

# Donald Trump and Our Obsession With Narcissistic Leaders

PT [psychologytoday.com/blog/wired-success/201507/donald-trump-and-our-obsession-narcissistic-leaders](https://psychologytoday.com/blog/wired-success/201507/donald-trump-and-our-obsession-narcissistic-leaders)

Americans are obsessed with [narcissistic](#) leaders, or at least they have an ambivalence between the ones they like and the ones they promote. A case in point is Real Estate baron and presidential candidate Donald Trump. Not that he is alone. At various times, similar attention and popularity have been heaped by the public and especially by the media for leaders such as Steve Jobs, Lee Iacocca and Larry Ellison.

Some [observers](#) have openly called Trump a narcissist in terms of a classical definition. Stephanie Marsh used the Narcissistic [Personality Disorder](#) description contained in the psychologists/psychiatrists Bible, the DSM-V as an assessment for Trump, concluding there was a match with the following traits:

- A grandiose sense of self-importance;
- A preoccupation with unlimited [fantasies](#) of success, power and brilliance;
- Believes that he is “so special;”
- Requires excessive admiration;
- Has a sense of entitlement;
- Takes advantage of others to achieve his own ends;
- Lacks [empathy](#) for others;
- Is super-sensitive to criticism.

Dana Millbank, writing in the [Washington Post](#), retrieved a number of Trump’s quotes from his campaign speech that could be illustrative of the criteria that Marsh cited: “I’m really proud of my success,” “I’ve done an amazing job.” Millbank also completed a content analysis of Trump’s campaign speech in which he was self-referenced 257 times.

The public in general and even management experts are hypocritical about what makes a good leader. On the one hand we exalt and praise leaders who are basically nasty and abusive (called a\*\*\*\*les by some) because they are financially successful and on the other hand, research shows that humble leaders whose focus is to serve others are equally successful, but more importantly, capture the hearts and loyalty of others. Which do we value more?

Not that their hubris doesn’t pay off according to a [research study](#) completed by Charles A. O’Reilly III at Stanford’s business school. O’Reilly and his colleagues surveyed employees in 32 large, publicly traded tech companies. He contends that bosses who exhibit narcissistic traits like dominance, self-[confidence](#), a sense of entitlement, grandiosity and low empathy, tend to make more money than their less self-centered counterparts, even if the lower-paid CEOs exhibit plenty of confidence. O’Reilly says of the narcissists, “they don’t really care what other people think and depending on the nature of the narcissist, they are [impulsive](#) and manipulative.” O’Reilly goes on to argue the longer narcissistic leaders are at the helm, the higher their compensation in comparison with the rest of the [leadership](#) team, or in some cases the narcissistic bosses fire anyone who dares to question or challenge them.

There is a dark downside to this appearance of success however, O’Reilly contends. Company morale often declines, and employees leave the company. And while the narcissistic or abusive leaders may bring in the bigger paychecks, O’Reilly says there is compelling evidence that they don’t perform any better than lower-paid, less narcissistic counterparts. This argument has been supported by Michael Maccoby in his book, [The Productive Narcissist: The Promise and Peril of Visionary Leadership](#).

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While Steve Jobs was a [charismatic](#) visionary, and brilliant innovator, Walter Issacson's biography showed him to be rude, controlling and mean-spirited, never hesitating to humiliate Apple employees and take credit for others' work. Since his death, there has been a flood of articles and books and seminars extolling Job's leadership style, many of which argue that it's okay to be an "asshole" as long as you are financially successful. In my article in [The Financial Post](#) I make the point: "The concern I have, and that it is reflected by other leadership experts, is the faulty cause and effect, and "ends justifies the means" arguments that hold up Jobs as a leader to be emulated. It goes something like this: It doesn't matter what kind of boss you are like (meaning abusive), as long as you get results (financial); and any methods to get there are okay, including abusing people."

Robert Sutton was one of the first leadership experts to draw attention to the prevalence of abusive bosses and how organizations should screen them out, as detailed in his book, [The No Asshole Rule: Building a Civilized Workplace and Surviving One That Isn't](#). He points out that tech firms, particularly those in Silicon Valley are where abusive leaders thrive. His article in the [Harvard Business Review](#) on the subject received an overwhelming response of affirmation. He says in business and [sports](#) it is assumed if you are a big winner, you can get away with being jerk. Sutton argues such bosses and cultures drive good people out and claims bad bosses affect the bottom line through increased turnover, absenteeism, decreased commitment and performance. He says the time spent counselling or appeasing these people, consoling victimized employees, reorganizing departments or teams and arranging transfers produce significant hidden costs for the company. And he warns organizations this behaviour is contagious.

A University of [Iowa study](#), "Perpetuating Abusive Supervision: Third-Party Reactions to Abuse in the [Workplace](#)" found "when a supervisor's performance outcomes are high, abusive behavior tends to be overlooked when they evaluate that supervisor's effectiveness." In other words, while people might not want to be friends with an abusive, overbearing bosses, they'll tolerate their behavior as long as they are productive.

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If you're the kind of boss who fails to make genuine connections with your direct reports, take heed: 91% of employees say communication issues can drag executives down, according to results from our new [Interact/Harris Poll](#), which was conducted online with roughly 1,000 U.S. workers. In the survey, employees called out the kind of management offenses that point to a striking lack of [emotional intelligence](#) among business leaders, including micromanaging, [bullying](#), narcissism, indecisiveness, and more.

Incivility also hijacks workplace focus. According to a survey of more than 4,500 doctors, nurses and other hospital personnel, 71 percent tied disruptive behavior, such as abusive, condescending or insulting personal conduct, to medical errors, and 27 percent tied such behavior to patient deaths.

Recently there has been a flurry of articles which promote the idea that employees want to receive "constructive criticism," or "negative feedback," and that employees prefer "toughlove" by managers. Such claims are retrograde and ignore recent [neuroscience](#) and motivation research that clearly show positive feedback and encouragement improve performance.

For example, a [Harvard Business Review](#) blog article by Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman argues, based on survey data "giving negative feedback tends to be the most avoided dimension" of feedback, based on the conclusion that "negative (redirecting) feedback, if delivered appropriately, is effective at improving performance." Such a conclusion is huge leap. In fact, there is no evidence to support the proposition that corrective or "constructive" feedback improves performance. And the proviso given by Zenger and Folkman—"if delivered appropriately," leaves a hole in the argument as big as the Grand Canyon. Many research studies have shown that few managers know how to give appropriate positive feedback, let alone negative or "constructive feedback."

In a similar vein, Laura Stack, writing in [HR Insights](#), says, "Criticism can be difficult to hear, but pain helps us learn and improve ourselves, " and "So listen and act on constructive criticism," and suggests to her readers to just "calmly

absorb the criticism graciously.” And Jacquelyn Smith, writing in [Forbes](#), outlines “8 Ways Negative Feedback Can Lead To Greater Success At Work,” sings the same tune.

In an article in [Management Issues](#), author Nic Paton contends “it is hard taskmasters who are not afraid to crack the whip to get the job done that are most valued by employees,” citing a study by the U.K. Institute of Leadership & Management of 1,500 managers. However, the conclusion was not reached based on how employees felt about that issue. Paton goes on to cite a University of Chicago study by Steven Kaplan which suggested that “hard-nosed” CEOs were preferred. However, when you examine the study carefully, it should be noted that the study is in reference to VC and “buyout” companies only, which presents a very different dynamic to the bulk of research which identifies positive interpersonal skills as a key trait of successful leaders.

So it seems that abusive, narcissistic bosses are alive and doing well in the business world (and [politics](#)), and even exalted by the media. This is in sharp contrast to the research showing that humble bosses actually perform better and are better for the organization.

Peter Smuelson, a psychologist at Fuller Theological Seminary along with psychologist Sam Handy at Brigham Young University published a study in the [Journal of Positive Psychology](#) describes the need for humble leaders. They recruited 350 participants and gave them an open-ended questionnaire about real life problems. They found two clusters of traits people used to explain humility: The first from the social realm—sincerity, honesty, unselfishness, thoughtfulness. The second was learning—curiosity, logic, awareness, open-mindedness.

Humble leaders are more effective and better liked, according to a study published in the [Academy of Management Journal](#). “Leaders of all ranks view admitting mistakes, spotlighting follower strengths and modeling teachability as being at the core of humble leadership,” says Bradley Owens, assistant professor of organization and human resources at the University at Buffalo School of Management. “And they view these three behaviors as being powerful predictors of their own as well as the organization's growth.”

Owens and co-author David Hekman, assistant professor of management at the Lubar School of Business, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, asked 16 CEOs, 20 mid-level leaders and 19 front-line leaders to describe in detail how humble leaders operate in the workplace and how a humble leader behaves differently than a non-humble leader. Although the leaders were from vastly different organizations—military, manufacturing, [health](#) care, financial services, retailing and [religious](#)—they all agreed that the essence of leader humility involves modeling to followers how to grow.

“Growing and learning often involves failure and can be embarrassing,” says Owens. “But leaders who can overcome their fears and broadcast their feelings as they work through the messy internal growth process will be viewed more favorably by their followers. They also will legitimize their followers' own growth journeys and will have higher-performing organizations.” The researchers found that such leaders model how to be effectively human rather than superhuman and legitimize “becoming” rather than “pretending.”

The more honesty and humility an employee may have, the higher their job performance, as rated by the employees' supervisor. That's the new finding from a Baylor University study published in in the journal [Personality and Individual Differences](#) that found the honesty-humility [personality](#) trait was a unique predictor of job performance.

“Researchers already know that integrity can predict job performance and what we are saying here is that humility and honesty are also major components in that,” said Dr. Wade Rowatt, associate professor of psychology and neuroscience at Baylor, who helped lead the study. “This study shows that those who possess the combination of honesty and humility have better job performance. In fact, we found that humility and honesty not only correspond with job performance, but it predicted job performance above and beyond any of the other five personality traits like agreeableness and [conscientiousness](#).”

The Baylor researchers found that those who self-reported more honesty and humility were scored significantly higher by their supervisors for their job performance. The researchers defined honesty and humility as those who exhibit high levels of fairness, greed-avoidance, sincerity and modesty.

"This study has implications for hiring personnel in that we suggest more attention should be paid to honesty and humility in applicants and employees, particularly those in care-giving roles," said Megan Johnson, a Baylor doctoral candidate who conducted the study. "Honest and humble people could be a good fit for occupations and organizations that require special attention and care for products or clients. Narcissists, on the other hand, who generally lack humility and are exploitative and selfish, would probably be better at jobs that require self-promotion."

Amy Y. Ou and her colleagues at Arizona State University published a study in [Administrative Science Quarterly](#), in which they suggested it would be interesting to look at some of the leadership traits associated with Confucianism. Those traits include self-awareness, openness to feedback, and a focus on the greater good and others' welfare, as opposed to dwelling on oneself. Ou, who is now an assistant professor at the National University of Singapore, thought that China would be a good place to gather data, because of Confucianism's influence. She also had a network of corporate contacts there and she teamed up with another Chinese colleague at the business school, Anne Tsui, who had connections in China.

Together with three other colleagues in the U.S. and China, the researchers wound up interviewing the CEOs of 63 private Chinese companies. They also gave surveys to 1,000 top- and mid-level managers who worked with the CEOs. The surveys and interviews aimed to determine how a humble leadership style would affect not so much the bottom line as the top and mid-level managers who worked under the CEOs. Did managers feel empowered by CEOs' humility, did they feel as though they were invited into company [decision-making](#), and did that lead to a higher level of activity and engagement? The study's conclusion: The more humble the CEO, the more top- and mid-level managers reported positive reactions. Top-level managers said they felt their jobs were more meaningful, they wanted to participate more in decision-making, they felt more confident about doing their work and they had a greater sense of autonomy. They also were more motivated to [collaborate](#), to make decisions jointly and to share information. Likewise middle managers felt more engaged and committed to their jobs when the top boss was more humble. "There is a negative [stereotype](#) that humble people are weak and indecisive," Angelo Kinicki, one of the co-authors of the report, "That's just not the case."

In an article in [the Harvard Business Review](#) entitled "Level 5 Leadership: The Triumph of Humility and Fierce Resolve," leadership expert Jim Collins argues Level 5 leaders, the best leaders exhibit the following characteristics:

- Demonstrates a compelling modesty, shunning public adulation; never boastful.
- Acts with quiet, calm determination; relies principally on inspired standards, not inspiring charisma, to motivate;
- Channels ambition into the company, not the self; sets up successors for even more greatness in the next generation;
- Looks in the mirror, not out the window, to apportion responsibility for poor results, never blaming other people, external factors, or bad luck;
- Looks out the window, not in the mirror, to apportion credit for the success of the company—to other people, external factors, and good luck.

Rob Nielsen, author of [Leading with Humility](#), argues that some narcissistic business leaders are treated like rock stars but who leaders who are humble and admit mistakes outshine them all. There's a difference between being a humble leader and being wishy-washy or overly solicitous of others' opinions, says Arron Grow, associate program director of the School of Applied Leadership at the City University of Seattle and author of *How to Not Suck as a Manager*. He says being humble doesn't mean being a chump and describes 6 ways in which leaders can be more effective by being more humble. Elizabeth Salib takes up on this theme in her article in [Harvard Business Review](#),

contending the best leaders are humble leaders. She cites Google's SVP of People Operations, Laszlo Bock, who says humility is one of the traits he's looking for in new hires.

A recent [Catalyst study](#) backs this up, showing that humility is one of four critical leadership factors for creating an [environment](#) where employees from different demographic backgrounds feel included. In a survey of more than 1500 workers from Australia, China, Germany, India, Mexico, and the U.S., Catalyst found that when employees observed [altruistic](#) or selfless behavior in their managers—a style characterized by acts of humility, such as learning from criticism and admitting mistakes they were more positive and committed to their work teams.

While narcissists may look like good leaders, according to a new study by a group of psychology researchers from the University of Amsterdam, they're actually really bad at leading. The study is in the journal [Psychological Science](#). Here's the abstract: "Although they are generally perceived as arrogant and overly dominant, narcissistic individuals are particularly skilled at radiating an image of a prototypically effective leader. As a result, they tend to emerge as leaders in group settings. Despite people's positive perceptions of narcissists as leaders, it was thus far unknown if and how leaders' narcissism is related to the actual performance of those they lead. We proposed and found that although narcissistic leaders are perceived as effective due to their displays of authority, leaders' narcissism actually inhibits information exchange between group members and thereby negatively affects group performance."

Writing in the [Harvard Business Review](#), Michael Maccoby identified the weaknesses of a narcissistic leader, including this: "Despite the warm feelings their charisma can evoke, narcissists are typically not comfortable with their own emotions. They listen only for the kind of information they seek. They don't learn easily from others. They don't like to teach but prefer to indoctrinate and make speeches. They dominate meetings with subordinates. The result for the organization is greater internal competitiveness at a time when everyone is already under as much pressure as they can possibly stand. Perhaps the main problem is that the narcissist's faults tend to become even more pronounced as he becomes more successful."

Fred Kiel, head of the executive development firm KRW international, recently studied 84 CEOs and more than 8,000 of their employees over the course of seven years. The results, written up in the Kiel's recent book [Return on Character](#), found that people worked harder and more happily when they felt valued and respected. So-called "character-driven" CEOs who possess four virtues—integrity, compassion, [forgiveness](#), and accountability—lead companies whose returns on assets are five times larger than those of executives who are more self-centered, he found.

In the [Harvard Business Review](#), Emma Seppala, the associate director of Stanford University's Center for Compassion and Altruism Research, details additional arguments for nice bosses.

Harvard Business School's Amy Cuddy and her [research](#) partners have also shown that leaders who project warmth—even before establishing their competence—are more effective than those who lead with their toughness and skill. Why? One reason is trust. Employees feel greater trust with someone who is kind.

And an interesting [study](#) shows that when leaders are fair to the members of their team, the team members display more citizenship behavior and are more productive, both individually and as a team. Jonathan Haidt at New York University Stern School of Business shows in his research that when leaders are self-sacrificing, their employees experience being moved and inspired.

[Researchers](#) at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania and the George Mason University School of Business examined what they call a "culture of companionate love," which involves feelings of affection, compassion, caring, and tenderness among co-workers at long-term care facilities. Though less intense than [romantic love](#), the strong emotions involved still help create bonds between people. 16 months later the researchers checked in with each group. It turned out that a strong culture of companionate love predicted benefits all around: less [burnout](#), fewer unplanned absences, more teamwork, and higher work satisfaction for employees; fewer emergency room trips and higher mood, satisfaction, and quality of life for patients; and more satisfaction with the

facility and willingness to recommend it for families. Research suggests that compassionate workplaces increase employee satisfaction and loyalty. A worker who feels cared for at work is more likely to experience positive emotion, which in turn helps to foster positive work relationships, increased cooperation, and better customer relations. Compassion training in individuals can reduce [stress](#), and may even impact longevity. All of these point to a need for increasing compassion's role in business and organizational life.

When are we going to stop idolizing business leaders, needing them to be bigger than life in a way reminiscent of celebrities and movie stars, and start appreciating the value of humble leaders, and accept the research evidence that will serve us better? When will we deny the media and public attention now accorded to narcissistic political and business leaders they so desperately desire?