



SURKO COACHING

A Guide to Managing a Narcissistic Manager

Dealing with a narcissistic manager can be one of the most stressful professional challenges. This guide is designed to help you identify the specific behaviors you're encountering and equip you with practical, professional strategies to manage the relationship while protecting your well-being and career.

See "[Sources Section](#)" for links to the materials this guide is based on.

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Part 1: Spotting the Full Range of Narcissistic Traits

Narcissistic managers come in two types:

1. **Overt** - loud, demanding, arrogant
2. **Covert** - quiet, passive-aggressive, victim-focused.

Regardless of their style, they share a core need for superiority and control.

Core Trait	Overt (Extroverted) Behavior	Covert (Vulnerable) Behavior
Sense of Entitlement	Grandiosity: Boasts constantly, dominates meetings, and demands public admiration and special rules.	Victim Playing: Constantly complains about being overworked, misunderstood, or unfairly treated by others (despite a fair workload).
Reaction to Criticism	Narcissistic Rage: Lashing out, yelling, or immediately attacking you when challenged.	Sullen Withdrawal: Sulking, giving the silent treatment , or acting visibly distressed/sad to make you feel guilty for providing feedback.
Manipulation Style	Direct Control: Micromanages every task, sets impossible standards, and openly belittles you in front of others.	Passive-Aggression: "Forgets" to include you on key emails, withholds crucial information , or uses subtle sarcasm and backhanded compliments.
Self-Image & Confidence	Appears hyper-confident, arrogant, and concerned only with status (e.g., name-dropping, expensive items).	False Modesty: Constantly fishes for compliments by downplaying their own accomplishments (e.g., "Oh, it was nothing, anyone could have done it. Right?").
Empathy	Casual Disregard: Ignores your needs, makes inappropriate jokes, or schedules mandatory meetings outside your working hours without apology.	Toxic Dependency: Pressures you into helping with their work using guilt (e.g., "I'm so overloaded, you're the <i>only</i> one I can trust to help me with this.").



The Critical Danger: The Narcissistic Injury

This is the most important behavioral pattern to understand: A manager who is narcissistic **cannot handle criticism**, even if they ask for it. Any form of **feedback** is perceived as an **attack** that threatens their fragile self-image of perfection. This is called a **Narcissistic Injury**, and it triggers dangerous behavior:

- **The Reaction:** They will immediately deny the validity of your feedback, become hostile, or pivot to blame *you* for the problem or accuse you of having malicious intent.
- **The Consequence:** They will often hold a **long-lasting grudge**, leading to retaliation such as sabotaging your projects, micromanaging you, or trying to isolate you from the team.

Part 2: Recognizing The Emotional Roller Coaster

The narcissistic work relationship is often not consistently bad. It follows a predictable and confusing cycle that hooks you in and lowers your resistance.

Phase	What It Looks Like	Your Emotional State
1. Idealization (The Honeymoon)	The manager " love bombs " you: praising you excessively, hinting at fast promotions or raises, giving you high-profile projects, and making you feel like the "favorite" or the only one who truly understands their vision.	You feel special, grateful, and energized. You dismiss early red flags, thinking, " <i>They're actually a great boss, they just have high standards.</i> "
2. Devaluation (The Attack)	The manager's attitude suddenly shifts. They start gaslighting, micromanaging, or criticizing your work unfairly. They withdraw praise, become cold, and isolate you from key decisions.	You feel confused, desperate, and anxious. You overcompensate by working harder, trying to get back to the "good old days" of being the favorite.
3. Discard (Temporary or Permanent)	If you stop providing the "narcissistic supply" (praise, compliance), they may isolate you entirely , take away your best projects, or try to transfer/fire you.	You feel betrayed, worthless, and stressed. This is often the point where people realize they must leave the job.



Third-Party Manipulation: The "Flying Monkeys"

Narcissists often recruit trusted colleagues, HR staff, or even senior leaders (The "Flying Monkeys") to do their dirty work.

- **Smear Campaigns:** They spread rumors and lies about you to discredit you and make others doubt your sanity or competence.
 - **Recruitment:** The manager may play the victim to a colleague, who then approaches you to "smooth things over" but is actually trying to manipulate you into dropping your boundaries or apologizing.
 - **Action Through Others:** They get others to enforce their unfair demands or social exclusion so the manager never has to directly take the heat.
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Part 3: Professional Strategies to Cope and Limit Damage

Your goal is not to change your manager, but to strategically manage your own responses and expectations to minimize stress and professional risk.

1. Protect Your Work with an Audit Trail

Your best defense against denial, blame, and smear campaigns is irrefutable evidence.

- **Document EVERYTHING:** Keep a private record of all interactions, including directives, promises, and inappropriate behavior. Note the date, time, and witnesses. Use **neutral, factual language**—think "courtroom evidence."
- **Confirm in Writing:** After *any* verbal conversation, send a brief, professional email to your manager to summarize and confirm the directives.
 - **Goal:** If they gaslight you later, you have an immediate timestamped record.
- **Respond to Misinformation Factually:** If the manager misrepresents facts, address it promptly, but never defensively. State the fact and reference your documented source.
 - *Example: "I understand that's not how you recall the Q4 budget. Per the attachment sent on Tuesday at 2:00 PM, the allocated spend for marketing was 15%."*



2. Strategic Communication

Manage your behavior to deny them the emotional "supply" they crave.

- **Use the "Gray Rock" Method:** In non-essential interactions, be as emotionally uninteresting as possible. Give **brief, unenthusiastic, and factual responses**. Do not share personal details, offer emotional reactions, or engage in their drama or gossip.
- **Appeal to Their Ego (BIFF Technique):** When you *must* interact, keep it **B**rief, **I**nformative, **F**riendly, and **F**irm. Frame all requests and ideas to highlight how they will **personally benefit the manager's reputation or goals**.
- **Avoid Criticism:** Do not give any negative feedback related to their character, judgment, or work quality, even if they ask for it. It will be weaponized later.

3. Set Firm, Professional Boundaries

You must be clear and consistent, as a narcissist will constantly push limits.

- **Decide Your Limits:** Determine your non-negotiables (e.g., no weekend calls, no working on personal tasks).
- **Enforce Limits Calmly:** State your boundary firmly and professionally, then follow through with action. Do not debate or explain.
 - *Example: "I am happy to address that first thing tomorrow morning when I'm back online."*

4. Prioritize Your Well-Being and Exit Plan

- **Seek External Support:** This is not a sustainable situation. Talk to a trusted therapist or coach specializing in workplace abuse to validate your experience and rebuild your self-esteem.
- **Broaden Your Network:** Seek professional validation from people *outside* of your immediate team. Your career worth is not defined by this one person.
- **Prepare to Leave:** If the situation causes persistent stress, anxiety, or physical symptoms, the healthiest choice is to develop an **exit strategy**. Start searching for a new role in a healthier company culture. You cannot fix your manager; you can only choose to remove yourself from the damage.



Sources and References in which this guide was based on:

Resource Type	Description / Focus	Source Link
Identification & Coping	15 Signs of a Narcissistic Boss & Ways to Deal With Them - Detailed signs and basic coping strategies.	Choosing Therapy
Strategic Management	5 Effective Ways to Cope With a Narcissistic Boss - Focuses on the BIFF method and avoiding triggers.	Right as Rain by UW Medicine
Coping Strategies	7 Strategies for Coping With a Narcissistic Boss - Emphasizes documentation, boundaries, and seeking professional help.	Psychology Today
Mindset & Resilience	Using a Growth Mindset to Cope With a Narcissistic Boss - Strategies for resisting the manager's attempts to undermine your competence.	Psychology Today
Documentation & Boundaries	How to Handle a Narcissistic Boss (5 Steps) - Practical steps for paper-trailing key instructions and disagreements.	CSU Global
Toxic Environment Survival	Tips to Survive a Narcissistic Boss or Toxic Work Environment - Includes self-care and trauma-informed advice for dealing with severe toxicity.	Dr. Jan Hoistad Partners