

From Organizational Grandiosity to Organizational Silence: The Role of Psychological Capital Depletion and Employee Amygdala Activation in Narcissistic Leadership

Aldi Adi Pratama¹

¹ Institut Pertanian Bogor

ARTICLE INFO

Received 14 July 2025
Accepted 25 August 2025
Published 30 September 2025

Keywords: *Narcissistic Leadership, Organizational Silence, Psychological Capital Depletion, Amygdala Activation, Defensive Silence*

DOI:10.24036/hrms.v5i3

ABSTRACT

Narcissistic Leadership (NL) is motivated by a deep need for power and admiration, characterized by organizational grandiosity and an excessive self-view. This environment, marked by micromanagement and avoidance of criticism, systematically undermines the psychological climate. This study aims to investigate how Organizational Grandiosity under NL creates an atmosphere of chronic threat (as reflected in Amygdala Activation), which subsequently depletes employees' positive internal resources (Psychological Capital Depletion), driving them toward Organizational Silence. Utilizing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the research analyzed in-depth narratives from a small sample (6-10 informants). Key findings confirm an integrative model mediated by dual mechanisms: the biological threat signal of Employee Amygdala Activation and the resource loss of PsyCap Depletion. The convergence of physiological threat and psychological exhaustion compels employees to adopt Defensive Silence as a low-energy, resource-conserving strategy. Organizations must focus on restoring PsyCap and ensuring the absolute safety of employee voice to mitigate the profound ethical and health costs of NL.

How to cite: Pratama, Aldi Adi. (2025). From Organizational Grandiosity to Organizational Silence: The Role of Psychological Capital Depletion and Employee Amygdala Activation in Narcissistic Leadership. *Human Resource Management Studies*, 5 (3), 110-117. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24036/hrms.v5i3>



This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons 4.0 Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. ©2020 by author.

* Corresponding author: e-mail: aldiadipratama20839aldi@apps.ipb.ac.id

INTRODUCTION

Narcissistic leadership is fundamentally driven by a profound need for power and admiration, which significantly supersedes any empathetic concern for subordinates or the institution being led (Suhardoyo, 2022). The cardinal feature of narcissistic leadership is an exaggerated view of self-grandiosity, coupled with a persistent need to be the center of attention and an expectation of special treatment stemming from perceived superiority (Aprilyanti et al., 2024). Narcissistic individuals inherently tend to view themselves as superior to others and exhibit a deficit in empathy (Aprilyanti et al., 2024). The leader's manifestation of grandiosity directly creates a threatening and resource-depleting environment for employees. This is evident in their attempts to maintain a "superior" self-

image through practices like micromanagement, the refusal to delegate tasks based on the belief that "No One Can Do It Like Me," and the making of unilateral decisions without soliciting subordinate input. Furthermore, they frequently reject feedback and criticism, and they tend to displace blame onto others when failures occur. This behavior systematically damages work dynamics, fosters an unhealthy competitive environment, and significantly deteriorates the organizational psychological climate (Nanlohy et al., 2025). Consequently, these personality traits transform into an organizational risk factor that must be proactively anticipated. The primary case study gap originates from a dearth of research exploring moderating factors that could potentially buffer employees (e.g., internal self-regulation or robust team support) from the negative impacts of Narcissistic Leadership (NL). Future research must bridge this gap by identifying the contextual and psychological conditions that determine whether a narcissistic leader's initial charisma will ultimately lead to positive performance outcomes or deteriorate into a toxic and silence-promoting environment.

This research endeavors to determine how a work environment characterized by narcissistic leadership often defined by efforts to construct an Organizational Grandiosity image beyond reality creates an atmosphere of threat and fear, reflected by the activation of the amygdala. This threat response subsequently depletes employees' positive internal resources (psychological capital), which ultimately prompts them to withhold crucial voices, ideas, and concerns, culminating in detrimental organizational silence. By integrating management, psychological, and neuroscientific perspectives, this study aspires to provide a profound understanding of the biological and psychological costs associated with narcissistic leadership.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Grandiose Narcissism in Leadership

Narcissistic leadership is fundamentally characterized by leaders who exhibit a cluster of traits, including grandiosity, arrogance, self-focus, entitlement, and minimal empathy (Lousã & Alves, 2025). Specifically, grandiosity is understood as possessing an overly elevated view of the self and one's significance, coupled with an exaggerated sense of one's own abilities and importance (Mankelwicz & Milligan, 2025). This grandiosity is a central, defining feature in explaining the actions of narcissistic leadership (Lousã & Alves, 2025). Although narcissism is a complex and multifaceted construct encompassing agentic, antagonistic, and neurotic narcissism all are unified by essential features such as a preoccupation with self-interest and a sense of entitlement (Lynch & Benson, 2024). Nevertheless, contemporary research acknowledges that this trait often manifests across a broad spectrum, potentially even incorporating underlying vulnerability or insecurity (Mankelwicz & Milligan, 2025).

Organizational Silence

Organizational Silence (OS) is explicitly defined as the act where employees intentionally withhold ideas, concerns, or information relevant for organizational improvement (Shen et al., 2025). This definition, emphasized in a 2025 study in *Frontiers in Public Health*, highlights that such silence constitutes a deliberate choice, albeit often a defensive or compelled response (Shen et al., 2025). It is crucial to underscore that Organizational Silence is generally viewed as a collective phenomenon that is systematically reinforced by management practices (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). This concept is distinct from *employee silence*, which is primarily an individual action highly influenced by the immediate environment and leadership. Thus, when silence becomes a defining characteristic of an organization, it is considered a consequence of internal organizational forces, specifically management power that systematically encourages the suppression of information (Morrison & Milliken, 2000).

Defensive Silence

In the context of antagonistic and oppressive leadership (NL), the most relevant form of non-communication is Defensive Silence, defined as the deliberate withholding of ideas based on fear (Kim & Wang, 2024). The connection between this behavior and Narcissistic Leadership (NL) is particularly robust. Since NL is fundamentally characterized by anger and defensiveness when criticized, employees rapidly learn that voicing concerns constitutes a high-risk behavior (Cognitive Tech, n.d.). Given that power derived from the leader systematically reinforces silence (Morrison & Milliken, 2000), any vocal behavior that does not align with the narcissistic leader's self-interest is highly likely to be sanctioned. This power dynamic consequently compels employees to resort to a defensive silence strategy.

Systemic Withdrawal Cost: Silence as a Resource Conservation Strategy

Under the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, silence can be interpreted as an adaptive defensive strategy. Given that Narcissistic Leadership (NL) creates chronic strain and resource depletion and because attempts to voice concerns are often met with contempt or anger (which constitutes a further resource loss/threat) employees strive to preserve their remaining psychological and social capital (Honsová et al., 2025). Silence, particularly in its defensive or acquiescent forms, is a low-cost, low-effort attempt to halt continuous depletion, achieved by avoiding interpersonal antagonism and the effort costs associated with attempting to change the work environment (Seong & Abdul Halim, 2025).

METHOD

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was selected as the primary methodology due to its inherent focus on lived experience and its hermeneutic interpretation of how individuals make meaning from the phenomena of interest (Nizza et al., 2021). IPA is specifically relevant because this study seeks to delve into the phenomenology of two highly internal variables: Psychological Capital Depletion and Amygdala Activation. The key research question is not whether these variables are correlated, but rather what it feels like for employees when their Psychological Capital (Self-Efficacy, Hope, Optimism, Resilience) is eroded, and how fear manifests emotionally and physically (Amygdala Proxy) (Girisoma & Lie, 2024). This research addresses a highly sensitive topic: the impact of potentially destructive leadership on employee psychology which often creates an environment of fear and Organizational Silence. Participants who meet the criteria namely, those who have actively chosen to remain silent represent a hard-to-reach population (Simkus, 2023).

1. Purposive Sampling

Purposive sampling was employed as the initial selection phase to identify organizations that meet the predetermined situational and leadership criteria. Through this technique, the researcher can select a sample deemed most representative and capable of providing in-depth information relevant to the research objectives. Contextually, organizations that place a strong emphasis on individual success and are characterized by a rigid, hierarchical structure often serve as the background that triggers the emergence of narcissistic leadership (Nanlohy et al., 2025).

2. Tiered Snowball Sampling

The snowball sampling technique becomes crucial for accessing informants. Given the high degree of trust required for this research, this technique allows the researcher to reach participants through established referral networks. The use of an Exponential Discriminative approach within snowball sampling is intended to ensure that every new referral obtained continues to meet the strict homogeneity criteria mandated by Interpretative

Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). These criteria mandate that all informants must share similar experiences, both in terms of the intensity of interaction with the narcissistic leader and the manifestation of Organizational Silence.

3. Sample Size Rationale

In accordance with the demands of IPA for in-depth idiographic analysis, the sample size is kept intentionally small, ideally ranging between 6 to 10 key informants in total. This limitation on sample size aims to maximize the hermeneutic depth in understanding individual experiences, rather than focusing on statistical generalization.

Key Informant Selection Criteria

The inclusion criteria were meticulously designed to ensure that each participant has experienced the full hypothesized cycle of triggers, internal psychological processes, and subsequent outcomes.

Table 1: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) Participant Selection Criteria

Participant Inclusion Criteria	Methodological Justification and Variable Linkage
Direct Report Employees	The intense and frequent interaction with the Narcissistic Leader yields the richest narrative data concerning the manifestations of Grandiosity and the direct triggers of the threat response (Amygdala Proxy).
Minimum Exposure Duration: One Year Under the Leader	This duration is necessary to allow for the reconstruction of the gradual process of Psychological Capital (PsyCap) Depletion and the consolidation of Organizational Silence behavior as a coping mechanism.
Demonstration of Organizational Silence	Participants must exhibit the behavior of withholding ideas, concerns, or important information due to feelings of fear or futility (helplessness). This criterion directly validates their relevance to the dependent variable (i.e., Organizational Silence), ensuring that informants have adopted either Defensive or Acquiescent Silence in response to a threatening leadership context.
Acute Emotional Distress Experience	A rich narrative concerning anxiety and physical responses to a leader is required, which will serve as a qualitative operationalization for Proxy Amygdala Activation

Source: Data Processed by Researcher (2025)

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Integrative Model Synthesis

This model posits a causal pathway, asserting that Psychological Capital Depletion and Employee Amygdala Activation are mutually reinforcing mediators that explain the transition from Organizational Grandiosity to Organizational Silence. The model emphasizes the synergy of the mediators: Depletion weakens the mental defenses necessary to cope with stress, while Amygdala Activation provides the urgent biological warning signal prompting avoidance. Employees who are both psychologically drained and physiologically threatened will exhibit the highest probability of opting for silence. Furthermore, the organizational context specifically, being hierarchical and competitive, serves as a crucial moderator, providing legitimacy for Narcissistic Leadership (NL) behavior (Nanlohy et al., 2025).

Table 2: Integrative Model: The Pathway from Narcissism to Silence

Stages of Transition	Key Construct	Employee Status - Phenomenological	Physiological Implications
Initial Trigger	NL / Grandiosity	Sense of uncertainty and high demands	Increased level of alertness/vigilance.
Psychological Mediator	PsyCap Depletion	Emotional exhaustion, loss of agency	Depletion of resources necessary to withstand stress
Physiological Mediator	Amygdala Activation	Fear of retaliation, experience of stress somatization	Biological signal to avoid danger.

Source: Data Processed by Researcher (2025)

The Amygdala: Biological Alarm System for Social Threat

The amygdala is a crucial component of the brain's limbic system that functions to detect and respond to danger, threat, and uncertainty, particularly within social situations (Roberts et al., 2022). Narcissistic leadership, which is often aggressive, authoritarian, and potentially abusive, creates a workplace that is physiologically interpreted by the employee's brain as a source of continuous threat. Specifically, grandiose narcissistic leaders are highly sensitive to threats targeting their ego (Jauk & Kanske, 2021). They are easily offended and are prone to retaliating against subordinates whom they perceive as undermining their status or self-esteem.

The state of sustained hyper-vigilance created by this leadership style triggers repeated Amygdala activation in employees. Chronic social threat-induced Amygdala activation has been demonstrated to correlate with hyper-reactivity in the Hypothalamic-Pituitary-Adrenal (HPA) axis, resulting in elevated peak cortisol levels in response to stress (Roberts et al., 2022). Should this pressure persist, employees incur an increasing allostatic load—the cumulative toll borne, both physiologically and psychologically, to adapt to a hostile work environment. The profound fear of deliberate retaliation from the Narcissistic Leader (NL) constitutes the primary social trigger (Liao et al., 2019). The amygdala processes this fear and emits a biological signal that validates voicing concerns as a high-risk action. Neuroscience data effectively provides objective confirmation that the workplace under NL does not merely induce mental exhaustion but is also physiologically threatening. This validation significantly supports the employee's subjective decision to choose silence as a strategy for hazard avoidance.

Neuro-Psychological Linkage: Depletion and Physiology

The synergistic relationship between PsyCap Depletion and vulnerability to amygdala stress triggers is central to this model. Employees who have exhausted their psychological capital and are experiencing emotional exhaustion possess a lowered cognitive defense to regulate their emotional responses. Although IPA participants will not utilize neuroscientific terminology, they will articulate the detailed somatization of stress through physical symptoms such as chronic fatigue, migraines, or sleep difficulties. The IPA interpretation must explicitly link these subjective complaints to the increased allostatic load induced by sustained Amygdala Activation (Roberts et al., 2022).

Amygdala Activation acts as the critical tipping point that directly precedes Organizational Silence. Narcissistic Leadership (NL) creates an environment that psychologically replicates a physical threat. When the mental resources (PsyCap) required to withstand or counteract the threat are depleted, the neurological system automatically prioritizes avoidance behavior. Silence thus emerges as the most energy-efficient and most primitive response aimed at placating the Amygdala alarm system and ensuring the conservation of vital resources.

Managerial and Ethical Implications

The in-depth analysis utilizing the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) framework has successfully uncovered a dual mechanism encompassing both psychological and neurobiological aspects that drives the organizational transition from a state of Organizational Grandiosity under Narcissistic Leadership (NL) towards Organizational Silence (OS). The key findings unequivocally demonstrate a high-risk convergence between the depletion of employees' internal resource capacity, specifically Psychological Capital (PsyCap), and the external threat confirmation mediated by the biological system, namely Amygdala Activation. The practical implications of this discovery mandate organizations to adopt proactive measures. While rigorous screening processes against NL are advisable, including the use of 360-degree evaluations and extensive reference checks, the cunning narcissist can often evade early detection. Therefore, effective mitigation steps become vital. Mitigation steps mandated by findings:

1. **Prioritizing Psychological Safety:** Implement systems to monitor and measure fear of retaliation rather than just satisfaction, directly targeting the source of Defensive Silence.
2. **Resource Restoration:** Actively invest in programs designed to restore and protect employee PsyCap, treating it as a strategic, non-limitless asset.
3. **Ethical Governance:** Establish clear ethical guidelines that hold leaders accountable for behaviors that induce physiological threat and contribute to increased allostatic load.

The most critical structural intervention involves adjusting the narcissistic leader's compensation and performance evaluation systems to align with metrics that prioritize team collaboration and staff development. By linking compensation to more pro-social outcomes, the self-serving motivations of the Narcissistic Leader (NL) can be significantly constrained. Ethically, organizations must acknowledge that Narcissistic Leadership causes long term health detriment (Tagoe, 2023). A workplace that chronically triggers employees' biological stress responses is a morally unjustifiable work environment. Therefore, post-appointment interventions must focus on restoring a safe work environment and replenishing depleted Psychological Capital (PsyCap). This includes ensuring employees can voice their concerns without fear of retaliation.

CONCLUSION

This research successfully presents an integrative model to explain the perilous transition from Organizational Grandiosity under Narcissistic Leadership (NL) towards Organizational Silence (OS). The core findings unequivocally demonstrate that this process is mediated by a dual mechanism: Psychological Capital (PsyCap) Depletion and Employee Amygdala Activation. NL creates an environment of chronic social threat that physiologically triggers the Amygdala, the body's biological

alarm system, which validates that voicing opinions is a high-risk action. This sustained threat subsequently drains the employees' psychological capital, weakening their mental defenses and increasing the allostatic load. This synergy between psychological exhaustion and biological alarm compels employees to adopt silence as the most rational, resource-conserving, and primitive strategy for self-preservation. It is the convergence between psychological exhaustion and the physiological danger signal that propels employees to opt for defensive silence as the most energy-efficient adaptive strategy for resource conservation and hazard avoidance. Implicatively, organizations must take proactive steps to address the long-term ethical and health impacts of Narcissistic Leadership (NL), focusing on the restoration of Psychological Capital (PsyCap) and the creation of an environment where the safety to voice concerns is absolutely guaranteed.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Future studies should integrate the depth of the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodology with non-invasive physiological measurements, such as heart rate variability (HRV) monitoring or skin conductance through wearable technology. This integration will enable researchers to directly correlate employees' subjective lived experiences of resource depletion with objective biological data (proxy for Amygdala Activation) that indicates chronic threat. This methodological triangulation will provide robust, objective evidence supporting the claim that the NL environment is not just mentally taxing, but also physiologically harmful, thereby strengthening the mandate for ethical and structural organizational interventions.

REFERENCES

- Aprilyanti, E. N. A. W., Isnania, N. Z., Rahma, A. D., Indriyana, E. N., & Ramadhani, L. (2024). Pengaruh dark triad terhadap kinerja karyawan: Kajian teoritis dan implikasi praktis. *Jurnal Ilmiah Ekonomi dan Manajemen*, 2(12), 285–299. <https://doi.org/10.61722/jiem.v2i12.3100>
- CognitiveTech. (n.d.). Social intelligence (Daniel Goleman). GitHub. https://github.com/cognitivetech/Psychology-Summaries/blob/main/Social_Intelligence_Daniel-Goleman.md
- Girisoma, Z. Z. S., & Lie, D. (2024). Pengaruh kualitas kehidupan kerja dan modal psikologis terhadap kesejahteraan subjektif pada salesman. *Jurnal Muara Ilmu Sosial, Humaniora, dan Seni*, 8(2), 319–327. <https://doi.org/10.24912/jmishumsen.v8i2.28950.2024>
- Honsová, P., Kubíček, A., & Pauknerová, D. (2025). The measurement trap: A meta-analytic review of measures in CEO narcissism research. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JMP-02-2025-0179>
- Jauk, E., & Kanske, P. (2021). Can neuroscience help to understand narcissism? A systematic review of an emerging field. *Personality Neuroscience*, 4, e3. <https://doi.org/10.1017/pen.2021.1>
- Kim, H. S., & Wang, J. (2024). Silence in the workplace: What do we know from research? *European Journal of Training and Development*, 48(10), 56–83. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EJTD-06-2024-0077>
- Liao, S., Zhou, X., Guo, Z., & Li, Z. (2019). How does leader narcissism influence employee voice: The attribution of leader impression management and leader–member exchange. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 16(10), 1819. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph16101819>

- Lousã, E. P., & Alves, M. P. (2025). When does a narcissistic leader force you out? The mediating role of psychological capital. *Administrative Sciences*, 15(10), 387. <https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci15100387>
- Mankelwicz, J. M., & Milligan, M. (2025). Narcissistic leadership: A global threat to a sustainable world. In L. Guo-Brennan et al. (Eds.), *Global leadership for a sustainable future*. Emerald Publishing Limited. <https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-83662-646-620251023>
- Morrison, E. W., & Milliken, F. J. (2000). Organizational silence: A barrier to change and development in a pluralistic world. *Academy of Management Review*, 25(4), 706–725. <https://doi.org/10.2307/259200>
- Nanlohy, E., Agustina, T., & Ekowati, D. (2025). Tinjauan literatur sistematis anteseden kepemimpinan narsistik (narcissistic leadership). *Jurnal Ilmiah Manajemen, Ekonomi, & Akuntansi (MEA)*, 9(1), 3049–3066. <https://doi.org/10.31955/mea.v9i1.5565>
- Nizza, I. E., Farr, J., & Smith, J. A. (2021). Mencapai keunggulan dalam analisis fenomenologi interpretatif (IPA): Empat penanda kualitas tinggi. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 18(3), 369–386. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1854404>
- Roberts, A. G., Peckins, M. K., Gard, A. M., Hein, T. C., Hardi, F. A., Mitchell, C., Monk, C. S., Hyde, L. W., & Lopez-Duran, N. L. (2022). Amygdala reactivity during socioemotional processing and cortisol reactivity to a psychosocial stressor. *Psychoneuroendocrinology*, 144, 105855. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psyneuen.2022.105855>
- Seong, C. M., & Abdul Halim, H. (2025). A conservation of resources perspective on psychological well-being. *Cogent Psychology*, 12(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311908.2025.2580034>
- Shen, Y., Chen, X., Zhang, H., & Lv, X. (2025). The work engagement and organizational silence among nurses. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 13, 1660100. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2025.1660100>
- Simkus, J. (2023, July 31). Snowball sampling method: Techniques & examples. *Simply Psychology*. <https://www.simplypsychology.org/snowball-sampling.html>
- Suhardoyo, S. (2022). The narcissistic leadership style perspective in terms of factors, roles and influences in the organization. *Jurnal Pendidikan, Sains Sosial, dan Agama*, 8(2), 449–462. <https://doi.org/10.53565/pssa.v8i2.551>
- Tagoe, T. (2023). The effect of narcissistic leadership on employee workplace flourishing (Doctoral dissertation). University of Wollongong. <https://hdl.handle.net/10779/uow.27824967.v1>