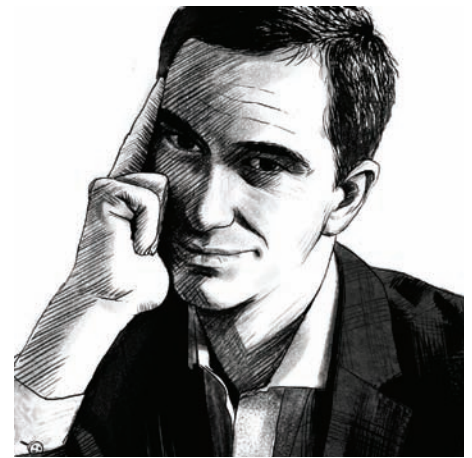


Psychology of a dictator



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As the current wave of uprisings in the Middle East continue to push dictators out of office, it is easy to wonder what makes those leaders so different... so narcissistic. Gaddafi, for example, is hated by many of his own people. He is wanted out of office by the international community, and he has been described by neighbouring leaders as 'crazy'. It is comforting to think that only a rare few could ever become like him but the truth may be very different.

Successful leaders have three things in common: a clear, inspiring vision that resonates with other people; the emotional intelligence to inspire people with a sense of connection to their cause; and the self-confidence to handle the hostility of people who do not believe them.

Acclaimed leadership guru and psychoanalyst Manfred Kets de Vries found that the primary drive for leadership is to compensate for emotional injuries experienced earlier in life. The allure of status and money, with the illusion of invulnerability that comes with power, is intoxicating to almost everyone. To someone who has experienced helplessness and a lack of self-worth during the formative stages, attaining leadership can be a deep *raison d'être*.

Studies show that a disproportionate number of men in senior leadership positions grew up having poor relationships with their fathers but good relationships with their mothers: for example, Bill Clinton, whose father died before his birth; Jack Welch, whose father was a train conductor and was largely absent; and Winston Churchill, who barely spoke with his father.

Several researchers suspect that they developed their leadership skills to compensate for their fathers' failings or absence and to displace their fathers as 'the man of the house'. The findings on women in leadership are less conclusive,

in part because fewer women hold leadership positions in business and politics than men, and in part because the data regarding women who have been studied is more complex. While some women have powerful and supportive mothers, others emulate those characteristics in their fathers. Several women in senior leadership roles grew up acting more like their father's favourite son than daughter.

Many aspiring leaders unconsciously focus on compensating for earlier experiences just to hear 'you're great' on a regular basis. Unfortunately, these external accolades rarely bring the desired reassurance. For example, soon after becoming a young Nobel Prize winner, a client of a colleague had a mild stroke. His mother chided him, 'You're just as much of a loser as your father. He had a stroke at your age'. Despite being one of the brightest minds in his field, he fell into a significant depression characterised by questions of self-worth. He had tried to heal himself of old psychological wounds by getting praise for his accomplishments as a scientist, but that medicine simply didn't work and left him mentally and physically ill.

Even when leaders hear what they want, the effect is short-lived. In the unconscious hope that a bigger 'fix' will bring a more substantial cure, they use their increasing power to surround themselves with yes-men and dependent personalities who will shower them with the praise they seek. They also create an environment where they feel they are in control. Their self-awareness and empathy for others fade as the focus increasingly shifts to 'me'.

Effective leaders need to be able to accept the disagreements and bruises to their egos that come naturally with power and position. The medieval kings of Europe used court jesters to check their

egos. The jester's job was to criticise the king and say what others did not dare to. Thomas Friedman, one of the most popular journalists today, was asked during his stay at the LKY School how he kept his ego in check. He replied, 'I have a wife!'. While he drew a lot of laughter from his remark, many leaders echo Friedman with statements like, 'My spouse is the only one who is honest with me. Without that criticism to correct me, I'd look like an idiot.' In the absence of checks, leaders start to believe what they are told and they graft their egos to their leadership role. So when their leadership is challenged, they feel a threat to the very core and may respond with disproportionate hostility.

Balancing the drive and determination that accompany healthy levels of narcissism with the humility to serve others is a rare skill. Leaders face a great challenge as they may be in positions to receive the praise we all crave, but that makes their egos grow in unhealthy ways. It is of those few who succeed in the balancing act that Lao Tze, author of the *Tao Te Ching*, wrote: 'When the great leader is done and the work is finished successfully, the people will say this all happened naturally.' **GIA**