



When self-confidence is a curse

Not all narcissists need be nightmare colleagues, says **Randall S Peterson**.
Learn to recognise the different types if you want to manage them successfully

Report/Kathy Brewis



Spot the difference: One person – let’s call him Donald – says, “I’m a born leader. I’m going to be a great person.” The other – call him Bob – says, “I’m going to bring peace and justice to the world and solve world poverty.” Which one’s the narcissist?

Of course, it’s a trick question. Both of them are. But not in the same way. Some narcissists are better than others, or at least better to work with, says Randall S Peterson, Professor of Organisational Behaviour at London Business School.

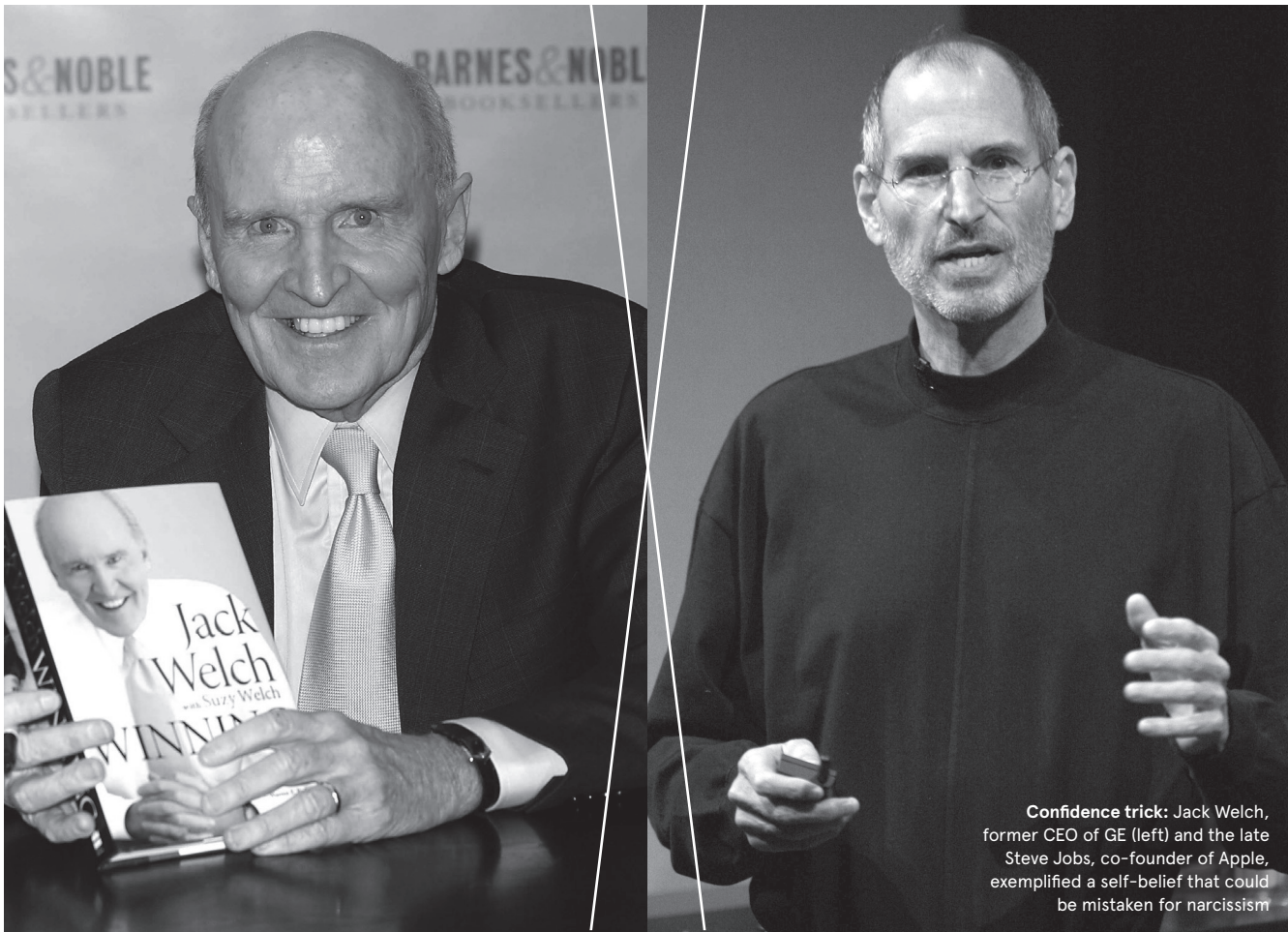
Donald is the classic “agent narcissist” – not merely confident, but unassailably full of himself, always winning, always better, always right. Donald will happily put other people down to make himself look and feel great. He has no team spirit. It’s all about Donald.

Bob, on the other hand, is a communal narcissist. He also oozes overconfidence, but it has a different focus. Bob thinks he’s the best, but that other people can also benefit. “Agent narcissists don’t share resources because they think they can use them more effectively than other

people,” says Peterson. “Communal narcissists are willing to share in order to maintain this idea that they’re more helpful than any other person.”

Sharing is caring – or is it narcissism?

In a recent psychological experiment with PhD student Wiley Wakeman, Professor Peterson used a ‘dictator game’ to look at the difference between agent and communal narcissists. In this game, a person is told they have been given an amount of money – £100, say – and »



Confidence trick: Jack Welch, former CEO of GE (left) and the late Steve Jobs, co-founder of Apple, exemplified a self-belief that could be mistaken for narcissism

asked how much they're willing to give to another person. They're allowed to give them anything or nothing. Most people have a basic sense of equity and fairness and feel they're lucky to be in the position to make the decision. They will give the other person half, or close to half.

The agentic narcissist will keep most or all of the £100 for himself. Communal narcissists, on the other hand, will tend to give the other party more than the average person would – because they are focused on wanting to believe that they're more generous than everyone else. The effect is stronger if the narcissistic giver knows the other person is aware of their identity, but the effect of this disclosure isn't huge. Even if the receiver doesn't know the identity of the benefactor, the narcissist will still bask in the knowledge that he or she has been generous.

What's it like to have a communal narcissist on your team? It's tricky, but

not impossible. This is what you have to watch out for, says Peterson: "If somebody else tries to compete with them for status, for being the best helper, it can get ugly. They will engage in conflict if a person moves into their territory. They don't want to lose their status position in the group. So as a leader, you have to manage that."

But communal narcissists can also be valuable, because they like to swing into action when there's something desperately needing to be fixed and they think they're the only person capable of fixing it. They

might be just the person for that unpopular task that most people find daunting.

Oh dear – I think I'm a narcissist

If you're recognising something of yourself in all of this, what can you do about it?

"People do have choices," says Peterson.

"One option is acceptance. You say, 'This is who I am. When something huge needs to be fixed, I'll do it.' A normal person will look at it and say, 'Oh my God, this is such a mess, so huge, I'm not confident I can do this.' A narcissist will say, 'Of course I can!' That confidence, when you need something really big and transformational done, can be useful."

Some degree of narcissism is, it turns out, perfectly healthy, perhaps even desirable. "What psychology shows is that on average people are overoptimistic and overconfident," says Peterson. "That's what keeps us going in life. It's what's got

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humans where we are. A bit of the 'When life gives you lemons, make lemonade' is hugely helpful, just to be functional. Research shows that the people who are most accurate about their future prospects are often borderline clinically depressed."

Who wants to believe that when life gives you lemons, it might be the start of a seriously sour spell? Too much realism just isn't helpful. If you're an entrepreneur, for example, you need to have faith that you'll succeed against the odds. But a little narcissism goes a long way. "Leaders need to have a degree of confidence, there's no doubt," says Peterson. "Narcissism is an extreme version of confidence. It's an extension of something that's generally functional. It's just gone too far."

Narcissists will wave away the results of anonymous feedback, such as a 360 survey. "They'll just dismiss the data. That's a strong sign you're looking at a narcissist," says Peterson. "They have a nasty habit of surrounding themselves with people who tell them how wonderful they are. If they fail, it's someone else's fault. You can see it in the way Donald Trump responds to the media – he's angry, defensive and unreasonable."

How to deal with a narcissist

Is it possible to change? "Yes, but like any personality change it's a major process," says Peterson. "And they may not have much incentive to change. They've usually created a system around themselves that supports their narcissism. They chase people away who don't tell them what they want to hear. If you're overconfident you will take on big tasks and if you do it well that will reinforce your self-perception."

How do you deal with a narcissist on your team? With difficulty, according to Peterson – but here are some tips.

"With a communal narcissist, you can get more out of them if you humour their belief that they are the greatest person to solve a problem. You can guide them, shape them. Having them in your team can be a good thing."

With an agentic narcissist, you only have one hope: give them a major task that they're not afraid of – something that other people are intimidated by – and hope they tackle it brilliantly.

But even then, "they won't share the credit and they won't cooperate, so you have to pair them with someone who can put up with them, who can tolerate the 3 am phone calls. If there's someone willing to play that role, you might be able to utilise them on the big project. Otherwise, they're never going to work well with people. Don't

attempt it. Don't assume it. Don't waste your time on them. The mistake a lot of managers make is to try to get these narcissists to work well with others because they have so much potential. Honestly, that's mostly a waste of your life."

How do these shocking people get hired in the first place? "They have confidence; they have a story that explains how they achieved everything; they have charisma," says Peterson. But it is possible to find out what's underneath: "That's the challenge for an interviewer. For example, if you ask them about their skills, if they're confident in their abilities because they understand how their education and experiences they've had have shaped them, that's normal. If, on the other hand, they just know that they're just amazing – that's a flashing red warning light." ○

Are you a narcissist?

Which of the following statements do you agree with? Numbers 1-5 relate to agentic narcissism; 6-10 relate to communal narcissism

1 A. I like having authority over other people.
B. I value being in a position of authority.

2 A. I like to look at myself in the mirror.
B. I'm happy with the way I look.

3 A. I usually dominate conversations.
B. I recognise the importance of two-way communication.

4 A. I always know what I'm doing.
B. The skills and experience I've acquired enable me to make good decisions.

5 A. I'll never be satisfied until I get what I deserve.
B. I want more for myself, but I'm also grateful for what I have.

6 A. I am the most helpful person I know.
B. I really enjoy helping other people.

7 A. I am the best friend someone can have.
B. I do my best to be a great friend.

8 A. I will be well known for solving the world's problems.
B. I want to play my part in solving the world's problems.

9 A. I greatly enrich others' lives.
B. I'm a positive factor in others' lives.

10 A. I will be able to solve world poverty.
B. I'm determined to tackle world poverty.

Mostly Bs: You're a confident leader who wants to have a positive impact. Get some 360-degree feedback anyway – it will boost your self-awareness and effectiveness.

Mostly As: Oh dear. Get some 360-degree feedback now and pay serious attention to what the results tell you. They aren't rigged. You need to make some changes.