

**“Psychological character traits in business:  
Part 1: Antisocial Personality Disorder and  
Narcissism. by Dr Mark Granitto & Mr Graham  
Guest**

This article is the first of a three part series highlighting six psychological character traits in business. We will be examining two traits in each publication in this series.

**INTRODUCTION: What is ‘normal’ behaviour?**

To achieve publication parsimony, we will not be defining the characteristics of what constitutes a ‘normal’ person as this judgement will be left to the reader’s discretion. These publications will briefly examine six character traits that you will encounter in business. You may or may not consider those traits ‘normal’ depending on your particular frames of reference. The objective of the articles are to inform the reader so that they can reflect on their business acquaintances and working relationships.

The word ‘normal’ is a broad concept when describing a person’s character. In isolation, it really does not mean much as its own descriptor because there are different frames of reference for how each of us describe someone’s character or behaviours as being ‘normal’ or ‘not normal’. ‘Normal’ for the purposes of these publications will be described very simply as a common behavioural pattern exhibited by the majority. However, qualifications of this description vary between cultures, countries, business sectors and sometimes individual justifications as to their actions. Unless you hold qualifications in a relevant medical or psychological field, attesting to someone’s ‘normality’ can be difficult but you may develop reservations about a person’s character/behaviours based on observations and other available evidence which should prompt you to ask questions or at least, give you cause for concern.

**Antisocial personality disorder (“ASPD”):**

What is ASPD? Prior to defining ASPD, it would be helpful to firstly clarify the definition of a personality disorder. Many people have used the term ‘personality disorder’ in common every day language but what does it mean? A common meaning of a personality disorder is a pattern of thinking (usually longer-term), emotions and behaviours that make it challenging for a person to

function in every day life. Now that we understand the meaning of a personality disorder, we can proceed to understand the definition of ASPD.

Mackenzie, P. (2014) describes ASPD as, “A personality disorder that is characterized [sic] by antisocial behavior [sic] exhibiting pervasive disregard for and violation of the rights, feelings, and safety of others starting in childhood or early teenage years and continuing into adulthood”. Some of the available literature suggests that 1% of people in the general population have ASPD whilst Glenn, Johnson & Raine (2013) suggest that 2-3% of the general population have ASPD and more prevalent in males. Other studies suggest even higher rates of ASPD people in the general population. The causes of ASPD emanate from: (i) Genetics, (ii) Environmental factors (iii) Physical factors.

**ASPD in Organisations:**

It can be apprehensive and frightening when someone who exhibits ASPD becomes a Manager/Leader in organisations. Colman (2001) suggests that a corporate psychopath exhibits traits equivalent to ASPD such as:

- (i) Superficial charm;
- (ii) Pathological lying;
- (iii) Egocentricity;
- (iv) Lack of remorse;
- (v) Irresponsibility;
- (vi) Excessive arrogance;
- (vii) Impulsive;
- (viii) Reckless;
- (ix) Disregulated temper;
- (x) Callousness.

At this point, you may be thinking about some of your past or present colleagues or clients displaying these traits and perhaps, the term criminal comes to mind also. However, not all ASPD people are criminals but certainly, there is evidence that some criminals have ASPD. Black and Gunter et al (2010) studied ASPD in incarcerated offenders and out of a random sample of 320, ASPD was prevalent in 113 (35.3%) subjects.

Corporate Psychopaths tend to create confusion when they are at risk of being detected. They tend to create chaos and manipulate events. According to Guest (2017), Corporate Psychopaths have perfected their craft and should be avoided. “They are brilliant manipulators”, says Guest, “You should not take them on unless you have support and keep plenty of notes and documents.” They will charm and manipulate their superiors and peers and; abuse their sub-ordinates.

## **What do I do if I work with a Corporate Psychopath? :**

There is absolutely no question that every employee or every service provider will at some point, encounter someone with APSD but the question is, what precautions can you take? The answer is not that simple but one can be sure that taking on someone with APSD will only lead to 'one winner'. As a service provider (e.g. Accountant, Lawyer or Banker), you could very easily terminate the relationship in the most unassuming way. Increasing your fees indiscriminately is not advisable as it would only create conflict; rather more diplomatic reasons are advisable. As an employee, it is probably best to keep detailed records of any mistreatment you experience, look for another job (which is not always easy) and at all costs, seek a transfer and/or avoid disagreeing with the subject.

## **Narcissism or Narcissistic Personality Disorder:**

The term "Narcissism" has its origins in Greek mythology. Narcissus, a male, was the son of 'Cepheissus' who broke the heart of 'Echo' (mountain nymph) and nothing remained of her but an echo of her sound. 'Nemesis', the goddess of revenge wanted to punish 'Narcissus' and lured him to a pool where Narcissus saw his image and fell in love it and, committed suicide because he could not receive the love of his own reflection.

Narcissism ("NPD") is a personality disorder according to Otto Kernberg and Heinz Kohut. A very substantive description of Narcissism that is worthy of mention, is provided by Rosenthal and Pittinsky (2006). Rosenthal and Pittinsky citing Kernberg (1967, 1989), described "narcissistic individuals that presented an unusual degree of self-reference in their interactions, a seeming contradiction between an inflated self-concept and inordinate need for tribute from others, shallow emotional lives, envy, vacillating extremes of idealization [sic] and devaluation of others, exploitativeness, a charming and engaging presence that conceals an underlying coldness and ruthlessness, and a lack of empathy. Narcissists' haughty and grandiose behaviors [sic] were interpreted to be defenses against 'oral rage', a pathological process in psychosexual development and an expression of vengeful feelings toward either coldly indifferent or aggressively rejecting parents". The substantive description provided by Kernberg is overwhelmingly informative and he adds that it also stems from childhood to adulthood (as does ASPD). According to Kernberg, pathological Narcissists

always seek recognition from 'parental substitutes' to save their own shortcomings. The American Psychiatric Association ("APA") suggest that a narcissistic individual must show 'pervasive patterns of grandiosity' with a need of admiration and lack of empathy. According to the APA (2000), the criteria for narcissism are:

- (i) Grandiose sense of self-importance;
- (ii) Preoccupation with fantasies of unlimited success or power;
- (iii) Belief in "special" or unique status (including fixation on associating with high-status people or institutions);
- (iv) Requirement for excessive admiration;
- (v) Unreasonable sense and expectations of entitlement;
- (vi) Interpersonal exploitativeness;
- (vii) Lack of empathy;
- (viii) Envy;
- (ix) Arrogant behaviors [sic] or attitudes.

## **Narcissism in Organisations:**

Dysfunctional Leaders/Managers will no doubt display narcissistic traits. Rosenthal and Pittinsky state that, "what truly ties them (Narcissists) together is that their leadership is driven by their own personal egotistical needs for power and admiration (Kets de Vries & Miller, 1997), rather than by an empathetic concern for the constituents they lead" (Conger, 1997).

Narcissistic Leaders/Managers need to be grandiose and if that is threatened, they will become angry and hostile; likely to insult and offend and in the extreme, become violent. If you have clients that are wanting to build 50 medical centres in one year throughout the country, you may well have the first signs of a narcissistic client but this trait alone should not be sufficient to convince yourself. Alternatively, the client may just simply be insane. Empathy is a particular trait that a narcissistic person does **not** have and with this initial measure, you may commence looking for further traits. However, from the perspective of some and whether a Leader or client is a narcissistic person is irrelevant. For as long as they produce income for the service provider or organisation, everything else takes second place. Caution though, law suits and corporate failures can be the result and determining the longer-term effects of Narcissistic clients/Leaders/Managers demands reflection.

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