

How to survive the 'extreme' narcissist and make your workday bearable

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An "extreme" narcissist is someone who has an inflated sense of their own importance, a deep need for excessive attention and admiration, and a lack of empathy for others. In the workplace, this manifests as someone who exaggerates their achievements, takes credit for others' work, needs constant adoration, is self-entitled and uses other people to further themselves. If you happen to work with one or, even worse, for one, it can be a waking nightmare.

Ironically, much of a narcissist's behaviour is driven by low self-esteem. That can be hard to believe given how they come across – full of noise and bluster – but the outward confidence belies deep-seated internal insecurities, a vulnerability to even the slightest criticism or perceived loss of face. In actuality, narcissism exists on a spectrum; all of us have some degree of self-absorption and self-interest. But when those characteristics veer toward behaviour that damages others is when narcissism becomes "extreme" and a problem. When that line is crossed, these people can make your work life miserable. So how does one deal with narcissists? More importantly, is leaving your only option? While it could eventually be a possible solution, here are some other ideas to try first to achieve a working relationship that is at least tolerable.

Don't waste time and energy trying to change them. Narcissists are who they are. Their inflated sense of importance means that they simply aren't open to others' perspectives. So focus your energy on modifying how you react to them. Don't let them push your buttons.

When they snipe, call them on it. Narcissists are known to give backhanded compliments. "I didn't expect you to pull off that presentation, congratulations." Or, "I wish I could be as straightforward as you, but I like to get along with others." Or sometimes, "Good of you to show up to the meeting," when you arrive a few minutes late. These are all examples of what is also referred to as sniping. So call them on it. Try "That sounded sarcastic, did you mean it that way?" It puts the narcissist on notice that you're not an easy victim and, just like bullies, they will often move on to targets that require less effort.

Assert ownership of your work. But be gracious. Let's say you are in a meeting when the narcissist takes credit for work that you have done. After she speaks, publicly thank her for referencing your work and give the group more specific detail about what you were trying to accomplish.

Keep your relationship professional. It's easy to get sucked into their seductive personalities, but narcissists are not your friends. Don't fall into the trap of sharing your vulnerabilities in moments of camaraderie. Because when it serves them, they'll be the first to use the information to take you down. Use their insecurities to your advantage. If you've got an initiative that you're seeking support for, present the idea in a way that suggests that they inspired you. Flattery feeds their need for admiration. Protect your own self-esteem. Do this by seeking out and building a supportive network. Chances are that others are also at the wrong end of a narcissist, so perhaps you can commiserate together. Limit the time you spend with them. Enough said.

Be alert for when narcissistic bullying crosses over into vindictiveness. Because the narcissist's ego is so fragile, sometimes the smallest slight can be the tipping point. A forgotten thank you, or a comment in passing, and suddenly you're enemy No. 1. When that happens, you may need to start distancing yourself. If it gets worse, start documenting interactions and saving correspondence.

Find your sense of humour. As difficult as it may be, see if you can force yourself to step back and observe the absurdity of their behaviour. Laughter can be a great coping mechanism.

Not all of these ideas will work in every situation. Test and adapt them for use with your co-workers and your boss. Remember that most narcissists don't stick around in a single job for very long. So if you can use these tips to make your workday more bearable, you just need to outlast them until they leave.