associated with high optimism and low depressive symptoms, and that covert narcissists on the other side are found to be higher in measures of depression and anxiety (Rathvon & Holmstrom, 1996). And because of this finding, it has been said that covert narcissists are anxious people who have very little confidence in themselves (Ashby, Lee, & Duke, 1979; Serkownek, 1975), whereas overt narcissists are chronic self-enhancers (Emmons, 1987; Paulhus, 1998). If this is true, then in leadership the distinction between overt and covert narcissism might also be highly important. It is conceivable that covert leaders suffering from anxiousness and lacking self-confidence are less effective in their leadership because of these characteristics, while on the other hand overt narcissistic leaders probably benefit from their
optimism and low depression, what will also positively affect their leadership effectiveness.

The previously mentioned fact, that narcissistic leaders with a strong sense of ego and with high levels of self-esteem but without manipulative behaviors, received the highest ratings for crisis leadership by their followers bring up the idea to further investigate the crisis phenomena and further unravel the requirements for a good crisis leader (Paunonen et al., 2006).

**Crises**

Crises feature severe threat, acute urgency, and uncertainty. They put citizens, political authorities, and public agencies to the test (Goodsell, 2002). Crises are also becoming more complex in nature, because of their interconnectedness, and Boin & Lagadec, 2000 say that crises have become naturally occurring features of modern society. In addition, crises have increasingly become an integral part of the everyday vocabulary in Western societies (Rosenthal, 2003). This is probably because the occurrence of crises in Western societies has increased the last decades. Moreover, crises have become transnational what makes them even more challenging for leadership. Besides, crises have the tendency to increase heavily over the last years because of the media. The modern media bridge the distance between the geographical site of the crisis and millions of people elsewhere will share the anxieties and sentiments felt by those at the crisis itself, making it harder for the crisis leader to manage the crisis effectively (Rosenthal, 2003). Not only does a crisis leader have to run a physical response operation for the crisis, but he also has to manage the ‘image’ that follows the outbreak of crisis has become important as well (Hart, Heyse & Boin, 2001). According to Coombs (1999) crises can range from small-scale
organizational issues ranging from staff illness, staff challenges/breakdowns, malevolence and organizational misdeeds to external factors such as natural disasters (earthquakes, floods and fires) and terrorist incidents (Blake & Sinclair, 2003).

Past research has found certain facts about what type of leader behavior is needed in times of crises. Responding to emergencies involves coping with the collective stress that emergencies generate (Rosenthal et al., 1989). The whole country or organization is upside down, and a leader is needed who can firstly calm citizens or employees down and secondly bring things back to normal. But crises do not necessarily mean ‘bad news’ for leaders, because not only does the crises cause stress and hardship, but also will there be opportunities that would not be there in stable times, and those are opportunities that well-prepared leaders could exploit (Hart, Tindall & Brown, 2008) In order for a crisis leader to be effective he has to be able to take prompt and decisive action (Rosenthal, 2003) There is not much time to over think the strategy, but instead the leader is obliged to make rather important decision in probably some days or even only a day. This will mean that the leader also has to be immune to stress.

Leaders must also define clear goals, rearrange their priority list, rethink relationships with stakeholders and clarify the communication strategy (Boin & Lagadec, 2000). They must be flexible in creating new visions and must be able to anticipate when normally applying rules disappear, and they have to avoid mistakes in terms of communication and decisions (Boin & Lagadec, 2000). Furthermore, according to Rosenthal et al., 1994, it is very important for a crisis leader to have the gift of fast decision making under pressure. Furthermore, crisis management not only requires that the leader will manage the crisis at the peak of the crisis, but besides that it is also very important that he is capable of anticipating to what happens somewhat
later during a longer time span. In that case it is really important for the leader to find a good balance between action and reflection in his management (Rosenthal, 2003).

It has been found that for crisis management to be effective, the leader has to reassess strategies and responses taken. In order to do so, he must evaluate the effectiveness of the strategies and has to be open for feedback (Ritchie, 2003). And to implement the strategies, the leader has to be flexible and constant monitoring his actions and their effects. For this purpose, he has to communicate well, and has to work collaboratively when needed. But these demands are particularly difficult considering the time limits and pressure the crisis puts on leaders. Nevertheless, if communication is poor, the crisis could get worse as stakeholders, employees, media and followers might ask questions that can’t be answered, which will in turn make them lose faith in the crisis response. It is necessary for the crisis leader to legitimate his actions, maintain credibility, and most importantly show effectiveness. Boin & Lagadec, 2000 say it is often so that leaders will try to avoid responsibility for the crisis. Boin & Lagadec, 2000 say the leaders will often apply with great ability, a systematic logic of avoidance. And Boin & Lagadec, 2000 suggest that it is important for the leader to know how to get involved with the crisis and how to take action. Moreover, crisis leaders are prone to forgetting the crisis and quickly returning to the prior situation. This is worrying, because if no analysis of the handling after the crisis is made, no lessons will be learned and traps for future crises will remain. Finally, Halverson et al., 2004 found that self-sacrificial behavior shown by the crisis leader also had a positive outcome on their effectiveness rating by his followers. Self-sacrifice was defined as a behavior wherein a leader gives up his or her rewards or abstaining from using power for personal benefit. So this suggests that it is important for an effective crisis leader not to be selfish and striving after personal goals.
Narcissistic leaders and crises

In the last two sections I have examined first what defines a narcissistic leader and second what defines a crisis and effective crisis management. In this section the paper focuses on uniting these two key factors to see if the main question of this paper can be answered, that is, are narcissistic leaders effective in times of crisis.

The previous section about narcissistic leaders might seem confusing because it contains so many positive and negative features of narcissistic leaders. For instance narcissists were found to be exploitive of others, are impulsive, make risky decision and are found to lack integrity and empathy for others, but on the other hand are often low in depression and anxiety, high in self-esteem (Paunonen et al., 2006). These different features of narcissistic leaders all function differently in crisis management. Firstly the fact that narcissistic leaders were found to be exploitive of others is probably in no occasion good for leadership effectiveness, especially not in crisis leadership wherein it has been found important for the leader to show self-sacrificing behaviors (Paunonen et al., 2006). Hereby does the narcissistic leader often lack integrity and empathy for others, which will probably also mean that self-sacrificing behaviors shown by the leader are scarce or absent. They are often limited by their own egocentric approach, because they are driven by personal goals rather than other peoples needs, what it said to cause them to have very low decision making skills (Blair, Hoffman & Helland, 2008).

For instance, effective crisis management contains rethinking relationships with stakeholders, but the question remains if narcissistic leaders will be able to do this when they lack empathy for other, in this case the stakeholders. Furthermore the fact that leaders have found to be low in integrity leaves them more susceptible to
engaging in immoral behavior and integrity is not only found to be an important 
feature in ethical leadership, but also plays an important role in the effectiveness of 
leadership, so this is probably negative for effective crisis management (Brunell, 
Staats, Barden & Hupp, 2010). Secondly, narcissistic leaders are generally found to 
be high in self-esteem, and low in depression and anxiety (Paunonen et al., 2006). 
These factors work in favor of the crisis leader, because these characteristics will 
make him self-confident, what in turn favors the effectiveness of leadership. To calm 
down followers and to create a positive image for the media, the leader has to portray 
a positive and self-confident image of himself. The narcissistic leader also is high in 
need for status, power and achievement, which are good motivators to emerge as a 
crisis leader and to show what he is capable of during the crisis. The narcissistic 
leader is known to be overly positive about his performance and because of his 
extreme need for attention he longs to be a leader in novel and dramatic situations 
where he can show off and shine (Campbell, Goodie, and Froster, 2004). A crisis 
might just be the perfect situation for a narcissistic leader to experience the novel and 
dramatic and to show off, motivated to resolve the problems the crisis caused and get 
great attention for that. It has been said that narcissists shine when there is an 
opportunity for glory, but under perform when such opportunities are not available 
(Wallace & Baumeister, 2002).

Nevertheless, for crisis leaders to be effective, they not only need to perform 
well at the peak of the crisis, but also need to anticipate to what happens during a 
longer time span, and this might in fact be a great problem for narcissistic leaders. For 
crisis management it is also very important to learn from past experiences and analyze 
the strategies that have been taken. But in order to do so, leaders need to listen to 
feedback from others, and that is something narcissistic leaders are really bad at
Another possible negative side of narcissistic leaders is that they are often initially liked by their followers, but this initial liking disappears over the course of time (Oltmanns et al., 2003; Paulhus, 1998). This is not a big problem if the liking fades when crisis is already over, but this could mean major negative outcomes when the leader still has to resolve the crisis while followers don’t support him anymore. Another characteristic of narcissistic leaders that will probably have great positive impact on crisis leadership, is that narcissistic leaders are socially extraverted (Oltmanns, Friedman, Fiedler, & Turkheimer, 2003). This is positive for crisis leadership because during a crisis it is very important for a leader to clearly communicate about the response strategies chosen. Further more, narcissistic leaders are also known for making fast and often risky decisions. This probably wouldn’t be accepted from leaders in stable times, but when crisis struck fast decisions have to be made, and the fact that they often make risky decisions could mean danger, but often these risky decisions are also the right decisions to be made in crises.

Finally the distinction between overt en covert narcissism again has to be made, as I think it will have different effects on crisis leadership effectiveness. As previously mentioned, overt narcissists experiencing a grandiose sense of self, tend to demand others’ attention, and are socially charming even though they are relatively oblivious of others’ needs. These characteristic seem to work in favor of crisis leadership effectiveness, because the grandiose sense of self will bring the self confidence needed to calm million citizens down. Moreover, the socially charming side of the over narcissist could be a very important feature in the way the leader portrays himself in the media. Cover narcissists on the other hand, feel profoundly inferior to others, what will probably cause them to not show any self-sacrificing behaviors that are very important for effective crisis leadership. Moreover, they are
negatively hypersensitive to others’ evaluations what could also be a big problem considering the fact that in crisis management it is important to accept feedback from others.

Conclusion

Considering the fact that narcissistic leaders possess so many positive and negative characteristics it seems difficult to determine if narcissists would be good crisis leaders or not. There are a few reasons to think they would be good crisis leaders. For example their high self-esteem, longing for attention and their capability of fast decision making. On the other hand, there are also many reasons to think narcissistic leaders wouldn’t be good crisis leaders, considering the fact that they show selfish behaviors, react negatively to feedback, lack empathy and integrity. Summing up these findings, I conclude that the negative features of the narcissistic leaders outweighs the positive features, what makes that the narcissistic leaders is not seen as an effective crisis leader. The narcissistic leaders might be more able than other leaders to catch peoples eye, and receive follower’s support, but the negative characteristic that the narcissistic leader brings to the table are not worth the few positive characteristics. A crisis is probably better of with a crisis manager who isn’t narcissistic but hopefully still possesses a lot as the same positive characteristics like self confidence and fast decision making.

A suggestion for future research is to take charisma into consideration. We have concluded that narcissism isn’t effective for crisis leaders, but charisma probably is. Charisma might contain the positive characteristics of narcissism, like self-esteem, social extraversion, and empathy and it has already been found to be linked to crisis leadership (Halverson, Elaine & Riggio, 2003). Further more, it could be useful to
find out if therapy would be helpful for the narcissistic leader to unlearn the negative features of narcissism and become a high potential crisis leader.

But summing up the findings, it now seems clear that people might think they need a super-hero narcissistic leader, but in reality this is not what will save them from the misery crises bring. Bush might have had high approval ratings during the crisis, but when citizens found out his narcissistic characteristics and his striving for personal goals and arrogance that came along with it, the approval rating dropped dramatically leaving him to be one of nowadays anti hero.

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