



# STYLIST

CAREERS

## How to tell if your boss is a narcissist (and deal with it without getting fired), according to a psychotherapist

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**It's thought that people with narcissistic personality traits (or disorder) are more drawn to the world of leadership, so what if you suspect your boss is one? Psychotherapist Kathleen Saxton shares how working for a narcissist can impact your career and the warning signs you shouldn't overlook.**

Ever encountered someone at work who always seems to be miraculously falling forward? Someone whose name curiously appears only on the front of good news reports, promotion lists and on the awards stage, despite bad financial results, toxic team politics or talent turnover on their watch? Charming, celebrated and held up by the company as a model leader even though the majority of their team silently loathes them?

Up close and personal, you'll likely discover their outer charm and persona of corporate servitude is simply performative. Once they are no longer in the company of those they seek to impress, they switch, becoming dismissive, manipulative, intimidating and devaluing towards those who work for them. Stealing their ideas, taking praise for others' work, sabotaging projects that threaten to expose or undermine them, playing rotating favourites among the team and even blame-shifting when there is unwelcome news in their division. Does any of this sound eerily familiar?

Welcome to the murky world of the narcissistic boss. Interestingly, while narcissistic personality disorder only affects between 0.5% and 5% of the population (diagnosis criteria include a lack of empathy and being preoccupied with fantasies of success and power), it's thought to be higher among senior executives in the workplace. A seminal book in this arena is *Snakes In Suits*. First published by industrial psychologist Paul Babiak and criminal psychologist Robert D Hare in 2006, it perfectly described the dark sides of a business leader – with traits leaning heavily towards what we would now identify in 2024 as narcissism (and at times psychopathy).

### “They can have an immeasurable effect on your confidence”

If you have experienced a narcissistic boss, you will know they can make your life a living hell. It tends to go like this: you are talented and ambitious and will have invested considerable time and energy into a business and your career at a specific firm. Then, a narcissist enters your workplace. At first, you might simply observe their odd behaviour, or even excuse it and try to adapt, but after a while, you'll likely develop a sinking feeling due to the loss of the psychological safety you once had at work. A toxic level of fear and distrust can settle within your team.

You might even start to wonder if it's just you having issues with this boss: are others noticing the way they act? Regular incidents can include a thrilling new project or a promotion being dangled before you if you could 'just take on some extra responsibility' in the short term, only for that reward to never appear. Perhaps you suspect you are being frozen in your role or dissuaded from applying for promotion because you are too useful in your current position, which only benefits the boss. Equally, sensing any elevation for you may potentially threaten their position: they might abruptly stop inviting you to meetings you should be part of or stop putting you forward for opportunities that would be a good fit.

On a one-to-one level, though, you've probably noticed they have little to no interest in your personal life, successes or struggles. Why? They simply don't care. It goes without saying that these individuals can have an immeasurable detrimental effect on not only your confidence and ambitions, but also your mental and physical health. It could even change the course of your entire career, so it's worth truly investing some time in considering what steps to take if you find yourself in such a situation.

It is unsurprising that those with deep narcissistic traits are drawn to the world of leadership; after all, a fragile ego that seeks something called 'narcissistic supply' (ie praise, reward, notoriety) is a cornerstone of the disorder. Leadership, therefore, is a cast-iron method of gaining professional validation to secure a never-ending stream of this supply via the workplace. As recently as 2022, studies from Stanford University estimated upwards of 18% of CEOs scored six out of seven on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory. For balance, there is also research that speaks to some of the positives of having narcissistic types in leadership roles: they bring energy, creativity, drive, focus and competitiveness – all of which, when deployed healthily, are critical in business. But it goes without saying how damaging some of their more negative traits can be to their direct reports and the overall team culture.

Regrettably, these individuals are often encouraged and enabled by shareholders and boards who simply measure the 'bottom line' but never the equally important 'cultural lifeline' of the

organisation. They can peddle themselves as irreplaceable and are thereby offered protection from enablers ranging from the CEO to HR directors. As Elon Musk once famously tweeted in 2018: “If I am a narcissist (which might be true), at least I am a useful one.”

### How to deal with your narcissistic boss

So, what can you do if you suspect you might be working for a narcissist? Well, there is good news and some challenging news. Let's start with the challenging: leaders with significant narcissistic traits, never mind those diagnosed with NPD, are unlikely to change. Ever. Research shows no evidence of change or cure for this personality type – if they venture to therapy, you might expect a mild yet inconsistent modification of reactions or behaviours at the absolute best.

The good news is you are ultimately in charge. They may have power, influence and authority over you within your current workplace, but you still fundamentally get to choose where you work and the energy you pour into the emotional exchanges that can happen at work. From my 30 years as a business executive, headhunter and psychotherapist, this is my honest advice. You have three choices: transfer, tackle or take off.

### “Leaders with narcissistic traits are unlikely to change”

Requesting a transfer or sideways move may not have been in your plan, but if a squiggly pathway allows you to escape the clutches of this individual, it could be worth it. Have these conversations fully above the line – in a formal meeting, not at the pub – and with others present. Be sure to remain graceful and enthusiastic about where you are and what you wish to move towards. Make a case for this side-step and explain why it's a good business decision – where are you most useful to the business? Is there someone who would be better placed to line-manage you? Make sure to have your reasons for a move backed up with evidence.

The next option – tackling these leaders – is the hardest route, and it isn't always successful. A lone voice is unlikely to unseat a leader as it can easily be blamed on personality differences and misunderstandings. If you are resolute about making them accountable for specific misconduct or bullying (specificity is crucial), I would suggest a large number of you, with consistent and unyielding testimony, make the case to the CEO, with HR present. You can utilise anonymous 360 feedback loops if needed but be ready for a rough old ride. Make sure to keep written accounts of when each issue occurred as evidence – you'll need lots of it.

Finally, there is the option to take off. Once you have consciously decided to leave your role – in your own time and in your own way – you will likely start to feel better about any pressures, accusations and manipulations from the narcissistic boss. They won't be your problem for much longer, after all. Use your pent-up feelings about their treatment of you and others as rocket fuel to launch you into a different company, division or environment where you will be respected, valued and championed once more.

Most importantly, do not get stuck. Those of us with dents in our self-esteem can sometimes be tempted to work harder, try different approaches, blame ourselves, take it as a challenge and even start to mimic the boss in the hope of gaining a spot in their sunshine. Don't. You may wake up a decade later, no further forward and depleted of all the brilliance you once held.

