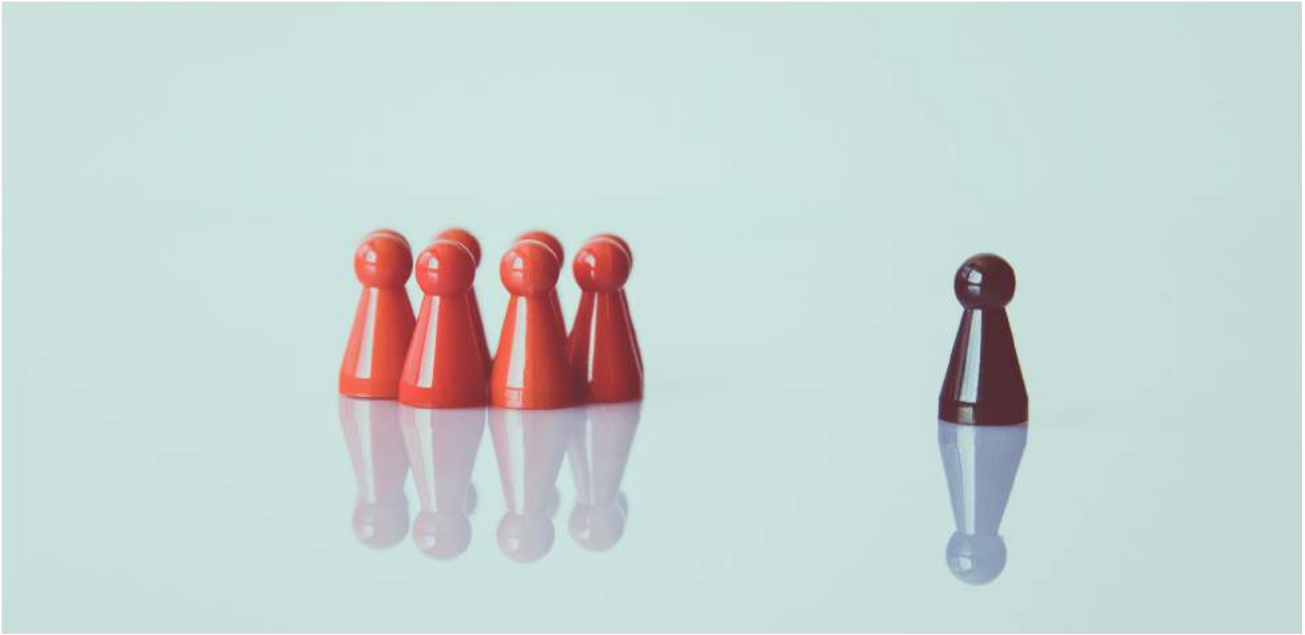


stuff you wish they taught in seminary



You're Following A Narcissistic Church Leader

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Narcissism is an intense focus on one's self and typically involves selfishness, entitlement, a constant desire and need for admiration, and a demonstrated lack of empathy. In short, narcissists maintain a me-over-the-rest-of-the-world mindset.

Sometimes those who lead deteriorate into narcissistic tendencies, but the nature of leadership positions often draws those who already demonstrate narcissistic behaviors. **Have you ever wondered if your lead pastor or supervisor in your church is a narcissist?** As it turns out, your concern may be not that unfounded.

A recent national study by the American Association of Christian Counselors found that [31.2%](#) of active ordained pastors scored in the diagnostic range for narcissistic personality disorder. I found this statistic shocking and unsettling, and I began to think critically about my own style of leadership in a way that I hadn't previously considered.

What is it about narcissism that makes it so prevalent within the world of Christian leadership? More specifically, what is it about leading within the local church that seems to attract so many narcissists?

In some ways, it's easy to understand how people who suffer from narcissistic personality disorder feel drawn to the local church. People come to the church looking for help and solutions to complex problems, and they seek those answers with us, the local church leaders.

But who are you and I to believe that we can advise and lead these people? **Why do they believe that we can speak clarity and solutions into their lives?** If we're not careful when leading others, we can cross over from helping them to feeding into our sense of self-importance.

We need to reflect on our own leadership and on the leadership of our team members, since unchecked narcissism can have a profoundly negative influence on our churches. A quick look around today reveals the remnants of broken relationships and churches affected by narcissistic leaders.

In an effort to address this prevalent issue, we've developed a list of characteristics that might point to narcissism in a church leader:

They're quick to criticize others but fail to see anything they do as wrong.

Have you ever been around a leader who consistently points out everyone else's errors or shortcomings?

In the church world, this person might be the one who notices that the mic stand isn't leveled in a certain way or takes issue with something said by the host during a Sunday service. This leader has the uncanny ability to pick apart every little problem that arises but somehow never recognizes their own fault or responsibility. **When leaders easily find fault**

with others but refuse to see their own flaws or inadequacies, it points to narcissism.

[Dr. Karlyn Borysenko](#) summarized the concern of this behavior aptly when she said, "A narcissist won't accept even the smallest piece of criticism. Any inkling that they're less than perfect will drive them over the edge. If your leader can't take criticism, even of the smallest kind, you need to be very wary of that. You need to be very concerned about where that could potentially lead." None of us are perfect and we can't lead from a place where we think we do everything right all the time. Narcissists will struggle to accept this and will be unable to act from a place of humility and recognition of their imperfections.

They can't deal with emotions.

In [Rethinking Narcissism](#), Dr. Craig Malkin explores the idea of narcissists pushing away from emotions. Narcissists will shun any emotions because the very display of emotions or feelings suggests that someone can be touched emotionally by friends, families, partners—and this idea is incredibly unsettling to a narcissist. The concept of emotional expression challenges a narcissist's sense of perfect autonomy. **If they're feeling anything—even happiness—then they have to admit that those emotions signal that someone else has affected them. This challenges the narcissist's worldview.**



Do you work for a church leader who doesn't seem to be able to deal with any emotions? Do they become upset when people in your community show emotion in meetings or on a Sunday morning? Are they the kind of person who prefers to keep things cerebral and finds a

touching sermon offensive? **Be wary of an emotionally disconnected leader who chafes against expressions of emotion or fails to respond to those they lead with emotional maturity.**

They have a potty mouth.

Research shows that narcissists are more likely to use negative language and swear when they communicate. [\[ref\]](#) Now, in terms of local church leadership, if you have a leader that drops the F-bomb in meetings just to draw attention or to redirect the discussion, you may be working with a narcissist. The narcissist knowingly uses harsh language to make people uncomfortable and to coerce others. This is even more recognizable within the local church where such harsh language is not the normal lingo.

You know that person who always tries to make it all about them in a conversation? The person who's ready to jump in with the next anecdote as soon as you finish speaking? Whether it's one-upmanship or going out of their way to prove their significance, a narcissist constantly dives in to speak next and to shape the focus towards themselves. Anita Vangelisti, a psychologist at the University of Texas, stated that narcissists typically prefer to keep the conversation around themselves by making "exaggerating hand and body movements, using a loud tone of voice, and 'glazing over' when others speak" [\[ref\]](#) **The idea of exaggerated hand movements or loud talking is particularly notable; someone who tries to use physical dominance to control a conversation should be a red flag.**

They take credit for your ideas.

Remember that cool outreach you did last year that drew record attendance at your church? Say you were the one who presented the idea or even executed the whole thing. A narcissistic leader would be the type to convey the impression that it was their idea or even claim that they themselves were the key factor for the project's success. **You might be working for a narcissist if they regularly take credit for what you're doing and try to attach their name to it.**

This is particularly problematic in the local church where we have a limited amount of bandwidth for our communities to know about how the church works and what makes things happen. We all know it takes a team to “make church happen”, but **if a leader goes out of their way to cover up other team members' contributions or directs all the credit back to themselves, that is a red flag indicating narcissism.**

If this is a peer leader, it might be wise for you to address this with them as well as involve a supervisor. If your supervisor is the one taking credit for everything and it's making you uncomfortable, talk with them and try to explore why they feel the need to edge out the team. **Again, a narcissist will most likely not take this conversation well. However, a balanced and healthy person will be able to understand your point and articulate some sense of contrition.** Their reaction to this conversation will be yet another indication of whether they exhibit narcissist tendencies or not.

He's young.

Okay, let's get real honest here for a second. There are some interesting patterns in narcissism research that indicate a high concentration of narcissism in young and/or male leaders. After 34,653 face-to-face interviews, psychologist [Frederick Stinson](#) found that men tend to be more narcissistic than women during their lifespan. He also found that narcissism seems to peak during adolescence and then decline with age.

So, what does that mean for us? **It means that a young male leader is more likely to be a narcissist.** This statement isn't meant to universally label all young male leaders, but it is an important distinction because men still tend to predominantly lead the local church. This statistic and pattern alone may speak to why so many local church leaders are diagnosed or diagnosable narcissists. Frankly, we have a disproportionate amount of men leading in the local church and therefore a greater risk of the presence narcissistic leaders. The picture of an over revved, narcissistic young male leader who's trying to prove something isn't just a stereotype—in many churches, it's a reality.



Think you're following a narcissist? Here are some next steps.

If you think that you may be working with or following a narcissistic leader, here are a few things you can do:

- **Slow down.** Sure, you just reviewed some points that might make it feel as if the person you're following is a narcissist and maybe you feel you should run for the hills. But don't react just yet. We all have some egotistical or prideful tendencies, but it doesn't mean that everyone who exhibits a hint of pride or self-centeredness is a narcissist. Carefully consider and investigate the specific traits of a narcissist. Take your time, pray, consider. Don't overreact.

- **Observe your leader in a variety of settings.** Sometimes your leader acts a certain way when they're around the church staff but behave different with their family, friends, or with volunteers in the church. Getting a chance to see people in a variety of settings will help you see the truth about who they are more clearly. If these traits represent themselves in multiple environments and settings, then you may have more reason for concern.

- **Find a way to supply feedback.** We need to be clear with people who are narcissistic in their approach to life. Are you encouraging them to move towards a healthier approach to life and leadership? This point deserves more conversation than this blog post could ever provide, but [Matthew 18](#) is a good place to start. How can you confront someone who has clearly sinned against you and against the church with their narcissism? If you are in an appropriate

position to supply that feedback, then think carefully about how to frame that conversation. However, you also need to remember that a narcissist might not listen or respond to your feedback. At that point, different steps might need to be taken.

- **Realize that it might be time for you (or them) to leave.** Remember that there are healthy leaders out there who would love to have you on their team. I don't say that lightly, but you need to ask yourself, are you enabling a narcissistic leader to continue to serve in their position? Are you giving them a platform for their narcissism to grow? I'm not trying to blame you, but I am asking you to think about what role you are playing as you also try to lead from a healthy place. If a narcissistic leader leads within the local church, it usually ends in disaster. Over the years, I've sadly seen such leaders carelessly ride their churches into the ground. So, ask yourself, am I allowing them to continue in that role by validating their behavior as a follower and do I need to step out from under their leadership? Is there some other level of leadership in the church that I can bring my concerns to in an effort to ensure the health of my church?

What is your advice for other leaders who think they might be following a narcissistic leader? What aspects have I missed? Leave a comment [here](#).

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