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COMMENTARY

Should HR redesign practices to suppress narcissism or develop humility instead?

Meagan E. Brock Baskin, Jennifer G. Manegold, and Ashley M. Mandeville

Department of Management, Lutgert College of Business, Florida Gulf Coast University, Fort Myers, FL, USA
Corresponding author: Meagan E. Brock Baskin; Email: mbaskin@fgcu.edu

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Introduction

Mitchell et al. (2026) provide a provocative take on how common human resources (HR) practices, such as competitive selection, exclusive training opportunities, and performance-based incentives, are contributing to the unintentional rise of narcissistic behavior in organizational leaders. The authors argue for the implementation of random selection and/or rotational leadership initiatives to depersonalize the leader experience. We argue that abandoning these practices in favor of random selection or rotational leadership misdiagnoses the issue and in turn amounts to "throwing the baby out with the bathwater," as the practices under scrutiny remain fundamental to talent selection, leader development, organizational efficiency, and meritocratic advancement in organizations. By avoiding one potential issue, we can inherently cause several more.

Although extant research provided in the focal article demonstrates proof of concept for their suggestions in controlled student population samples (e.g., Berger et al., 2020; Westerman et al., 2012), caution should be exercised when extending these findings to the realities of meritocratic and risk-averse corporate settings. First, research on narcissism has demonstrated that the younger generation tends to be more narcissistic than older generations, which limits generalizability of the findings to the average employee (Roberts et al., 2010). Further, from a practitioner perspective, HR cannot randomly assign executives without risking organizational performance or exposing firms to legal repercussions. For example, the Securties and Exchange Commision legally requires publicly traded companies to designate specific officers (e.g., principal executive and financial officers), in the end requiring individual roles and making random or rotating assignments less feasible. Additionally, leader rotation programs have been shown to have negative effects on organizational followers, including reduced happiness, greater stress, and diminished perceptions of leader commitment (Young et al., 2024). These depersonalizing approaches may hold some value in limited contexts, such as small teams with flexible roles, but they are less practical for use in senior leadership selection.

Drawing on our backgrounds as HR and leadership development practitioners and academics, we argue that organizations must work within the meritocratic systems in which they operate. Rather than dismantling these core HR systems to account for the possibility of narcissistic leaders, a more effective solution is to focus on cultivating self-awareness and humility in leaders as they ascend the ranks. This strategy promotes humble, self-aware leadership and allows for the selection and recognition of the most competent leader while tempering the emergence of narcissistic tendencies. Further, this approach is both empirically supported and implementable within current human resource development frameworks.

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Reframing narcissism as malleable

Narcissism is a subclinical personality often framed negatively, vis-à-vis a set of associated cognitive, behavioral, and emotional variables such as an inflated sense of self, need for admiration, grandiosity, entitlement, and so on. Although much of the extant research on personality traits such as narcissism has traditionally conceptualized them as relatively stable over time (Orth et al., 2024), a growing body of work argues for a more dynamic view of narcissism. Scholars such as Roberts et al. (2010) and Tasselli et al (2018) emphasize that personality, including narcissistic tendencies, is not fixed. Specifically, this perspective highlights that maturity, organizational experiences, self-development efforts, and life events can induce meaningful personality shifts over time. Using this argument, Mitchell et al., warned against organizational practices that can enhance narcissistic tendencies. Using the same logic, we argue that narcissism can be mitigated by enhancing qualities antithetical to narcissism. This approach allows for the retention of some of the positive attributes associated with narcissism, like confidence, ambition, and visionary boldness, which can contribute to effective leadership and be desirable in organizational leaders. For example, Galvin et al. (2010) found that narcissism was positively related to visionary boldness, which in turn enhanced attributions of leader charisma. These findings suggest that narcissism can foster some leadership strengths, but its benefits depend on how it is channeled, which complicates the prescriptions offered by Mitchell et al. Thus, rather than attempting to eliminate narcissistic leaders altogether, we argue that organizations should focus on developing leader humility as a mechanism to counteract the negative traits often attributed to those who exhibit narcissistic tendencies, such as self-centeredness, entitlement, and self-absorption.

The humble narcissist

Humility is conceptualized as the understanding that one has imperfections, but such a view does not require having a low perception of the self but rather an accurate one. It is a sense of open-mindedness and the ability to acknowledge that one is not perfect and all-knowing (Tangney, 2000). Humility in leaders is regarded as a positive trait that is closely related to organizational effectiveness and innovation (Ou et al., 2018). We argue that emphasizing humility offers a more effective alternative to eliminating strategic HR processes, as it achieves a similar outcome to that advocated by Mitchell et al. Specifically, fostering humility encourages a form of depersonalization rooted in transcendence (Morris et al., 2005), which involves recognizing something greater than oneself, valuing others' worth, and adopting a broader life perspective.

Although humility is seemingly at odds with the narcissistic view of the self, research shows that these constructs are not opposite ends of a continuum. Rather, they can paradoxically coexist, with leaders demonstrating elements of both at the same time (Cavazotte et al., 2023). When this happens, leader effectiveness is increased. For example, research conducted by Ownes et al. (2015) found that narcissistic leaders who displayed humility were viewed as more effective than those who did not. Further, Zhang et al. (2017) found that CEOs who embraced the paradoxical practice of humble narcissism cultivated greater organizational innovation. Indeed, the term "humble narcissist," popularized by Adam Grant, refers to the leveraging of the more positive qualities of narcissism in combination with humility, culminating in a visionary and confident leader who is also able to recognize their own weaknesses and learn from mistakes (Grant, 2018). Research by Owens et al. (2015) demonstrated that leader humility can "temper the potential negative effects of narcissism and magnify the potential positive effects," finding that narcissistic leaders with high humility scores showed significantly better outcomes in terms of perceived leader effectiveness, follower job engagement, and both subjective and objective job performance. Together, this suggests that humility does not erase narcissism; rather, it provides a means for channeling its constructive aspects toward positive outcomes.

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Training humility to suppress the negative effects of increased narcissism

Like narcissism, humility is a flexible trait that can be impacted through the environment in which an individual is situated and can be cultivated through training. Grant's work on "humble narcissism" suggests that rather than trying to lower narcissistic leaders' confidence, the most effective approach is to remind employees "that they're human, they haven't succeeded alone, and what sets the best apart is that they're always striving to get better" (Grant, 2018). These comprehensive programs work because they acknowledge that effective leadership requires both confidence and humility, creating what Grant describes as leaders who "have bold visions, but they're also willing to acknowledge their weaknesses and learn from their mistakes."

Programs designed to cultivate humility while preserving the positive dimensions of narcissism require a distinctive approach. These programs should begin by reframing humility as a leadership asset rather than a moral correction, positioning it as a high-performance skill within organizational contexts. This framing can enhance buy-in by communicating to leaders how they will benefit from the training (Day et al., 2021). Further, training programs should include multi-source feedback paired with individualized coaching, where feedback from peers and supervisors serves as a social mirror, and coaching helps leaders transform insights into sustainable habits (Choi & Phan, 2022). Additionally, programs should encourage self-affirmation combined with structured reflection. Self-affirmation activities paired with guided journaling about lessons learned from mistakes enable leaders to engage with feedback less defensively, potentially reducing narcissistic reactions to criticism (Legault et al., 2012). Finally, humility training should be tied to accountability by connecting expected humble behaviors to performance metrics or team-based outcomes, thereby channeling narcissists' recognition-seeking tendencies toward desired organizational goals, because felt accountability has been shown to promote prosocial behaviors among individuals who seek praise and avoid criticism (Zhan & Jie, 2023).

Conclusion

The call to redesign HR practices to suppress narcissism, though theoretically intriguing, overlooks the practical necessity and benefits of these systems. Instead, should such practices increase narcissistic tendencies, a more constructive call to action is a balanced increase in leaders' humility and self-awareness. As such, the positives that come with these HR systems can be captured, and the counterbalance of targeted humility training can provide a more viable and impactful strategy. It aligns with existing development structures, produces measurable organizational benefits, and equips leaders to thrive without compromising collective values.

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