

An analysis of psychometric testing for the COO role

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Abstract

The later sections of the paper will note various test methodologies designed to isolate individuals with positive narcissistic traits whilst filtering out those who exhibit excessive psychopathy or Machiavellianism (Sutton, 2019). Additionally, testing of the Light Triad virtues will be deployed to identify individuals with beneficial personality traits that will offset the negative aspects of the narcissistic tendencies that that individual exhibits. Finally, in finding the right balance of risk-taking, charisma and politics with tendencies to exhibit ethical behaviour and concern for not only the individual's progression but that of their staff, it will be possible to test for personality traits (McKenna, 2020) that will align well with the role of a Chief Operating Officer (COO) in a growth role and hence with entrepreneurial skill sets.

The Dark Triad of Personality Traits

Paulus and Williams (2002) defined three “offensive, yet non-pathological” personality types demonstrated to be prominent in the literature. Designating what the authors termed the “Dark Triad” as a combination of one

or more Machiavellianism, subclinical narcissism, and subclinical psychopathy allowed developing a set of personality traits that may be measured separately. Still, it exhibited “overlapping but distinct constructs”. These personality types were said to be within the normal functioning range while being socially adverse. The definition of these personality types has led to other researchers investigating the correlation between these adverse personality types and entrepreneurial traits (Hmieleski & Lerner, 2016; Tucker et al., 2016; Do & Dadvari, 2017; Wu et al., 2019).

Furnham et al. (2013) conducted a review of the original research by Paulus and Williams (2002) and note that many of the subsequent research papers on this topic suffer through ill definitions as the various aspects of the triad empirically overlap in the range of measured and expressed personality features. Additionally, it is noted that differences in clinical and subclinical conceptions of these traits vary between researchers. The creation of the Dark Triad builds upon the work of Kowalski (2001), who created an analysis of several adverse forms of interpersonal behaviour, including definitions of individuals who are annoying, aversive and self-presentation, are offensive, gossipy, aggressive and generally engage in negative forms of social interaction (Jonason et al., 2015).

The Dark Triad is negatively correlated against life satisfaction and growth orientated outcomes (Abolghasemi et al., 2015). However, as Bonebright et al. (2000) earlier noted, the various traits associated with the Dark Triad are also correlated in various classes of workaholic. The distinction between work-life conflict and life satisfaction was demonstrated to result in different outcomes depending on whether the workaholic individual was enthusiastic or non-enthusiastic in their role and between the separate classes of “work enthusiasts, relaxed workers, unengaged workers, and disenchanting workers”.

Wu et al. (2019) demonstrate that sustainable entrepreneurial orientation (SEO) can negatively correlate to dark triad traits. Of note, however, is that this is not equal between

each of the personality types in the triad. For example, whereas psychopathy and Machiavellianism negatively impact the entrepreneurial results, narcissism positively impacted the ability of the subjects tested to deliver business results, to maintain a high level of psychological resilience and that where the subject exhibits high levels of resilient, that the other negative aspects of the dark triad are moderated. The results reported by Wu et al. (2019) further support this conclusion with individuals who are enthusiastic about their work also exhibiting heartiness, resourcefulness and that entrepreneurs can be trained or guided to aid in the promotion of effective work strategies.

Kraus et al. (2020) conducted a systematic literature review of the topic, noting that the study of narcissistic tendencies dominates the research. The researchers come to a similar conclusion to Wu et al. (2019), noting that Machiavellianism and psychopathy significantly correlate with reorganisations and exploitations amongst workers. In contrast, some forms of narcissism are demonstrated to strongly correlate with entrepreneurial activity, orientation and leadership and positive forms of risk-taking. As a result, individuals in the triad often strive to achieve wealth, power and prestige (Lee & Ashton, 2005).

Narcissism

The American Psychiatric Association (1980) has incorporated narcissism as a disorder that has been widely studied for many decades. Narcissism is defined as a trait exhibited by an ordinary person characterised by the expression of dominant tendencies, exhibitionism and a propensity to seek to exploit others. Raskin and Terry (1988) argue that individuals exhibiting narcissistic tendencies feel superior and entitled. The authors analysed the validity of the (NPI) Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Hall, 1979) and concluded that the measurement scale was accurate across the majority of individuals being tested. The individuals tested also exhibited more positive traits, including the ability to exert authority and self-sufficiency. However, these need to be balanced against the traits of vanity and the propensity to exploit others if unchecked.

Raskin and Novacek (1989) further “developed a Minnesota Multiphase Personality Inventory (MMPI) description of the narcissistic personality” that is useful in extending the analysis of narcissistic traits. Cain et al. (2008) and Pincus et al. (2009) each provide further independent support of the NPI and MMPI test methodologies and demonstrate that these are

good indicators of the subclinical version of the DSM-defined personality Dark Triad disorder regarding narcissism. Cain, Pincus and Ansel (2008) have sought to differentiate narcissistic grandiosity and narcissistic vulnerability in what Back et al. (2013) reference as the light and dark side of narcissism. In this, there is a distinction between narcissistic forms of admiration against those of rivalries. Exhibiting narcissistic admiration, engage in activities that exhibit their uniqueness, often creating grandiose fantasies whilst exhibiting charming comportment. This behaviour can aid in the development of self-confidence through a dominant and expressive presence.

By pursuing paths to superiority, individuals exhibiting narcissistic rivalry tendencies seek superiority over others at all costs, including through activities that devalue and undermine other individuals (Leckelt, Kufner, Nestler, & Back, 2015). Behaviour of this form can be contentious and arrogant. In the long-term, narcissistic rivalry leads to a high correlation towards an adverse reaction from social groups. Consequently, the personality trait of narcissism needs to be further analysed to ensure that the light side and not the dark side of the trait is expressed when seeking entrepreneurial managers and leaders.

The Light and the Dark

An alternative to the dark triad has been promoted by Kaufman et al. (2019). As an alternative referenced as the Light Triad, the researchers propose three alternative and polarised aspects of personality that balance the dark triad of adverse personality types. A combination of Kantianism, Faith in Humanity and Humanism is said to make up beneficent personality traits. Whilst these traits are not directly associated with business success, as are some in the dark triad (especially narcissistic personality type), each of these may be seen to partially balance some of the negative aspects of darker personalities.

Kantianism

Kaufman et al. (2019) define this aspect of their alternative personality triad as one where individuals are treated as an end unto themselves. Whilst this Light Triad alternative displays a form of personality type that we would wish to have in specific industries, it implies that the leadership role being fulfilled by an individual exhibiting these tendencies would not put the

company before the employee. Unfortunately, while this seems beneficial to those outside of the company and employees, it is not a means to create growth within companies. Although some researchers (Stevens, 2010) have promoted this as an alternative to the hypercompetitive nature of many industries, competition remains an integral part of entrepreneurship (Kirzner, 2015).

As noted above, narcissistic individuals can be of a lighter form that, when blended with traits such as having innate respect for the rights of other individuals, may lead to more effective leadership. The distinction between Machiavellianism and psychopathy as against that of Kantianism express opposed positions. For instance, the Machiavellian and the psychopath are willing to use others in achieving a goal. The consequence of this is that only a leader exhibiting narcissistic tendencies would possibly exhibit Kantian values.

Humanism

Those who express humanism as a personality trait demonstrate that they value the dignity and worth of other individuals with whom they have dealings (Kaufman et al., 2019). Hicks and Waddock (2016) investigate the role of ethical business leaders and note that corporate leaders who value the dignity and worth of their employees are more likely to retain staff members. Mea and Sims (2019) provide an argument for a similar “human dignity” stance, an ethical framework that allows leaders to gain and create corporate value over the long term. As with Kantianism, humanism can coexist with some forms of light narcissism but stands in stark opposition to both Psychopathy and Machiavellianism.

Faith in Humanity

This personality trait is based on a deep belief in the fundamental goodness of other humans (Kaufman et al., 2019). Leaders exhibiting a deep faith in humanity can engage in leader-follower strategies that build trust and allow for the creation of a more dynamic and creative workplace. Whilst there is a possibility that a leader exhibiting light narcissism may maintain a deep faith in humanity, this aspect of the Light Triad would lead both the individual exhibiting Psychopathy and Machiavellian traits to exploit and undermine their employees. Individuals who exhibit narcissistic tendencies but also believe in their own ability to make others better and enhance corporate outcomes would be able to use a deep faith in humanity in both satisfying their narcissistic tendencies whilst building credibility

and developing their own self-image in a way that also promotes the interests of the corporation.

A Blend of Light and Dark

The Light Triad virtues provide a balance that offsets some of the negative aspects of grandiose narcissism. For example, Hoffman et al. (2013) demonstrate that their follower groups perceive more openly narcissistic leaders as “ineffective and unethical”. A narcissistic leader who has sufficient self-confidence and integrity would understand how their follower group perceives them. Consequently, it becomes essential for the grandiose narcissistic leader to gain feedback on their behaviour. Rather than the uncontrolled organisational feedback to destructive narcissistic behaviour that develops as a counterpoint within organisations (Godkin & Allcorn, 2011), a structured process could be put in place that allows the leader to both keep their more destructive tendencies at bay and to focus on a positive outcome that builds the company while simultaneously allowing the individual to preen their narcissistic tendencies.

Sedikide and Campbell (2017) present an energy clash model of the interactions between the narcissistic leader and the pushback throughout the organisation where poor leadership tendencies are exhibited. As these researchers note, the clash of narcissistic energy against the more stayed tendencies of the organisation, when managed correctly, can “may contribute to organisational innovation and evolution” (Sedikide & Campbell, 2017, p. 400).

Consequently, finding an individual who exhibits both aspects of narcissism and Light Triad virtues may lead to scenarios that provide for healthy conflict and manageable levels of tension that aid in the growth and development within the firm.

Narcissistic tendencies are exhibited across a continuum (Campbell & Miller, 2011; Foster & Campbell, 2007) but in general exhibit positivity, optimism (Sedikide & Campbell, 2017) and visionary communication skills (Galvin, Waldman, & Balthazard, 2010). To this end, the organisation should seek an individual exhibiting narcissistic qualities that are simultaneously balanced by some of the aspects of the Light Triad. The understanding and concern for both the company and employees exhibited as aspects of the Light Triad connect to mitigate some of the more negative aspects of narcissistic behaviour in the leader.

Simultaneously, the perturbation created through the organisation as the leader starts to implement decisions can lead to a level of conflict that simultaneously develops dynamism and growth within the firm (Sedikide & Campbell, 2017). These conflicts need to be maintained within suitable levels such that the organisation as a whole is strengthened and simultaneously the leader is not expelled or forced out. While narcissistic tendencies are often associated with formidable political skills (Thompson, Campbell & Glasø, 2020; O'Reilly & Pfeffer, 2021), these need to be directed to benefit the organisation and not merely the individual as a leader. Consequently, individuals who exhibit other aspects of the Dark Triad than merely narcissism need to be carefully weeded out of the recruiting process as the more manipulative aspects of Machiavellianism and the lack of concern for other individuals in psychopathy exasperate the negative aspects of narcissism and oppose the Light Triad virtues.

Padilla, Hogan and Kaiser (2007) provide evidence that the wrong environment promotes the development of Dark Triangle personality traits that could lead to the collapse of corporate cultures. In this scenario, the unchecked Machiavellian objectives of self-interested leaders, when coupled with susceptible follower groups in the organisation, create a negative feedback loop resulting in an unproductive environment. Therefore, hiring a leader who exhibits these traits for the position would lead to losses in the company. For this reason, it is essential to ensure that the executive level positions that are going to provide leadership for the firm are not filled by individuals who exhibit psychopathy or Machiavellianism as a strong trait. Further, any narcissistic personality traits should be balanced by more positive and beneficial traits, and it will be essential to test for these in the hiring process.

Testing to Ensure the Right Blend and Balance of Personality Type

The assertions of Allport (1937) that note that the distinction between personality types that are “normal” and those that are “abnormal” may be challenging remains true even now.

Lebreton, Binning and Adorno (2006) contrast the terms subclinical and clinical by differentiating those examples who are under clinical care or are involved in forensic activities as being clinical from those individuals who are subclinical that exist in the broader range of individuals in the general community. Whilst the hiring process would necessarily reject any individual exhibiting behaviour in the clinical range, Ray and Ray (1982)

demonstrate that whilst clinical definitions reject the milder versions of traits such as those in the Dark Triad, there will be individuals within the community that exhibit extreme behaviour but have not been diagnosed at present.

Those being examined for psychopathy generally only receive clinical definitions under the DSM-IV-TR in instances where a result of 30 or greater is returned on the Psychopathy Check List (Hare, 1991). The validation of high levels of psychopathy is noted to correlate with deficient levels of conscientiousness or agreeableness (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1985).

Narcissism

The primary measurement of subclinical narcissism remains the 40 item NPI initially developed by Raskin and Hall (1979). More recent test methodologies have been developed by Cain et al. (2008) and Pincus et al. (2009), but these remain different from the complete process in the SR3. These test methodologies focus on subclinical narcissism and differ significantly from the diagnostic processes used in testing (NPD) narcissistic personality disorder. Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) was derived using the DSM-III criteria for Narcissistic Personality Disorder but is not intended to validate clinical cases.

When using this test, it is essential to remember that the NPI is strongly correlated with high levels of self-esteem. Consequently, this beneficial trait may produce high false positives when measuring otherwise healthy individuals (Ackerman et al., 2010). Consequently, a hierarchical model that investigates both testing for narcissistic tendencies through the deployment of the NPI and subsequent testing for effective leadership, high self-esteem and other positive outcomes should be integrated to ensure that the candidate is expressing positive values and where levels of narcissism are demonstrated, that these will be able to be beneficially exploited by the organisation to ensure a manageable level of chaos that delivers growth whilst not being overly challenging.

The NPI has been demonstrated to exhibit good construct validity (van der Linden & Rosenthal, 2016). However, due to the correlations with Eysenck Personality Questionnaire Psychoticism and Extraversion scales (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1985) and the measurements of positive traits, individuals testing high on the narcissism scale should be further tested using the (PES)Psychological Entitlement Scale (Pryor, Miller & Gaughan, 2008) to validate

whether the levels of narcissism fall within the more positive aspects of the trade noted previously in the paper.

Joint Measurement Testing Processes

In hiring for executive positions, the cost-benefit analysis of hiring a high worth individual that causes problems for the corporation need to be considered. While the Dirty Dozen (Jonason & Webster, 2010) demonstrates some positive benefits at a lower cost and using a simplified procedure, researchers such as Miller & Lynam (2012) have noted problems and have criticised this approach. On the other hand, the Short Dark Triad (SD3) measure has been used successfully by Giammarco et al. (2012). Still, given the value of testing for an executive that will determine the financial success of the organisation, a complete test would be warranted.

Additionally, integrating the Five-Factor Model or Big Five test will better measure other personality dimensions such as extraversion, agreeableness, openness to experience, conscientiousness, and neuroticism (Costa & McCrae, 1991). The integration of both Dark Triad and Big Five personality traits will increase the chances of finding potential executives who are selfish, stubborn, autocratic and demanding and separating them from individuals who are expressive, dutiful and think strategically (Miller et al., 2010). The goal is to find an individual who does not exhibit toxic leadership (Babiak, 1995) that also exhibits the ability to deploy soft manipulation tactics used by the narcissist in a balanced fashion to create the right level of creative disequilibrium throughout the organisation.

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