

Physician Leader, Humble Thyself: Balancing Narcissism and Humility in Healthcare Leadership

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Abstract: Data on expert leadership have shown numerous benefits, including enhanced job satisfaction, productivity, and job retention. Similarly, many of the top hospitals in the United States are physician led; however, the training of a successful physician and that of a successful healthcare administrator often are significantly different. Here, we specifically discuss the balance of narcissism and humility in leadership as it pertains to physicians transitioning from clinical careers to healthcare administrative roles.

Key Words: expert leadership, humility, narcissism, physician leadership

Jason Kidd was a magician with a basketball in his hands. Widely considered to be one of the greatest point guards of all time, Kidd's resume is impressive: 10-time National Basketball Association (NBA) All Star, 9-time NBA All-Defensive player, 6-time All-NBA Selection, 2011 NBA Champion with the Dallas Mavericks, second all-time in the NBA for assists and steals. As an NBA coach, however, success has been harder to find. Immediately after his playing career, Kidd's lone season with the Brooklyn Nets was defined by clashes with management and player criticisms that he was "overly aggressive and harsh."¹

In his seventh season as an NBA head coach, Kidd found himself across the court in the 2022 Western Conference Finals from another former, albeit not as decorated, NBA player turned coach in Golden State Warriors head coach Steve Kerr. Although Kerr did win championships as a player with Coach Phil Jackson's Chicago Bulls, he was not the team's star player. That role, of course, belonged to NBA all-time great Michael Jordan. Even though Kerr's role as an outstanding 3-point shooter certainly helped his team, it was Jordan whose presence propelled the

Bulls to championships. In fact, during the two seasons in which Jordan stepped away to pursue a baseball career, the Bulls failed to reach the NBA Finals. As a coach, however, it is Kerr who is the star. Kerr's Warriors played in five straight NBA finals from 2015 to 2019 and have won a total of four NBA Championships, including the 2022 season, in which his Warriors defeated Kidd's Mavericks in the conference finals. Kidd, to the contrary, is still chasing his first championship as a head coach. Kidd isn't alone, however. In the 70-year history of the NBA, only eight total championships have been won by coaches who were Hall of Fame Players.²

So, why is it so hard for former superstar players to ascend to the top as coaches, whereas it is seemingly easier for former role players like sharpshooter Steve Kerr or little-used defensive specialist Phil Jackson? In Kerr's assessment, it is "harder for superstar players to really understand how hard the game is for the lesser players." In pursuit of excellence as a coach, Jason Kidd "got over himself."¹ Can physician leaders do the same?

Physicians as Leaders

There is ample evidence for the success of physicians as health system leaders. It makes sense that the "stars" of patient care naturally would be adept at leading hospitals. Per the 2016 *U.S. News and World Report* rankings, the chief executive officers (CEOs) of the nation's top two hospitals—Mayo Clinic and Cleveland Clinic—are physicians. Both institutions have been physician led for the entirety of their existence. Furthermore, hospital quality scores are roughly 25% higher in physician-led hospitals than in manager-run hospitals. In the 2019 *U.S. News and World Report*

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Key Points

- Expert leadership is associated with many positive benefits in the workplace, including job satisfaction, productivity, and job retention.
- Many of the top hospitals in the United States are physician led, emphasizing the need for physician leaders in health care.
- The countereffect of humility can serve as a foil to the more toxic effects of leader narcissism and could be what is needed to help physicians maximize their potential as healthcare leaders.

“Best Hospitals” list, higher ranked hospitals were more frequently managed by physician executives, and the top six were all physician led.³

That physicians make successful hospital CEOs is consistent with findings in other industries. Sports organizations such as the NBA, the National Football League, the National Hockey League, Formula One race teams, and Major League Baseball showcase former players turned successful coaches. In academia, scholarly leaders at major universities enhance the research produced at their institutions and often become successful department chairs. Although research into the notion of expert leadership is relatively new, early findings have shown many positive effects. Job satisfaction, productivity, and job retention increase when employees are led by those with expertise in the core activity of the business. In fact, in the United States, having a technically competent boss was more important to job satisfaction than salary. When employees stayed in a job but got a new and more technically competent boss, their job satisfaction rose.⁴ Clearly, expert leadership is valuable, but how do we transition these players in the field to be successful leaders in the field?

There are barriers in transitioning physicians from their role as experts in patient care to becoming leaders of people. Medical education itself may even be a barrier. Physicians-in-training often are in subordinate positions for extended periods of time in a highly hierarchical system. They also are extensively evaluated, with training slots and board certification often based on individual, not team-based, performance.⁵ Rather than being taught to be collaborative, physicians are more traditionally trained in “command and control” practice models and see themselves as “heroic lone healers.”⁶ As such, physician leadership development generally occurs outside traditional medical training and often is focused on unlearning some of these traits that conspire against successful leadership. Much like Jason Kidd, successful physician leaders must learn to get over themselves.¹

Leader Narcissism

Steve Jobs is widely recognized as one of the most successful CEOs of all time. He also is thought to be a shining example of expert leadership, having built Apple from the ground up in his garage with his business partner Steve Wozniak. Steve Jobs also was seen as having a high level of narcissism. He was reportedly preoccupied with his own brilliance; prone to exploitation and bullying; and was controlling, manipulative, and unempathetic.⁷ Although expertise is certainly a key ingredient in the recipe of effective leadership, the fine line between expert and narcissist is one that must be walked delicately.

Narcissists are generally attracted to and tend to emerge in leadership roles. This has resulted in narcissism receiving a good deal of attention from both the managerial and psychological perspectives. Named for the mythological Greek hunter Narcissus, who became so infatuated with his own reflection in the water that he eventually drowned, narcissism is defined as “a complex of personality traits and processes that involves a grandiose

yet fragile sense of self as well as a preoccupation with success and the demands for admiration.”⁸ The characteristics of narcissists include “excessively self-centered perspective, self-absorption, extreme confidence or superiority, exploitativeness/entitlement, and a strong desire to lead.”⁹

Even though narcissistic traits may sound entirely negative (and there are indeed negative aspects of narcissistic leadership), it is a double-edged sword, with both maladaptive and adaptive aspects. Although maladaptive narcissism refers to one’s need to be viewed as better than others and is associated with aggressive behavior, adaptive narcissism is associated with charisma and the likelihood of espousing the kind of bold vision that organizations need to effect palpable change. Furthermore, narcissists are generally confident, bold, and fiercely driven to succeed, all of which are traits that can yield positive results and more productive leaders.¹⁰

One characteristic that may temper the ill effects of narcissism and lead to more adaptive narcissism and effects is humility because it acts as a foil to its toxic aspects such that the more constructive aspects can manifest. Although narcissism and humility may seem paradoxical, the two can exist harmoniously to enhance the effectiveness of a leader. Research has shown that narcissism was a positive predictor of leader effectiveness, follower job engagement, and subjective and objective follower job performance only when the leader also displayed higher levels of humility.⁹ Although effective leaders must have a strong sense of self, they must maintain humility to be successful. Furthermore, management research has described how narcissists actually can be trained to be humbler, accept feedback, acknowledge others, and laugh at themselves.¹¹ Humility seems to prevent derailment and enhance effectiveness in leaders by tempering the most toxic aspects of narcissism so that the more positive aspects can be realized.⁹

Problems can develop when only one side of this paradox is emphasized; a leader who is fully humble may not be seen as strong enough to be a leader, whereas a pure narcissist may not be productive as a result of being too self-absorbed. Indeed, Steve Jobs was seen as having been far more successful in his second stint as Apple CEO, himself describing his firing as “awful tasting medicine that the patient needed.” Although still viewed as narcissistic, his second leadership stint was described as more tempered, more open to the ideas of others, more appreciative, and more counterbalanced with humility. It was his second stint as CEO during which Apple became the most valuable company in the world.⁹

The Solution: The Humble Physician Executive

The need for physician leaders, as evidenced by the success of hospital systems led by physicians,³ has sparked an interest in formal training. Historically, physicians train in a hierarchical system that promotes autonomy in patient care. By focusing on being the sole care provider, physicians often may prefer to delegate other roles in the health system. Healthcare administrators, who often lack clinical experience but are charged with making systems-based

decisions, find themselves in a role in which collaboration and compromise can lie in direct conflict with individual autonomy. As frontline providers, physicians' expertise makes them ideally suited to take on healthcare leadership roles. It is this very expertise and training that often poses the biggest challenge in becoming a successful health system leader. Autonomy is not always synonymous with high quality, and physician leaders may be disinclined to collaborate in a modern healthcare environment.¹²

Physician training emphasizes individual achievement over that of the institution itself. Most physician leadership training programs, however, take the physician away from the hospital or medical school to develop leadership qualities, physically separating physicians from their normal environment. At the Cleveland Clinic, potential physician leaders are offered a 10-day offsite leadership training course covering such topics as emotional intelligence and team building.³ Leadership fellowship programs now partner with business schools and schools of health professions, bringing physicians out of the hospital and into an entirely new environment, to teach not only the business of health care but also the personal and leadership skills needed to thrive as a healthcare executive.¹³

A 2022 article promoting anesthesiologists as health system leaders underscores the value of humility in leadership.³ Anesthesiologists are uniquely positioned to rise in the leadership ranks. Operating rooms are the most cost intensive and highest revenue-generating areas of a hospital. Ensuring efficiency, maximizing productivity, and providing value-based care often fall to anesthesia operating room managers. Although the traits of being data analytic, precise, and highly observant are listed as contributing to success in this role, it is the anesthesiologist's traits of collaboration, compromise, and active listening that underscore humility as being the "secret sauce" of effective physician leadership.³

Although their inner narcissist pushes physician leaders to win, it is humility that helps them understand that leadership is about both sides winning. Their narcissistic tendencies push physician leaders to be the hero, but their humility drives them to create alignment so that those around them succeed. Their narcissistic tendencies push physician leaders to command and control, whereas their humility allows them to see themselves as servant leaders who deemphasize self to prioritize others. Narcissism tends to make physician leaders focus on their own success, whereas their humility allows them to, like Jason Kidd, get over themselves.

Conclusions

To most people, narcissism carries a heavily negative connotation. It does have its benefits, however, and physician leaders ought not abandon that which helped them become successful

physicians. A physician's training requires an incredible amount of sacrifice, hard work, and relentless determination. These characteristics also enable physicians to continue to learn as they progress through their careers, relentlessly pursuing excellence in patient care through a tireless quest for perfection. It is these traits that give physicians the potential for great leadership. It is the delicate balance of humility, however, that allows physicians to truly develop into the healthcare leaders our system so desperately needs. When describing his transition from former star player to coach, Jason Kidd reminds us, "You can't say, 'this is the way I would do it,' because everybody is different. My job is to help everyone recognize their strengths and put them in a position to be successful."¹ Narcissism in balance with humility—that may be the true secret ingredient we are missing.

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