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Why so many bad bosses still rise to the top

Narcissism. Overconfidence. Low EQ. Why do we persist in selecting for leadership traits that hamper organizational progress—and leave the right potential leaders in the wrong roles?

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Hot air rises—and so, unfortunately, do many of the aspiring leaders who spout it. Why do we continue to mistake confidence for competence, and what should we be doing differently?

In this episode of *McKinsey Talks Talent*, Dr. Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic, author of *Why Do So Many Incompetent Men Become Leaders?: (And How to Fix It)* (Harvard Business Review Press, March 2019, joins McKinsey talent leaders Bryan Hancock and Brooke Weddle, as well as global editorial director Lucia Rahilly, to discuss why the traits that propel us to the top seem to diverge so widely from those that make us great leaders—as well as how to choose stronger, more successful, and more diverse candidates for leadership roles.

The conversation has been edited for clarity and length.

How do leaders rise?

Lucia Rahilly: It's with both great glee and a genuinely heavy heart that we begin our topic for today and talk about Tomas's research on why so many incompetent men rise to leadership positions. It's a serious and, in some cases, devastating issue. What prompted you to pursue this particular line of research?

Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic: I was interested in knowing the truth. What is it that propels some people to leadership roles? Why are some people effective or ineffective when they get to those roles? Gender was actually a peripheral variable.

Our research was focused on abilities, competencies, interests, and personalities, but of course, we collected data on age, gender, and socioeconomic status. We found a remarkable gap whereby gender was one of the strongest predictors of why people reach leadership roles through nomination, selection, or election.

We also saw the effect of gender on predicting performance once they got to occupy those positions. We saw that we didn't select leaders on the basis of talent, merit, or potential. That's the main conclusion of the research.

Lucia Rahilly: Lest we lose the majority of our male audience, let us be clear: men also suffer the consequences of bad leadership. The stakes are high for all of us in hiring and cultivating good leaders. This isn't just a female issue or an identity politics issue, correct?

Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic: It doesn't really matter whether the person in charge identifies as male or female. The important thing is that when they are competent, we all benefit. We are more productive, more engaged, and less likely to engage in antisocial behavior. Fundamentally, competent men should relish the transition to a meritocratic system, whereby people achieve leadership roles based on their talent and potential, because there are many competent men who are, ironically or paradoxically, overlooked for leadership roles.

This is precisely because they have some of the qualities—empathy, self-awareness, integrity, and humility—that ultimately make them better leaders but don't really make them leaders to begin with. If you succeed at playing within the current rules of the game, you're going to get further, but then you're going to make things worse. And if you don't, you might never be selected. This is the interesting conundrum that we should be addressing when we talk about things like gender diversity.

Empathy and gender

Bryan Hancock: One of the interesting pieces of research in your book is that women, on the whole, have a similar IQ to men but have higher EQs [emotional intelligence], although the difference in EQ between men and women is no more than 15 percent. While women's tendency to have higher EQs can help explain why there are fewer women in leadership, there may also be a large number of men who are competent, who have high EQs, who are the nice guys, and who may not rise to the top.

Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic: We have this paradoxical situation wherein if we made leadership selection gender blind and only focused on the traits that have proved to lead to more effective leadership styles and approaches, we would end up not only with more women in leadership roles but also slightly more women than men in them. There's this underlying assumption in gender diversity interventions that, because most leaders are male, there's something we need to do to help women who are not as naturally predisposed to being good leaders.

It's actually the other way around. There's a lot of antimeritocratic and implicit positive discrimination going on that favors not just men but overconfident, narcissistic, and incompetent men when it comes to leadership roles.

Lucia Rahilly: What does the research tell us about women in leadership roles?

Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic: Often, even when women are appointed to very senior leadership roles, it isn't because people have embraced what they bring to the table in terms of EQ, self-awareness, self-control, integrity, humility, people skills, et cetera. Rather, it's because they go for a profile of somebody who may be biologically female but out-males males in masculinity. So there's a queen bee or Margaret Thatcher phenomenon. In fact, there are many countries in the world that are run by women who look more alpha male than their male competitors.

The point is not to have more biological women in charge but to have better leaders in charge. And if we don't understand that we should optimize for a more feminine, empathetic, or competent style, whether it's displayed by women or men, we run into problems.

We're also much more likely to remember failures in leadership when the leaders are female. If you look for an arguably psychopathic, narcissistic, and very toxic leader who became very rich and famous, for every female case, there's probably nine or ten male cases. The male cases make for great movies like *The Wolf of Wall Street*. But when the leaders happen to be female, we're more likely to hear, "Oh, my God, women shouldn't be leaders."

Three steps forward

Brooke Weddle: Tomas, there's so much to unpack in that, and I feel my blood pressure rising. It's like a personal engagement here, as well. How do you even begin to penetrate this? We put women in leadership training programs to try to level the playing field. They're very well intentioned, but it sounds like the treatment should be applied to male, rather than female, leaders, who could strengthen their EQs. How do you have that conversation with leaders so as to inspire them to think differently?

Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic: There are three basic steps that I tend to follow. The first is to get leaders to show me how they know that the current leadership is actually adding the most

amount of value. In most organizations, there's a discrepancy between individual or personal career success on the one hand and value added to the organization on the other. Companies should start to decrease that.

The second one is to focus on the business case. Leaders should be committed to elevating the quality of leadership, because that's good for revenues, profitability, innovation, et cetera.

And the third one is to try to make leadership selection gender blind. I always say the best gender diversity intervention is done by focusing on talent, rather than gender. If you focus on gender, you may or may not increase the quality of your leaders. But if you focus on talent, you will probably increase the competence and quality of your leaders, as well as increase gender representation.

Measuring change and evaluating impact are really important, because there are a lot of well-meaning interventions that don't necessarily translate into good outcomes. Pointing the finger at women and blaming them for not applying for jobs when they don't meet the qualifications or requirements is one of them. So is blaming women for not leaning in or speaking in meetings when they have nothing to say. Mansplaining things is another one.

There's also the accusation against women of having imposter syndrome and the implication that because they are pathologically insecure, they will never be leaders. There are a lot of these well-meaning approaches or intentions that will, when we look back in 50 years' time, hopefully be understood as benevolent sexism.

Will technology help or hurt?

Bryan Hancock: I want to link this to some of your other research on AI and generative AI [gen AI], as it relates to selection. AI ramps down the relative importance of technical skill. Therefore, interpersonal skills become even more important. And at the same time, there are some new tools that enable you to understand who has a higher EQ and who could be a real leader in ways that traditional assessments haven't been able to. Could you comment on how you see AI changing what we're seeing in selection and maybe ramping up the underlying thesis of your book even further?

Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic: Even if we are skeptical of the whole gen AI hype, it is true that it commoditizes knowledge and access to knowledge. And so, there's a much weaker case for selecting people for leadership roles based on what they know. It used to be about having the answers to a lot of questions. Now, it's more about asking the right questions. The leaders of today, and especially of the future, will be chosen based on their ability to inspire, to motivate, to connect with others at an emotional level, and to understand people on a human and humane level.

On the other hand, when you talk to people about AI and its connection to recruitment, they think that this is going to introduce bias to human society. Instead, what AI does is expose those biases. When companies try to use gen AI to select leaders and they find out that the algorithm nominates men 80 percent of the time and women 20 percent, it's not the algorithm of the AI that is sexist. It's the system that is providing the training data for the AI to learn from—and replicate what has succeeded in the past—that is sexist.

With the opportunity to use AI and data more broadly and to remove some of the biases and flows of intuitive human thinking that have led us to where we are today, it's not that I have a lot of confidence in AI. Rather, I'm very aware of human stupidity, which gives me some confidence in AI.

Competence and capital

Brooke Weddle: When it comes to identifying and selecting leaders, or future leaders, you mention three kinds of capital in your research: intellectual, social, and psychological capital. I loved that. I wonder if you could help define those terms for us here.

And then the second part of my question is, is there any organization out there or type of organization that is able to assess for those different kinds of capital well, and has that produced a different outcome?

Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic: Intellectual capital is your knowledge, your expertise, and your experience—the stuff that you might report on your résumé or on your LinkedIn profile. And it includes your titles, capabilities, languages, et cetera.

Social capital is interesting, because it could be a euphemism for nepotism. On the one hand, many people said in the '50s and the '60s that "contacts mean contracts." That is, the more people you know, the more successful you are. It's important that we develop our networks, strong ties, and weak ties, et cetera. But at the same time, social capital is also conflated with privilege. It also means, "Oh, I can speak to this person, and they'll get me a job," even though there are systems in place to make things a little more equal and meritocratic. But social capital still matters.

Psychological capital means your learning ability, curiosity, grit, resilience, self-control, EQ, empathy, and integrity. Those things are normally distributed in the population. You have more or less of them, irrespective of where you were born and what you actually know. It's in the interest of any organization to focus more on that part and less on the others.

Who's doing it properly? No one is—at least not to the point that my utopian academic imagination wants to see happening. First of all, you can look at organizations with very strong programs that use evidence-based people analytics and try to use proper assessments and de-emphasize the value of interviews. They're trying to fundamentally connect input with output and hire people based on competencies and see how they perform as leaders in their teams and organizations.

In recent years, I have seen organizations say, "We are on a quest to de-emphasize the importance of CVs and résumés for a lot of these jobs." And that is their challenge; most of them haven't cracked it yet.

Why EQ matters

Bryan Hancock: Tomas, can I go back and get us to say more about why having a higher EQ makes you a better manager and leader?

Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic: If you look at emotional intelligence as intrapersonal and interpersonal skills and if you're managing people, it's important that you also manage yourself. It's important that you control your temper. It's important that you evoke and display the right emotions. It's important that you can empathize with others and connect with them on a human level. It's important that you understand people as individuals. It's important that you read between the lines, that you get the signs, and that you can meet people where they want to be met—whether it's in person or via email, WhatsApp, Slack, et cetera.

All these things are very important. And we know from lots of research that the higher your EQ is, the more likely you are to do these things and the more likely it is that your team is engaged and productive, that you have high ratings on a 360-degree review, and that your team outperforms competitors.

Now for the part that people don't like as much. If you look at the typical manager or leader with high EQ, they're probably quite boring, quite bland, and predictable. Mostly, they're somebody who makes rational decisions, doesn't want to be the center of attention, is unglamorous, listens to others, and puts the team first.

Conversely, when people have a boss who is bombastic, excitable, and has a low EQ, that creates a lot of stress. So even though it doesn't sound quite as cool to say, "Ooh, I love my boss, because they are very boring," that's actually almost the best-case scenario.

Don't fall into the pool with Narcissus

Bryan Hancock: Why is it that we like narcissists?

Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic: The best explanation was given by Freud. Basically, it's a subliminal and acceptable way to love ourselves. They promise us the world and tell us that we are amazing and that we should follow them, because they know the answers to all the questions and they are invincible. They seduce us with these megalomaniac visions. It's a very populist and seductive strategy. We're seduced by them, and in the modern era, we have come to this notion that leaders have to be entertaining and charismatic.

Whereas 300,000 years ago, we could look at some of our hunter-gatherer ancestors or their teammates or group-mates and say, "Okay, they're strong, they're brave, they're courageous, and they're a good hunter or a good gatherer." So as reality becomes more complex, leadership becomes harder to grasp, and then we become lazier.

Brooke Weddle: Tomas, it sounds like you're saying that narcissism, and maybe its appeal, is increasing. Do you think that EQ is in decline?

Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic: Yes. Certain elements of EQ are declining as narcissism goes up, and there's a lot of evidence for this. The social psychologist Jean Twenge has published *Generation Me* [Atria Books, September 2014] and other books, tracking the narcissistic epidemic throughout the decades. Not just from one generation to another, but over the years in America and other countries.

If narcissism increases and if that means we are becoming more deluded and less self-aware, then that also means EQ is going down. On the other hand, our interactions with technology and our dependence on validation and approval from others mean that we are becoming more neurotic, more impulsive, and more insecure.

There are two very different types of narcissism. One is the psychotic, deluded type, wherein you really believe your own hype and you're disconnected from reality. That's a very effective strategy for convincing others to follow you.

Then, there's the so-called vulnerable or neurotic type, which is the one that is most prevalent, especially if you look at teenagers or younger generations. Put simply, it's when you want to believe that you're as great and as good and as talented as your parents maybe told you that you are. But you don't quite believe it, so you're desperately seeking validation and approval from others. It's why people get clinically depressed if

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they post an update on social media of their traveling to a fancy island or remote destination and only one or two people like that update.

As I have written, gen AI is so good at copying humans and so similar to human intelligence that it almost behaves like a neurotic or vulnerable narcissist. You say, "Hey, ChatGPT, can you give me a thousand words on medieval history in Italy?" And the response is, "Well, you know, I'm just a large language model. I don't know anything about the subject. But here's a thousand words, and I hope you like me." It has copied us very well, because it's more confident than competent. But if you scratch beneath the surface, under that confidence, there's a lot of insecurity.

Bryan Hancock: If narcissism is going up and it's harder in a complex world to figure out what we're really looking for in leaders, is there any hope that tools and technology can help us identify folks with good EQs or provide nudges for us to deepen our empathy?

Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic: Technology isn't going to solve that problem, but it can actually be used for self-assessment or to provide evidence for or shed light on how we're doing on these issues. If you look at social media as a whole, it's like an enormous social experiment that enables us to study behaviors in real time.

What to do differently

Lucia Rahilly: Tomas, as we move toward this imperative to really identify and cultivate genuine leadership potential, talk to us about other traits that, in the assessment process, we should be mindful not to misconstrue.

Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic: We should try to ignore everything that is style and not substance. We should also de-emphasize things like credentials, expertise, and experience, especially when they apply to something people have done before but is not so relevant for the future. Today, most of us are less likely to lose our jobs to AI than to reimagine our current roles while working out how to use AI to add value in different ways. I would say less focus on hard skills and more focus on the right soft skills.

There should be less focus on individualistic, selfish, egotistical, and career-enhancing traits and dispositions and more focus on those that make other people better. Fundamentally, leaders need to make other people better, including by helping them collaborate effectively. If you look at that, then you're going to have a selection of individuals who are predisposed for leadership roles and who look very different from the majority of leaders today, whether they are male or female.

Dr. Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic is a professor of business psychology at Columbia University and University College London and the chief innovation officer at ManpowerGroup. **Bryan Hancock** and **Brooke Weddle** are partners in McKinsey's Washington, DC, office; and **Lucia Rahilly** is global editorial director and deputy publisher of McKinsey Global Publishing and is based in the New York office.

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