

FOUNDER AND CEO PSYCHOLOGY

# Executive Psychology and the Dark Side

*Kets de Vries · Hogan · Maccoby · Kahneman*

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PAPER 02 / 02

A Furtherance reference compendium on the intellectual traditions behind organisational design, leadership, execution, and culture.

**IN THIS PAPER**

The series closes on the darker psychology of those at the top – the inner drivers, personality risks and cognitive biases that shape, and sometimes derail, executive judgement. The question it answers: what psychological forces make leaders fail, and how should organisations guard against them?

Kets de Vries brings the clinical lens to the leader's inner world; Hogan supplies the empirical science of derailment; Maccoby examines the double edge of narcissism; Kahneman shows how systematic biases distort even able executives' decisions.

**Manfred Kets de Vries** *The Leader on the Couch, 2006*

*Clinical leadership · INSEAD*

**CORE THESIS**

Leaders' **inner worlds** – their defences, anxieties and narcissism – shape the organisations they run. A clinical, psychodynamic lens reveals the irrational dynamics behind executive behaviour and organisational dysfunction.

**FRAMEWORK**

| Concept           | Meaning                                             |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| The inner theatre | Early experience scripts adult leadership behaviour |
| Narcissism        | Reactive (destructive) versus constructive forms    |
| Neurotic styles   | Leaders' patterns imprint on the whole organisation |
| Collusion         | Followers and leaders reinforce shared blind spots  |

**METHODOLOGY**

Psychoanalytic and clinical approaches applied to leaders and organisations.

**SIGNIFICANCE AND CRITIQUE**

The leading psychodynamic scholar of leadership. The critique, per the caveat: clinical interpretation is hard to test and easy to misapply to real individuals.

**Robert Hogan** *Personality and Derailment, 1990s–*

*The dark side of personality*

**CORE THESIS**

Personality predicts leadership – and, crucially, **derailment**. “Dark side” traits that stay hidden day-to-day emerge under stress and cause managerial failure. Managerial incompetence is common and costly, and reputation matters more than self-image.

**FRAMEWORK**

| Distinction            | Meaning                                              |
|------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|
| Bright side            | Everyday personality – how one appears at one's best |
| Dark side              | Traits that surface under pressure and derail        |
| Values (the inside)    | What genuinely drives and motivates the person       |
| Reputation vs identity | How others see you predicts more than self-view      |

**METHODOLOGY**

Personality assessment and empirical research on leadership effectiveness and failure.

**SIGNIFICANCE AND CRITIQUE**

The empirical authority on derailment and dark-side personality. The critique: it relies on proprietary assessment instruments.

**Michael Maccoby** *Narcissistic Leaders, 2000*

*Productive and unproductive narcissism*

**CORE THESIS**

Many visionary leaders are **productive narcissists** – grandiose, charismatic and bold (their strengths), yet thin-skinned, poor listeners and short on empathy (their weaknesses). Narcissism can be productive or destructive, and must be actively managed.

**FRAMEWORK**

| Aspect                     | Meaning                                               |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|
| Strengths                  | Vision, appetite for risk, charisma, big ambition     |
| Weaknesses                 | Sensitivity to criticism, poor listening, low empathy |
| Productive vs unproductive | The same drive can build or destroy                   |
| The trusted sidekick       | A grounded partner keeps the narcissist effective     |

**METHODOLOGY**

Psychoanalytically informed analysis of leadership personality types.

**SIGNIFICANCE AND CRITIQUE**

An influential, nuanced account of narcissism in leadership. The critique: it works at the level of typology rather than rigorous measurement.

**Daniel Kahneman** *Thinking, Fast and Slow, 2011*

*Cognitive bias in executive judgement*

**CORE THESIS**

Even able executives fall prey to systematic **cognitive biases** – overconfidence, the planning fallacy, the inside view, loss aversion. Fast, intuitive thinking (System 1) outruns slow, deliberate thinking (System 2), and confident judgement is often wrong.

**FRAMEWORK**

| Bias / tool            | Meaning                                       |
|------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| Overconfidence         | We are surer than the evidence warrants       |
| Planning fallacy       | We underestimate time, cost and risk          |
| Inside vs outside view | Trust the base rate over the compelling story |
| The premortem          | Imagine failure in advance to surface risks   |

**METHODOLOGY**

Foundational research in the psychology of judgement and decision-making.

**SIGNIFICANCE AND CRITIQUE**

The foundational science of judgement error (explored further in the Decision-Making series). The critique: knowing the biases is far easier than debiasing real decisions.

**A NOTE ON EVIDENCE**

A caveat on use: this material illuminates patterns, but it is not a licence to diagnose real leaders. Clinical and typological accounts are interpretive, and even validated assessments describe tendencies, not destiny. Use these lenses to build guardrails – candour, checks on power, debiasing routines, honest feedback – rather than to label colleagues. The aim is better systems around leaders, not armchair psychiatry.

**Synthesis**

| Contribution         | Lens        | Key idea                    | Register               |
|----------------------|-------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| <b>Kets de Vries</b> | Clinical    | The leader's inner theatre  | Psychodynamic          |
| <b>Hogan</b>         | Personality | Dark side; derailment       | Empirical / assessment |
| <b>Maccoby</b>       | Narcissism  | Productive vs unproductive  | Typology               |
| <b>Kahneman</b>      | Cognition   | Systematic bias; System 1/2 | Foundational science   |

**FOR THE OPERATOR**

The dark side of executive psychology spans the inner world (Kets de Vries), the personality traits that derail under stress (Hogan), the double edge of narcissism (Maccoby), and the cognitive biases that distort confident judgement (Kahneman). For the operator: the defence is systemic – checks on power, honest feedback, debiasing routines, and grounded partners around ambitious leaders – not the hope that individuals will simply see their own blind spots. That closes the Founder and CEO Psychology series.