

# Convinced of Their Own Deceptive Aura of Greatness: Narcissism, Stress, and the Derailment of Charismatic Leaders

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## Introduction

Charisma is highly valued in the business world today; in fact, it has become a primary criterion for the hiring and promotion of aspiring leaders (Conger 1990; Hogan, Raskin, and Fazzini 1990; Howell and Avolio 1992). Multiple studies have produced a darker picture of charisma, however, linking it with destructive behaviors and leadership derailment (Conger 1990; Hogan, Raskin, and Fazzini 1990; Howell and Avolio 1992; O'Connor et al. 1995). In this essay, I use the phrase “leadership derailment” to refer to the collapse of glorified leaders and often the companies they represent as well. Organizational failures publicized in corporate scandals like the 2001 Enron bankruptcy show the high costs of leadership derailment. Therefore, an understanding of the factors and causes of leadership derailment is paramount for building a successful and stable organization.

Hogan, Raskin, and Fazzini (1990) identify the overriding personality defects frequently associated with derailed managers: extreme ambition, lack of support for subordinates, emotional instability, insensitivity, arrogance, and poor relations with staff. These personality defects suggest an underlying narcissism. Many narcissists exemplify seemingly positive charismatic qualities. According to Hogan, Raskin, and Fazzini (1990), for example, the narcissist is a “self-confident, assertive person who is concerned about recognition and advancement” (352). In order to secure advancement, however, the narcissist “exploits his or her subordinates while currying favor with

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his or her supervisors. This is part what we mean by the dark side of leadership” (352).

While a number of narcissistic qualities have been traced to ineffective leadership, what remains unclear is narcissism’s role in leader derailment in particular. What mechanisms of narcissistic behavior cause people to shift from glowing success to complete failure so quickly? The fast-paced collapse of certain narcissistic business leaders seems to be caused by an inability to perceive deteriorating circumstances within the organization. Stress is an important indicator of problems, and I hypothesize that the tendency of narcissists to not experience stress helps explain the connection between narcissism and the distinct pattern of the derailment of charismatic leaders.

### **Literature Review**

The literature of charismatic leadership, narcissism, and stress is reviewed in this section.

#### *Charismatic Leadership*

Charisma is associated with an ability to inspire people to follow a particular path. Scholars often cite Max Weber in their discussions about charisma. As Kets de Vries and Miller (1985) explain,

Max Weber (1947) used the term *charisma* to elucidate this strange influence of some leaders over followers, which for him, consisted of “a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them, the individual concerned is treated as a leader.” (585)

Superhuman may be a bit of an exaggeration, but whatever this “quality” is, charismatic leaders are able to use it in powerful ways. Kets de Vries and Miller argue that charismatic people have the ability to control followers, manipulating them to make them feel either powerfully grandiose or helplessly dependent.

Whether positively or negatively, charismatic leaders are able to deeply affect the emotions of others, especially those who are induced to follow. Because of this, charisma is associated with both good and bad forms of influence. The label has been applied to both revered and abhorred social, political, and organizational leaders: Mahatma Gandhi, Adolf Hitler, Martin Luther King, Jim Jones, Jesus Christ, and Benito Mussolini are all considered charismatic leaders. Howell and Avolio (1992) studied these inconsistencies in charismatic leaders and highlighted specific characteristics that place them in one of two categories: either “ethical charismatics” or “unethical charismatics” (44). They conclude that ethical charismatics develop and empower their followers, welcome feedback, emphasize collective interests, and recognize others’ abilities and contributions. In contrast, unethical charismatics often cross moral boundaries to promote a personal vision through the control and manipulation of their followers (Howell and Avolio 44).

In summary, ethical charismatics work to reach collective goals of the group they lead; unethical charismatics work to reach personal goals. These same characteristics are used by O’Connor et. al. (1995: 531) to distinguish between “Socialized Charismatic Leaders” – who concentrate their goals towards the betterment of society – and “Personalized Charismatic Leaders” – who structure their goals around the attainment of power and position for themselves. Organizations need to worry about Personalized Charismatic Leaders because “Leaders who react to organizational problems in terms of their own needs rather than those of the organization often engage in actions that may have disastrous consequences for the organization” (O’Connor et al. 531). These are the leaders that are most likely to derail. Because narcissism is frequently linked with Personalized Charismatic Leadership, I will next consider literature on narcissism.

### *Narcissism*

Narcissism is defined by its most prominent personality characteristics, including: grandiose self-importance and preoccupation with fantasies of unlimited power, success, or love (Sankowsky 1995); exhibitionism, feelings of entitlement, expectation of special treatment, and feelings of omnipotence in controlling others (Hogan, Raskin,

and Fazzini 1990); and aggression, dominance, and exploitiveness (Raskin, Novacek, and Hogan 1991). There is thus extensive overlap between the personality characteristics of narcissists and those of Personalized Charismatic Leaders. In general, the presence of narcissism has been detected in studies of charismatic leaders (Hogan, Raskin, and Fazzini 1990; House and Howell 1992; O'Connor et al. 1995; Sankowsy 1995); however, not all narcissists demonstrate Personalized Charismatic Leadership. Some narcissists are actually characterized by anxiety, pessimism, and feelings of vulnerability (Wink 1991). This directly opposes the arrogance and self-aggrandizement exhibited by Personalized Charismatic Leaders. Past research suggests that narcissistic individuals behave badly at work. Specifically, Helland and Blair (2005) found that in an assessment center situation, in which individuals are asked to role-play high-stress situations, narcissistic individuals tend to manipulate information, abuse power, and use personalized charismatic behaviors in order to attain their goals. Moreover, when rated by superiors, highly narcissistic individuals were more likely to receive lower interpersonal performance and integrity ratings (Blair, Hoffman, and Helland 2008). In general, there is reason to believe that one of the factors that contributes to managerial derailment is narcissism.

### *The Link Between Stress and Narcissism*

Research has popularized the negative aspects of stress as a psychological and physical burden. An optimum level, however, stress can have healthy and positive benefits for both the individual and the organization (Quick et al. 1997). The Yerkes-Dodson Law (1908) utilizes a normal (bell-shaped) curve to illustrate stress levels in relation to worker performance. Up to an optimum intensity, increasing stress loads actually increases performance. After this peak, stress becomes too great and increasing levels progressively worsens performance. Therefore, some level of stress arousal is necessary to stimulate performance, but in excessive amounts it proves detrimental to the individual and the organization (Quick et al. 1997).

My framework for stress comes from H. Levinson (1980), who describes stress in terms of the individual's perceived gap between two partially conscious images: the present self-image and a futuristic,

improved image of the self (the ego ideal). Stress, according to Levinson, is a reaction to stressors that objectively or perceptually prevent a person from moving towards his ideal self.

The greater the gap between the ego ideal and the self-image, the less well a person thinks of himself and the more angry he becomes with himself. Thus, feelings of inadequacy are pervasive. We are never as good as we would like to be. (Levinson 1980: 500)

This gap Levinson describes is what we know of as “stress” and helps explain the outcome of Yerkes and Dodson’s studies. Some stress is needed to arouse the individual into action he feels will help him reach the ideal self. However, once the stress reaches an extreme level it can prevent a person from feeling that he can reach that goal; anger, as Levinson emphasizes, or other emotional reactions such as confusion or fear of failure signify excessive stress.

What distinguishes narcissistic individuals is their tendency to equate their real self with their ideal self. Research by Raskin, Novacek, and Hogan (1991) links narcissism to defensive self-enhancement through the key components of social desirability and grandiosity, which corresponds to self-deception. “According to most clinical accounts,” they write,

grandiosity involves two contradictory belief systems, namely, an aggrandized version of the self (ideal self), and a self that corresponds to actual experienced self (real self). Moreover, when threatened with failure, the grandiose person tends unconsciously to adopt a posture consistent with his or her aggrandized self. In other words, grandiosity may play an important role in the self-deception component of socially desirable responding. (33)

This explains why narcissistic or “grandiose” individuals tend to give themselves overly positive self-evaluations (Raskin, Novacek, and Hogan 1991). They do not feel anxiety over the gap between their ideal selves and their actual self-images; the gap that causes others to

feel stress is non-existent for narcissists. To my knowledge, the connection between Levinson's work and Raskin, Novacek, and Hogan's findings has not been made; understanding the relationship between narcissism and stress may also help to understand one of the factors that contributes to the derailment of narcissists.

*Narcissism, Stress, and the Downfall of Charismatic Leaders*

Levinson's framework of stress and research on narcissism support the theory that narcissism acts as an internal self-defense against stress. Charisma, which is linked to narcissism, may also help develop an external defense among followers that serves to compound the immunity to stress among narcissists. Two central aspects of charismatic leadership – early success and the development of a loyal following – stimulate narcissistic high self-esteem and the fusion of the ideal-self and real-self resulting in a reinforcement of that stress barrier. It is under these conditions that Personalized Charismatics develop a belief in their invincibility and ultimately derail. According to Howell and Avolio (1992),

The trap that awaits charismatic leaders who have a successful track record partially lies in the accolades that accompany their accomplishments. If they readily believe the praises headed upon them, they can be seduced by delusions of invincibility and greatness. Rather than focusing on the next challenge, they become preoccupied with maintaining an aura of greatness. Image management replaces active, meaningful contribution to the organization. (50)

Therefore, high self-esteem and belief in the ideal self not only obstructs the perception of stress. It shifts the focus of Personalized Charismatics away from constructive work habits. Their feelings of invincibility lead Personalized Charismatics to disregard constructive criticism. Both through refusal to accept opposing viewpoints and the employment of charisma, Personalized Charismatics build a following of supporters best described as "Yes People." This following continually reinforces the leader's feelings of greatness through idealization, continual praise, and unquestionable allegiance. The

leader accepts and encourages these actions to boost his feelings of dominance. “Yes People” create an environment of cognitive dissonance around the leader, reinforcing his perception of infallibility and grandiosity. This atmosphere encourages the leader and his followers to undertake high-risk ventures and discount challenging realities that may impede the achievement of their goals. Important criticisms that could serve as red flags are ignored, and a speedy deterioration of the organization is triggered (Conger 1990).

In summary, high self-esteem and the belief in invincibility prevent the leader from *internally* experiencing stress. The encouragement coming from early success and a following of “yes people” prevents others from seeing it as well. Together these forces combine to encourage the leader to continue down a risky path by eliminating stress as a signal that poor decisions are being made. The absence of stress may thus explain the rapid decline – or derailment – of deceptively “successful” charismatic leaders.

### **Hypothesis**

The research on narcissism, charismatic leaders, and stress combine to support a connection that has previously gone unexplained. Narcissism is a key personality characteristic of the Personalized Charismatic Leaders that tend to derail. Narcissism functions as a defense mechanism against stress because it allows the individual to equate his real self with his ideal self. This is problematic, as charisma enhances this quality by pulling in outside support and encouragement for this belief. Together, these forces perpetuate bad decisions and the refusal to accept that failure is possible. The end result of these factors is the sudden derailment of leaders who, before their fall, appear to be brilliantly successful. The purpose of this study is to further explore the relationship between narcissism and stress.

More specifically, I hypothesize that narcissism will be negatively related to stress tolerance in high performance situations. That is, narcissistic individuals will show signs of stress when in a high performance situation. I expect, however, that they themselves will not recognize this stress. When asked to self-report the amount of stress they typically feel at work, narcissistic individuals will play down any feeling of stress they might experience.

## Method

### *Participants and Procedure*

The data used in this study was archival in nature, and the sample consisted of 119 participants in a leadership development program at a large university in the southeast United States. The leadership development program is a curriculum requirement for completion of the executive MBA degree. As the MBA program is for executives, the participants hailed from a number of different fields (e.g., medical; engineering; manufacturing; shipping), had a variety of job positions (e.g., sales manager; head physician; production manager), and had a substantial number of years of supervisory experience ( $M=9.06$ ,  $SD=7.61$ ). The majority of the sample was male (85%). All of the participants had at least a bachelor's degree, and a proportion of the participants had previously obtained graduate degrees.

After enrolling in the program, the executives completed a number of instruments, including a California Psychological Inventory (CPI), which provides a measure of narcissism, and the *Coping and Stress Profile*.

*Narcissism.* Wink and Gough's (1990) narcissism scale from the California Psychological Inventory (CPI) was used in this study. This scale was developed to capture narcissism in con-clinical populations (Wink and Gough 1990). Respondents answered "true" or "false" for each of 49 items. Wink and Gough (1990) have demonstrated construct validity for their narcissism scale. The CPI-narcissism has demonstrated acceptable internal consistency in past studies ( $\pm = .78$ ) and in the current study ( $\pm = .80$ ). The CPI is a copyrighted assessment instrument, thus scale items were not included in this document.

*Work Stress.* Work stress was measured with a 28-item profile included in the *Coping and Stress Profile*, originally created by Fournier (1981). The scale includes items such as, "My work schedule creates problems"; "My job is demanding or creates tension"; and "Angry or tense relationships exist at work." The items are measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1=Never, 5=Very often). In this study the internal consistency estimate for this scale was .87.

### *Assessment Center Stress Tolerance.*

During their first week of residence in the program, the students also participated in a one-half day developmental assessment center.

The assessment center consisted of three to four exercises (i.e., a role play exercise, a role play memo exercise, a group decision-making task, and an in-basket exercise). The participants received feedback in 14 different performance dimensions. One of the performance dimensions was stress tolerance. Here, stress tolerance was rated as the effectiveness of dealing with stress during the assessment center. Stress tolerance was rated on a scale from 1 to 5. Lower scores were assigned to individuals who showed signs of stress (e.g., sweaty palms; red face; nervous laughter; nervous reactions to questions). Higher scores were assigned to individuals who seemed calm and unaffected throughout the assessment.

### *Analysis*

The data was analyzed by correlating the CPI measurement of narcissism with indicators of stress. The expectation was that work stress and narcissism would be inversely related, while stress tolerance measured in the assessment center would also be negatively related to narcissism. I expected, in other words, that those who measured high on narcissism scales would be less likely to effectively deal with stressful situations in the assessment center. I also anticipated that participants with high levels of narcissism would not feel as stressed by the workplace because of corresponding feelings of invincibility. However, the same participants that test high on narcissism scales are likely to feel stress in an assessment center environment where personal impressions are important. Charismatic narcissism hinges on gaining positive impressions, especially first impressions, from an audience. Further, charismatic narcissists often rely on a following of individuals who, seduced by the leader's personality, have the impression that he or she will be able to produce actual, substantive work.

## **Results**

### *Principal-Components Analysis*

The Work Stress scale was subjected to a principal component analysis with equamax rotation. Five factors were extracted on the basis of Kaiser's eigenvalue criterion. (See Table 1.) In the table, Component 1, "WS Co-Worker Relationships," describes self-reported feelings of stress caused by same-level workers. Component 2, "WS

**Table 1: Factor Analysis**

Question	Component				
	1	2	3	4	5
Communication with some of my co-workers is a problem	.83				
Co-workers create problems for me	.80				
Angry or tense relationships exists at work	.81				
Trouble with co-worker causes a poor work environment	.81				
My employer demands too much		.49			
Some things about my job are a problem		.42			
The type of job I have creates problems		.47			
My job is demanding or creates tension		.65			
I am tired or not physically ready for work		.47			
My work schedule creates problems		.76			
Working long hours are a problem		.78			
I know what hours I work (reversed)		.58			
I have control over my work hours (reversed)		.62			
My job is everything I want it to be (reversed)			.46		
I am interested or happy with my job (reversed)			.51		
I have difficulty getting along with my supervisor(s)			.76		
My supervisor(s) are too rigid			.70		
I am supported by my supervisor(s) (reversed)			.73		
My suggestions are valued by my supervisor(s) (reversed)			.74		
I lose time at work because of personal problems				.75	
Personal concerns reduce my productivity				.78	
Personal commitments interfere with my work performance				.79	
I have problems concentrating on my job				.75	
It is hard to receive a promotion					.44
Employer policy on payment of wages creates problems					.77
Salary and benefits create problems					.85
I am paid fairly for what I do (reversed)					.73
My employee benefits are adequate (reversed)					.58

1: WS Co-Worker; 2: WS Time/Work; 3: WS Overall/Supervisor;  
4: WS Distractions; 5: WS Promotion/Compensation

Time/Work Load Demands,” reflects the participant’s feelings of stress over the substance of their job: anxiety over completing tasks, the demand of the work schedule, etc. Component 3, “WS Overall Interest and Supervisor Relations,” relates to general happiness with work and attitude about the supervisor. Component 4, “WS Distractions,” involves feelings of stress due to external personal issues and other outside issues. Finally, Component 5, “WS Promotion and Compensation,” reports levels of stress based on feelings that the participant has not been adequately compensated.

### *Correlations*

*Narcissism and Assessment Center Stress Tolerance.* As shown in Table 2, Narcissism was inversely related to stress tolerance as displayed in an assessment center ( $r = -.20, p < .05$ ). This indicates that more narcissistic individuals are less able than less narcissistic individuals to tolerate stress in a performance assessment situation.

*Narcissism and Work Stress (WS) Total.* As shown in Table 2, Narcissism was *positively* related to stress tolerance as displayed in an assessment center ( $r = .19, p < .05$ ). This indicates that more narcissistic individuals are more likely than less narcissistic individuals to report high levels of stress in the workplace. Likewise, every one of the five factors of Work Stress positively correlated with Narcissism, but only three of the factors (WS Co-Worker Relationships, WS Distractions, and WS Promotion and Compensation) were significant.

*Narcissism and WS Co-Worker Relationships.* As shown in Table 2, Narcissism was inversely related to stress tolerance as displayed in an assessment center ( $r = .17, p < .05$ ). This indicates that more narcissistic individuals are more likely than less narcissistic individuals to report feelings of stress as a result of other employees in the workplace. Those who tested highly narcissistic often agreed with the following statements: Communication with some of my co-workers is a problem; Co-workers create problems for me; Angry or tense relationships exist at work; Trouble with co-workers causes a poor work environment.

*Narcissism and WS Distractions.* As shown in Table 2, Narcissism was inversely related to stress tolerance as displayed in an assessment center ( $r = .26, p < .05$ ). This indicates that more narcissistic

**Table 2: Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Narcissism	x							
Assessment Center Stress Tolerance	-.20*	1.0						
Work Stress (WS) Total	.19*	-.25	.87					
WS Co-Worker Relationships	.17*	-.35*	.62**	.87				
WS Time/Work Load Demands	.05	-.17	.73**	.31**	.80			
WS Overall Interest and Supervisor Relations	.06	-.21	.72**	.33**	.33**	.80		
WS Distractions	.26**	-.04	.46**	.20*	.19**	.24**	.81	
WS Promotion and Compensation	.14*	-.05	.64**	.27	.21	.43**	.17**	.76
<i>M</i>	24.63	3.29	2.31	2.32	2.65	2.10	1.76	2.41
<i>sd</i>	6.14	.266	.434	.769	.621	.638	.562	
<i>N</i>	219	144	272	271	272	272	272	271

Coefficient Alphas are presented on the diagonal.

\*\* $p < .01$  (one-tailed test) \* $p < .05$  (one-tailed test)

individuals are more likely than less narcissistic individuals to report feelings of stress as a result of external distractions.

*Narcissism and WS Promotion and Compensation.* As shown in Table 2, Narcissism was inversely related to stress tolerance as displayed in an assessment center ( $r = .14$ ,  $p < .05$ ). This indicates that more narcissistic individuals are more likely than less narcissistic individuals to report feelings of stress as a result of external distractions. Narcissism and stress over Promotion and Compensation correlated .14, indicating that highly narcissistic individuals feel stress over issues of promotion, wages, salary, and employee benefits.

## Discussion

This paper studied the correlations between CPI narcissism scales, Assessment Center Stress Tolerance measurements, and information about Work Stress from the *Coping and Stress Profile* to study the

relationship between narcissism and stress. The results of this study support my hypothesis that highly narcissistic people would demonstrate signs of stress during a situation when their performance was being observed. This hypothesis stemmed from a review of literature about narcissism, charismatic leadership, and image management. Howell and Avolio's (1992) studies about charismatic leadership concluded that image management replaces meaningful work habits. Therefore, the expectation was that highly narcissistic individuals would be more likely to feel stress when performing for an audience than those who are less narcissistic. This proved to be correct.

At face value, the data disproved my second hypothesis. Rather than an inverse relationship between work stress and narcissism, this study shows that those who tested highly narcissistic were *more* likely to test high on the work stress profile. However, a closer look at which factors of work stress correlated with narcissism and what the *Coping and Stress Profile* measures explains these unpredicted results.

What are narcissists stressed about?

1) Co-workers. Significantly, narcissism did not correlate with the factors of work stress dealing with the substance of the work, work schedule or workload. Yet participants in the study who tested high on narcissism scales did report more feelings of stress over their relationships with co-workers. Poor relationships with others who have opposing viewpoints are a key factor of Personalized Charismatic behavior (Howell and Avolio 1992; O'Connor et al. 1995). Indeed the questions that were asked on the *Coping and Stress Profile* support past studies about how narcissistic, charismatic individuals relate with others (Conger 1990; Hogan, Raskin, and Fazzini 1990; House and Howell 1992; Howell and Avolio 1992; O'Connor et al. 1995). Narcissists were more likely to report the following: "Communication with some of my co-workers is a problem"; "Co-workers create problems for me"; "Angry or tense relationships exist at work"; and "Trouble with my co-workers causes a poor work environment" (Table 1). Therefore, while narcissistic individuals were more likely to report feelings of stress at work, the focus of their stress put the blame on other co-workers rather than personal performance.

2) External Distractions. The second factor that positively correlated with narcissism emerged in response to the following

questions:” I lose time because of personal problems”; “Personal concerns reduce my productivity”; “Personal commitments interfere with my work performance”; and “I have problems concentrating on my job” (Table 1). Just as highly narcissistic individuals were more likely to report that co-workers caused them stress, they pointed to external issues to explain their inability to concentrate at work. This supports everything we know about the link between narcissism and stress (Levinson, 1980; Raskin, Novacek, & Hogan 1991). Rather than take personal responsibility, these people blame their stress at work on external factors (family, extracurricular commitments, etc.). When things do not go well, it is never their fault; it is to be blamed on someone else.

3) Compensation and Promotion. Prominent personality characteristics that define narcissism include grandiose self-importance, feelings of entitlement, and expectation of special treatment (Sankowsy 1995). The final factor creating stress for narcissists recognizes these key features. The *Coping and Stress Profile* reported that highly narcissistic individuals agreed with negative statements about compensation and promotion: “It is hard to receive a promotion”; “Employer policy on payment of wages creates problems”; and “Salary and benefits create problems.” Likewise, they disagreed with the positive statements: “I am paid fairly for what I do” and “My employee benefits are adequate.” Narcissists were therefore more likely to believe they were not receiving what they deserved.

### Implications

When considering the structure of the *Coping and Stress Profile* and the factors that correlated with narcissism, the results are actually not that surprising. Although the results conclude that narcissists do in fact feel stress at work, contrary to the original hypothesis, the stress they report seems to be caused by negative external factors rather than internal issues or stress about personal performance. In fact, any possible stress about personal performance is avoided by placing the blame on external factors: incompetent co-workers, external irritations that impede ability to work, or the management’s inability to recognize the individual’s greatness. It is not only important that narcissists identify these particular factors as the cause of work stress, but also

that they do not perceive stress over the substance of the work.

The results of this study imply that stress still plays a key factor in the derailment of Personalized Charismatic Leaders. In fact, these findings paint an even bleaker picture than expected. Narcissists do not apparently feel stress about personal ability and therefore are more likely to take risks, often miscalculated and extreme risks. . Their lack of stress about their abilities does not, however, relieve them of all stress. Anxiety over image management, external factors, and unrecognized greatness is higher in narcissistic individuals, making their personalities not only difficult for others but a source of discomfort to themselves as well.

### **Limitations**

The archival nature of this study did not allow for any questions to be explored beyond the information that was collected at the time. The *Coping and Stress Profile* did not measure Work Stress in the way this study really needed; it did not provide a quantitative measure of executive stress over completing work, taking risks, dealing with the possibility of failure, etc. A different measurement of stress with the aforementioned measurements may have been more descriptive. The CPI was also not the best possible measure of narcissism, but it was the best of what was accessible at the time. Furthermore, the sample was taken from executives so it is unclear whether these conclusions translate for individuals who are not at the executive level.

Moreover, the nature of narcissism could also represent an additional limitation in this study. Wink (1991) suggests that there are two distinct types of narcissism: overt narcissism and covert narcissism. Both types have grandiose fantasies, but the two types exhibit different characteristics. Covert narcissists “appear to be hypersensitive, anxious, timid, and insecure” (Wink 1991: 591). In contrast, overt narcissists are arrogant, ostentatious, and openly expressive of their grandiose self-image (Wink 1991). This form of narcissism, overt narcissism, is more congruent with Personalized Charismatic Leadership. Kets de Vries and Miller (1985) claim that narcissism often motivates individuals to obtain a leadership position, but their research only applies to those who are overtly narcissistic (Wink 1991). In this paper, I was unable to distinguish between covert and overt

narcissists. It could be that covert narcissists are much more likely to self-report feelings of stress at work than overt narcissists; it is also likely that there was an absence of covert narcissists in this sample, as the data was collected in an executive population.

## **Conclusion**

Leadership derailment is crucially important to understanding why some businesses fail while others succeed. Charisma is a key factor in the hiring and promotion process, but businesses must recognize the negative aspects of personalized charisma and carefully weigh the costs and benefits of incorporating narcissistic, charismatic individuals into the company. Not only have I found that highly narcissistic individuals have a very low tolerance for stress in performance situations, the stress they report in the workplace is directed at other individuals rather than themselves. This protective shield prevents them from making a change in their own behavior in order to better the situation.

While charismatic leaders may have the ability to inspire, recent experience suggests that they also have the ability to destroy. I originally thought that the tendency of narcissistic leaders to derail was related to their failure to experience stress. However, the data examined here suggests quite the opposite. When in a situation when performance was being observed, narcissists showed greater signs of stress than other people. However, when asked about the things that cause them stress at work, narcissists report that they do feel stress. Indeed, they report elevated levels of stress in relation to incompetent coworkers, external irritants, and the management's inability to recognize their greatness. It should be interesting to further explore these areas.

While some of the results of this study were surprising, a closer investigation into the correlation between stress and narcissism help to explain the type of stress that narcissistic individuals feel and how the relationship relates to the derailment of Personalized Charismatic Leaders. By projecting stress onto external factors, narcissists relieve themselves of personal responsibility for negative outcomes and continue to believe in their invincibility. This sustained belief of invincibility may support overly risky behavior and a perceived buffer against personal failure. Stress over personal failure often directs action towards safer, planned, and carefully planned actions. Without this

concern, narcissism in charismatic leaders seems to play a key role in derailment.

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