

When leaders are narcissists: Psychoanalyst Michael Maccoby

interview by [David Heim](#) in the [April 27, 2016](#) issue

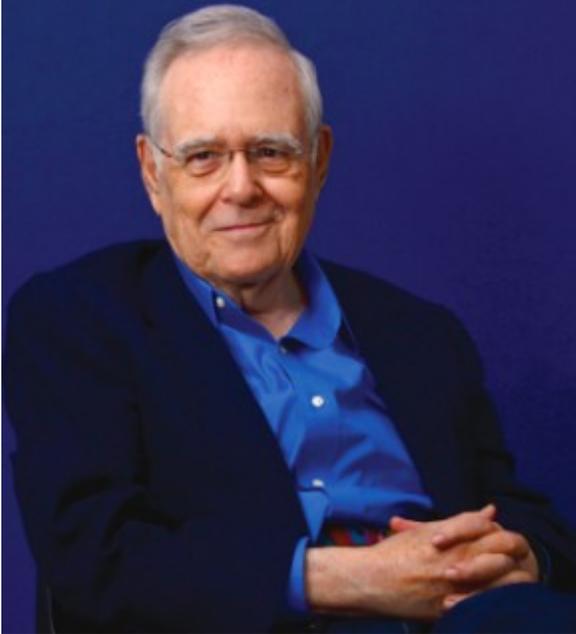


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*Michael Maccoby, a psychoanalyst and president of the Maccoby Group in Washington, D.C., has advised leaders in businesses, governments, unions, and nonprofit organizations. He directed Harvard University's Program on Technology, Public Policy, and Human Development and taught leadership at Oxford University's Saïd Business School. His books include Narcissistic Leaders, The Leaders We Need, and Strategic Intelligence: Conceptual Tools for Leading Change.*

**Is it reasonable to judge Donald Trump to be a narcissistic personality? If so, what are the signals?**

Yes, and in the introduction to his book *Think Like a Billionaire*, he cites my description of a "productive narcissist" and says it describes him. He likes the part of the description that calls narcissists visionary. But he shows the negative side of grandiosity in putting down others while being himself thin skinned, seeing enemies everywhere, and seeing himself as changing the world.

**Trump seems adept at scapegoating or blaming others. Is that a feature of a narcissistic leader?**

Yes. It's never his fault.

### **What is the productive side of a narcissistic leader?**

The narcissist has tremendous energy and self-confidence and can be inspiring. St. Augustine was a narcissist. Freud saw himself as one. Franklin Roosevelt, Ronald Reagan, and Barack Obama show evidence of a narcissistic personality. Whether narcissists are creative or destructive depends on their philosophy.

### **What are the chief negatives? How are narcissistic leaders likely to crash and burn?**

By losing touch with reality, by becoming so grandiose that they think they can do anything—like Napoleon in Russia, or Hitler. By not listening to others—Napoleon was successful when he listened to Talleyrand, his minister of foreign policy.

Successful narcissists have collaborators who keep them somewhat grounded. Steve Jobs failed at Apple until he brought in Tim Cook and Jony Ive to work on operations and design.

### **What advice would you give to someone working for a narcissist? How do you manage, or cope, or contain such a leader?**

It depends on whether the person's philosophy is creative and you think it's worthwhile working for this person. If you do, keep in mind that it's all about him or her, and they'll only want you as long as you add something they think they need. To keep your self-esteem, invest it somewhere else—in an avocation, or volunteering, or family.

### **At what point does narcissism become a pathology, not just a character trait?**

When a person becomes so grandiose, paranoid, or living in unreality that he or she can't function. That's the psychopathology. However, the moral pathology emerges in practicing a philosophy of domination and destruction.

### **Is domination and destruction the typical moral pathology that arises in such cases?**

Yes. We see it in Julius Caesar, Napoleon, Hitler, and Mao.

**How was Augustine a narcissist? He was fascinated by himself, but he also tried to submit himself to God. Can we call him a healthy narcissist?**

I wouldn't say healthy. I'd call him a narcissist who recognized the negatives in himself and developed a faith and philosophy that made him a creative narcissist. I think Obama is a creative narcissist who turns to his faith to try to keep from grandiosity.

**Narcissists are sometimes said to have a fragile sense of self—that's why they constantly need to be reaffirmed. Is that how you would describe it?**

No, that account can describe a dependent person. Narcissists at an early age do not identify with their parents and struggle to develop a sense of self. Rather than having a strong superego, they create an ego ideal that can be extremely grandiose. They struggle to live up to the ideal and seek reassurance and praise.

**Is there anything that can really change a narcissist? Is such a person ever disciplined by reality or humbled so that they change?**

They can develop a better ego ideal, as Augustine did, and their colleagues (or a spouse) can help them stay in reality. Having the ideal be someone like Jesus can help a narcissist practice humility and serve others. However, too much praise can act like a drug, especially for a narcissist like Trump with a grandiose philosophy.