

Seeking Superheroes and Narcissists: The Truth Behind How We Choose Leaders

“Nice guys finish last” is an idiom and plot trope often used to bemoan the modest, but upstanding male who is overshadowed by a calculating, but seemingly charming competitor for a big promotion or in matters of the heart.

But the expression didn’t come from the “underdog”. Instead, it is the cutthroat and quite proud pro-baseball manager, the late Leo Durocher, who is widely credited with the phrase, in part because he publicly took the credit in his 1975 autobiography - titled, not surprisingly, *Nice Guys Finish Last*.

Considering their intended meaning, Durocher’s words carry some deep truths about how we select leaders, whether they be on the field or in the boardroom.

Professor Margarita Mayo explores this interesting dynamic in her April article for the *Harvard Business Review*, [“If Humble People Make the Best Leaders, Why Do We Fall for Charismatic Narcissists?”](#)

For those who have had a hand in selecting leaders or have followed or worked alongside leaders - in short, everyone - this article is a must-read that offers a perspective worth exploring.

There are some key takeaways, supported by research, in Mayo’s article, which compares humble leaders to the narcissistic and charismatic ones that people so often gravitate toward.

Humble Leaders

Pros:

- Improved long-term company performance through the creation of more collaborative environments
- Balanced view of their virtues and shortcomings
- **Strong appreciation of others’ strengths and contributions**
- Open to new ideas and feedback
- Build self-esteem in others so they exceed their own expectations
- Channel individual efforts into an organized group working toward a common goal

- Followers emulate their modest attitude and behavior, so are more likely to admit mistakes and limitations, share the spotlight, praise others, and be receptive to differing views and input

Yet, Mayo notes that “instead of following the lead of these unsung heroes, we appear hardwired to search for superheroes: over-glorifying leaders who exude **charisma.”**

Charisma is typically considered a good thing, and there certainly are some benefits.

Charismatic Leaders

Pros:

- Followers are drawn to their high energy, unconventional behavior and heroic deeds
- Charisma is conducive to orchestrating positive large-scale transformations
- Willing to take on high-risk/high-reward propositions

The list of positives is slightly shorter than that of the humble leader, and **charismatic leaders come with their own list of negatives, what Mayo calls a potential “dark side” to character trait.**

Cons:

- Can be prone to extreme narcissism that leads them to promote highly self-serving and grandiose aims
- Low level of empathy
- Dominant orientation toward others
- Strong sense of entitlement
- Tend to abuse their power and take advantage of their followers
- Often present a bold vision of the future, making them more charismatic in the eyes of others
- Often perceived as arrogant
- Reduced exchange of information among team members

So, if the list of cons is so long, *why* do we often still fall for this type of leader? Mayo offers one theory: because narcissists enjoy the visibility, they know how to draw attention to themselves. And often it takes a while for people to realize such leaders may not be as fully competent or as capable as they first appear.

Yet, we have a tendency to romanticize the leader figure (think superheroes) as the symbol **of strength, the one who will save us. The problem is the narcissist’s self-centered**

magnetism can be contagious and followers looking for that “superhero” imitate their leader, becoming more self-centered, as well.

Mayo’s own research offers another possible explanation - psychological states can skew our perceptions of charismatic leaders. For example, in times of crisis and uncertainty, we often perceive the leaders we already follow as more charismatic. Mayo writes that this is because **“crises and other emotionally laden events increase our propensity to romanticize the grandiose view of narcissistic leaders.”** In short, we want a hero to swoop in and save the day.

So, it appears humble leaders are preferable, overall, to charismatic ones. But what happens when a humble leader is also charismatic? It is easy to divide leaders into “good” versus “bad,” but such oversimplified labels may lead us down a futile or faulty path.

Then, how do we distinguish leadership effectiveness? According to Mayo, “Researchers agree that we could classify charismatic leaders as ‘negative’ or ‘positive’ by their orientation toward pursuing their self-interested goals versus those of their groups,” i.e., personalized versus socialized charisma.

With all the pros, cons and generalities tossed around, it may be tough to reach a simple conclusion about leadership. But the next time the chips are down and you are tempted to gravitate toward the most “superhero-like” leader in the room, you may want to take a second glance around in favor of a more humble leader who will put the goals, interests and needs of the group above his or her own.

About the Author

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