

**Center for  
Executive  
Succession**

# **CEO Narcissism, CEO Humility, and C-Suite Dynamics**

Results of the 2016 **HR@Moore** Survey  
of Chief HR Officers

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# Executive Summary

The 2016 **HR@Moore** Survey of Chief HR Officers explored the CEO's leadership style, particularly in terms of narcissism and humility, and some aspects of C-suite dynamics. The results showed that while some CEOs can be described as narcissists, the vast majority fail to fit this negative stereotype, and in fact, most would be described as relatively humble.

CEOs have relatively positive perceptions of the board, but have some concerns with the extent to which the board may get involved in more operational decisions, thus, overstepping their boundaries.

Executive leadership teams were described in terms of Agreement, Camaraderie, and Trust. They scored highest in trust, followed by camaraderie, and finally agreement.

Finally, we explore how CEO narcissism and humility relate to ELT dynamics, the ELT's view of the CEO, the CEO's perceptions of the board, and both the CEO's and board's involvement in CEO succession. CEO narcissism and humility were unrelated to agreement among ELT members, but strongly related to camaraderie and trust. They were also strongly related to the ELT's view of the CEO, the CEO's view of the board, and both the CEO's and board's involvement in CEO succession. In all cases, narcissism resulted in lower scores and humility in higher scores on these measures.

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Since 2009 we have conducted an annual survey of Chief HR Officers, with each one focusing on a variety of different topics. One of the topics covered in 2016 deals with some of the dynamics taking place within the C-Suite.

In this study, 124 Chief HR Officers (CHROs) reported on some of the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and executive leadership team (ELT) behaviors based on their interactions with and observations of those individuals. In addition, they described aspects of the relationship between the CEO and the Board of Directors. The remainder of this report will describe these results.

## CEO Leadership Behavior: Narcissism and Humility

The popular press often portrays CEOs as arrogant and narcissistic authoritarians intoxicated with power and running roughshod over “the little guy” (whoever that is). Our experience with CEOs and our interviews of board members (see our report “Defining CEO

Succession Success: A Board Perspective”) suggests that while some CEOs fit that description, it usually leads to failure. As such, the vast majority of CEOs do not resemble the narcissistic stereotype. Hence, we sought to explore empirically the extent to which CEOs displayed such behavior.

CHROs were asked to report the extent to which they agreed with how 19 different statements described their CEO’s leadership style. About half (10) of the behaviors involved narcissism using a classic narcissism scale and the rest (9) addressed humility. These results can be seen in **Figure 1**. All items shown in Figure 1 are reported such that higher scores indicate less narcissism and more humility and lower scores reflect more narcissism and less humility.

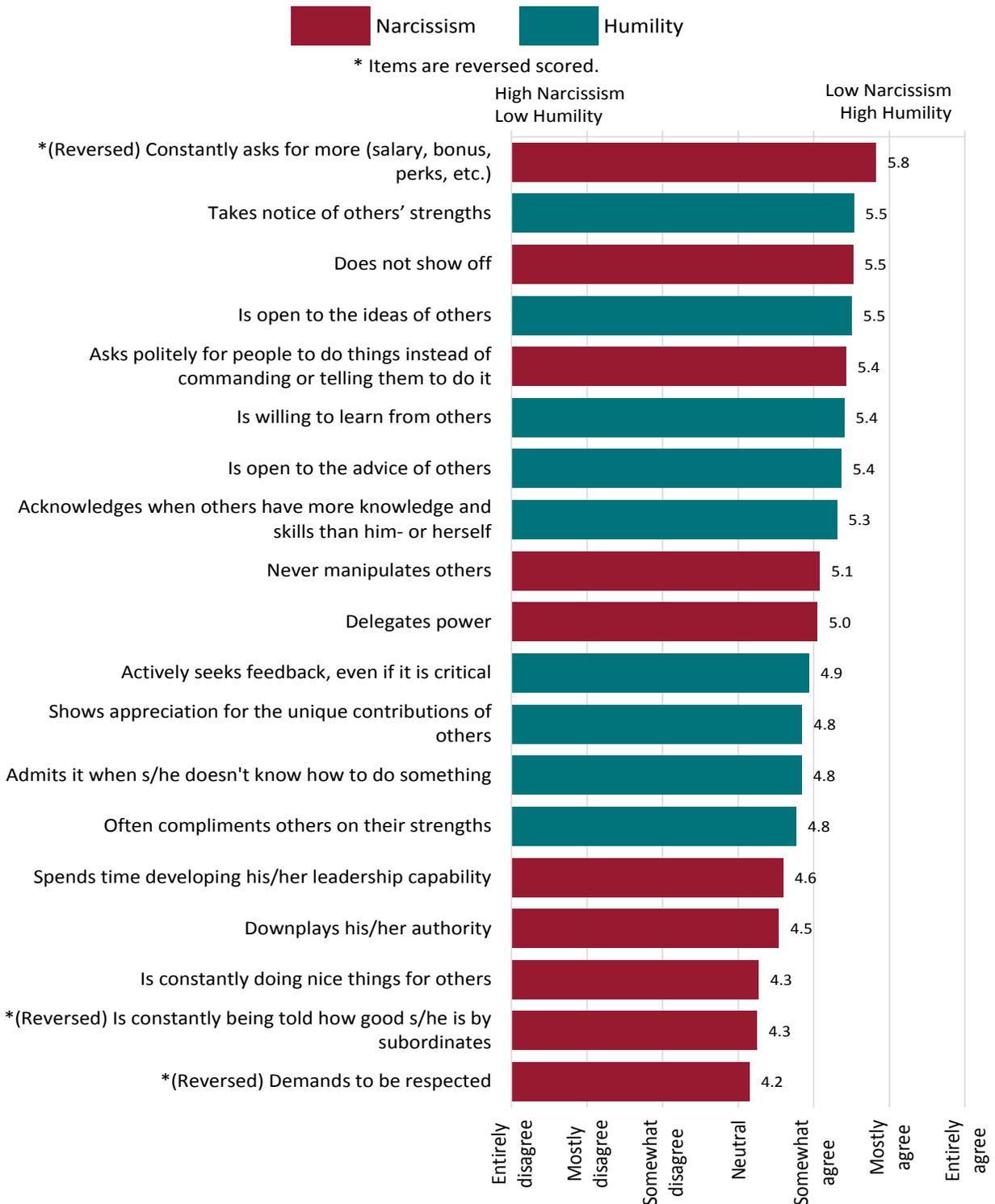
*Cover photo:* In the Moore School’s Charles S. Way, Jr. Palmetto Courtyard stands the sculpture, “*Eternal Flame*” by Mexican artist, Leonardo Nierman.



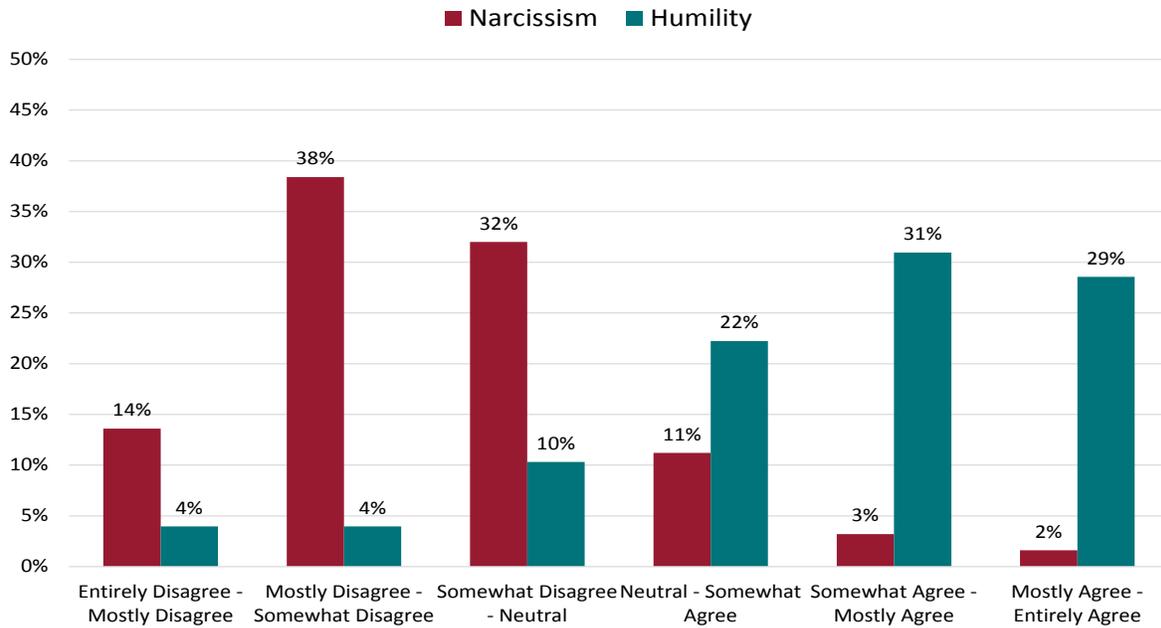
These results suggest that CEOs might be perceived as more humble than frequently portrayed. In **Figure 1**, we see that CEOs seem to display more narcissistic behavior than humility as the lowest 5 items (and 7 of the lowest 11) are

those regarding narcissism. However, even those items display means above the Neutral level...none go anywhere near negative territory. Similarly, the humility items all fall well above the neutral point, and nowhere near negative territory.

**Figure 1: CEO Leadership Behaviors**



**Figure 2: Narcissism vs. Humility Distribution**



These averages per item suggest that the “average” CEO is not a narcissist. However, another way to examine the data is to create a distribution of CEOs based on their narcissism score and their humility score. These results are displayed in **Figure 2**.

Note that CHROs responded on a 7-point scale. In this figure we do not reverse score the items, so the figure shows what percentage of CHROs described their CEO at different levels of narcissism and at different levels in humility. For instance, 14% gave their CEO an average narcissism rating across all items that fell between “Entirely Disagree” and “Mostly Disagree” indicating they do not describe their CEOs as narcissistic in any way. On the other end of the distribution, however, 2% “Mostly Agreed” to “Entirely Agreed” that their CEO displayed narcissistic behavior and another 3% fell in the “Somewhat Agree” to “Mostly Agree” category. An additional 11% fell in the “Neutral” to “Somewhat Agree” range, which may be best interpreted as being a little narcissistic. Thus, about 5% of the CEOs in this study were described as narcissistic.

Alternatively, we can compare the two extreme

categories (entirely/mostly disagree and mostly/somewhat disagree) along the distribution. Using that as a criterion, more than half (52%) of CEOs are far from being narcissistic, while less than 1/10th of that (5%) are considered narcissistic. Thus, the data suggests that while narcissistic CEOs exist, they are far outnumbered by ones who come nowhere near the narcissist profile.

Finally, another way to explore the prevalence of narcissistic CEOs is to compare those described as narcissists with those described as humble. The figure shows 60% of CEOs are described as being in the top 2 categories in terms of humility. Thus, CEOs were 12 times more likely to be categorized in the greatest humility range than the greatest narcissistic range.

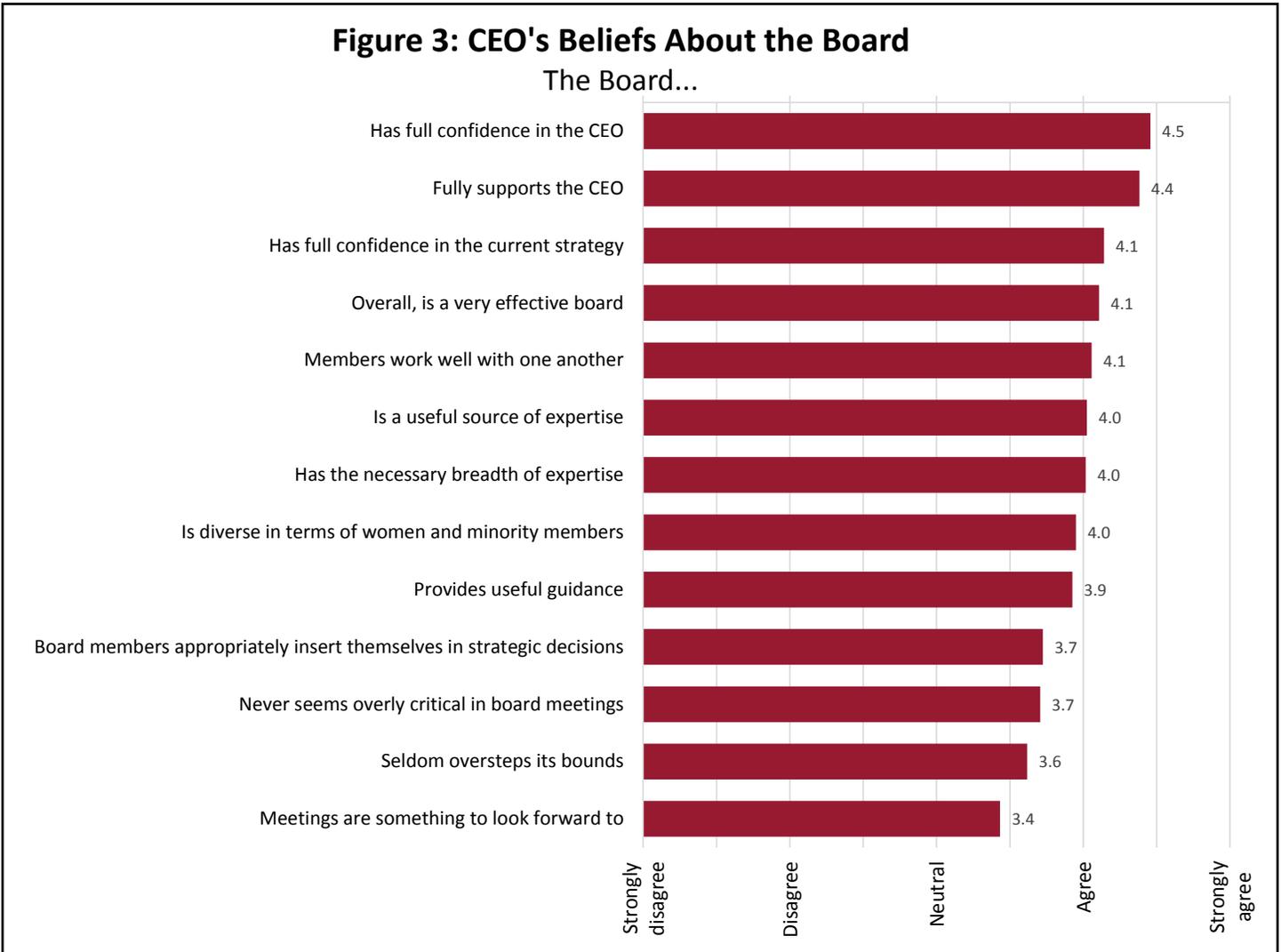
These results describe the prevalence of narcissism among CEOs, but do not address the consequences. In the following sections, we will discuss the results regarding some aspects of C-suite dynamics, including the CEO’s relationship with the board, the ELT’s dynamics as a team, and the ELT’s view of the CEO.

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# CEO Beliefs about the Board

Because CHROs often work with the CEO in both the preparation for and review after board meetings, we asked them how the CEO felt about the board. These results are shown in **Figure 3** and show a slightly divided view of the CEO's

relationship with the board. On the positive side, CHROs describe CEOs as feeling as if the board has confidence in them, but on the negative side, they seem to feel that the board is overly controlling and critical.



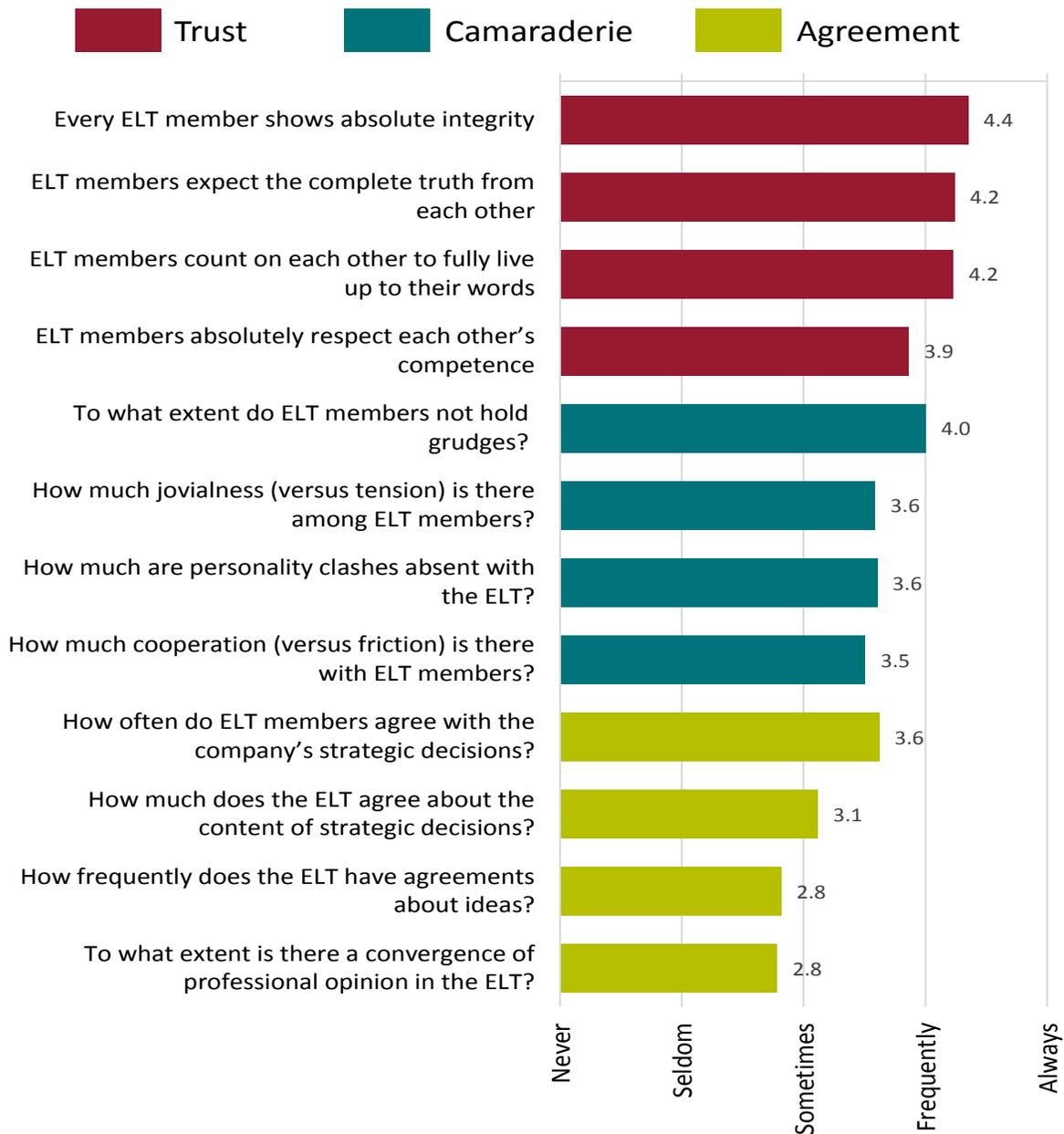
**TRUST**  
**Camaraderie**  
*Agreement*

# ELT Dynamics

CHROs reported on several aspects of the dynamics among the ELT members. We first asked about 3 aspects of the team’s interactions which we label Trust, Camaraderie, and Agreement. These results are shown in **Figure 4**. As shown in this figure, the mean ratings vary dramatically. Regarding trust, ELT members score high in their integrity and honesty in dealing

with one another. On the other hand, it appears that they do not always agree on ideas and strategies, which is not surprising given their varying functional backgrounds and/or business responsibilities. In between, while not high, the figure shows that teams seem to be neither strong nor weak in terms of their camaraderie.

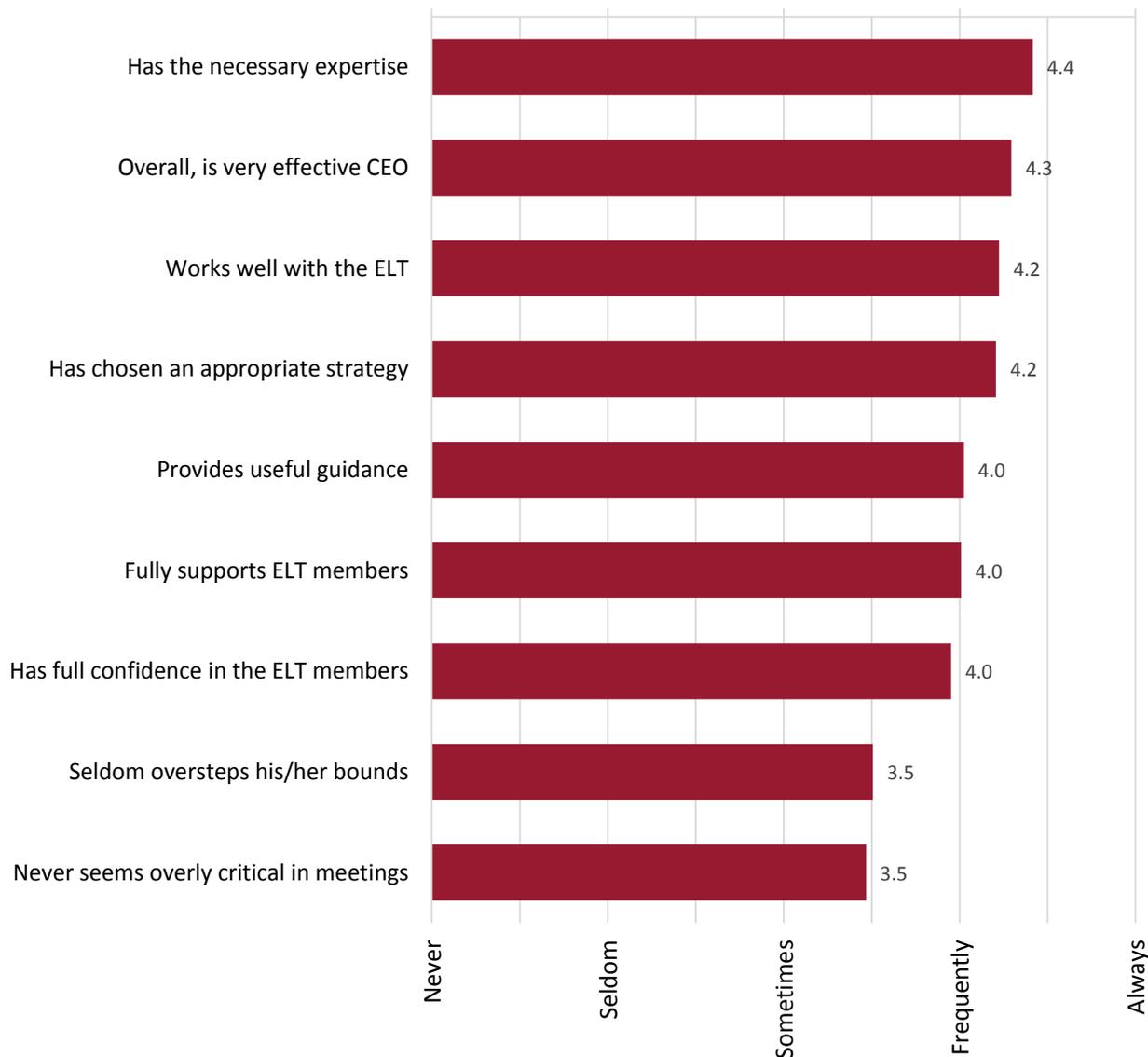
### Figure 4: ELT’s Interactions



Another aspect of the ELT we examined was how they perceived the CEO. As shown in **Figure 5**, CHROs indicate that the ELT seems to respect the CEO's competence and the way the CEO deals with the team. However, it appears that some CEOs may micromanage or be overly critical of ELT members. Overall, CHROs report ELT members as having a reasonably positive view of the CEO. Interestingly, these results seem to mirror how the CEOs feel about the board, perhaps indicating that CEOs govern their people like the boards govern the CEO.



**Figure 5: ELT's Beliefs About the CEO**

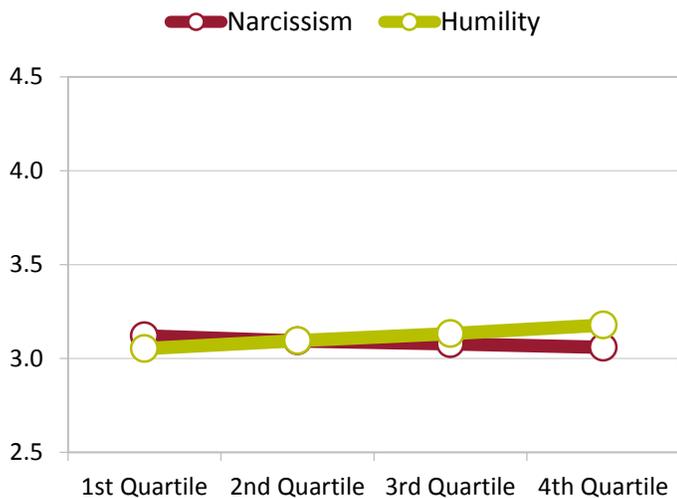


# Are Narcissistic CEOs Problematic?

Having discussed the prevalence of narcissism among CEOs and the state of ELT dynamics, we now turn to exploring whether narcissistic CEOs create problems for organizations. We first explore how narcissism impacts the dynamics among the ELT.

Recall that three aspects of the ELT dynamics were considered: Agreement, Camaraderie, and Trust. The relationship between CEO narcissism/humility and each of these aspects are displayed in **Figures 6, 7, and 8**.

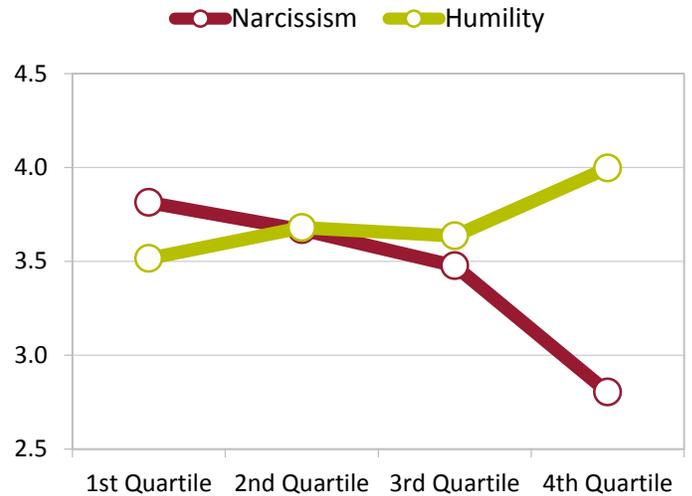
### Figure 6: ELT Agreement



As can be seen in **Figure 6**, neither narcissism nor humility have strong relationships with the extent to which ELT members agree (correlations of  $-.05$  and  $.15$ , respectively, neither of which is statistically significant). It is important to note that Agreement scored lower than both Trust and Camaraderie, and this additional analysis suggests it is not impacted by the leader's narcissism or humility. Thus, narcissism and humility do not seem to drive ELT agreement around strategy or ideas.

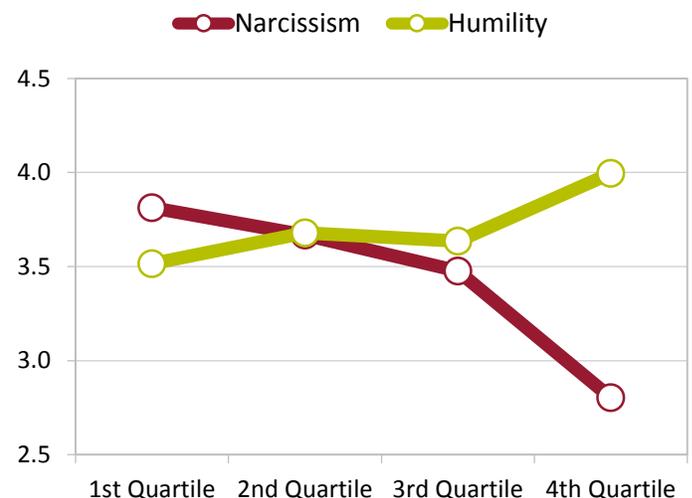
However, as **Figures 7 and 8** show, both narcissism and humility are strongly related to camaraderie and trust. The correlations of

### Figure 7: ELT Camaraderie



camaraderie with narcissism and humility were  $-.41$  and  $.43$ , respectively, both of which are statistically significant. The highest levels of camaraderie (4th quartile) are associated with the highest levels of humility (4.0) and lowest levels of narcissism (2.8) and the lowest levels of camaraderie (1st quartile) are associated with the highest levels of narcissism (3.8) and the lowest levels of humility (3.5). Similarly, the correlations between narcissism and humility with trust are  $-.52$  and  $.54$ , respectively, again, both being statistically significant. Note that the trust dimension of ELT dynamics was rated highest, with camaraderie just behind it. Considering these results simultaneously suggest that while most teams seem to have reasonably high scores on

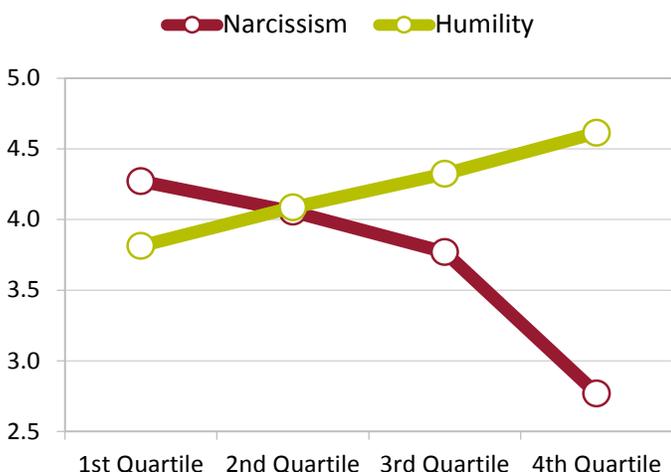
### Figure 8: ELT Trust



these dimensions, narcissistic CEOs harm their teams by creating environments and dynamics where ELT members fail to cooperate with each other, hold grudges, fail to respect each other's competence, and do not display integrity. Humble CEOs, build the exact opposite dynamics among their teams.

We also report how ELT members view the CEO, and these results suggest that, on average, they have positive views. However, this is not the case for narcissistic CEOs. **Figure 9** shows the relationships between narcissism and humility with the ELT's beliefs about the CEO. Narcissism and humility correlate with these beliefs  $-.37$  and  $.39$  respectively, both statistically significant, suggesting that ELT members with narcissistic CEOs feel less confidence in the CEO's expertise, strategy, leadership style, and effectiveness.

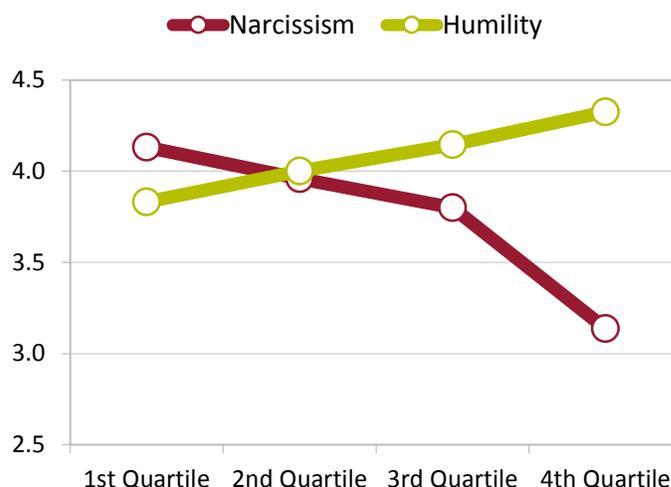
**Figure 9: ELT's Beliefs About the CEO**



Finally, narcissism and humility of the CEO are associated with the relationship between the CEO and the board as shown in **Figure 10**. These characteristics correlated with the CEO's beliefs about the board  $-.37$  and  $.39$  respectively, (both significant), indicating that narcissistic CEOs have less respect for the board as a resource, feel less confidence from the board, and feel the board is less effective.

Having discussed how narcissism relates to the measures discussed in this report, we now turn to how it relates to measures we reported in

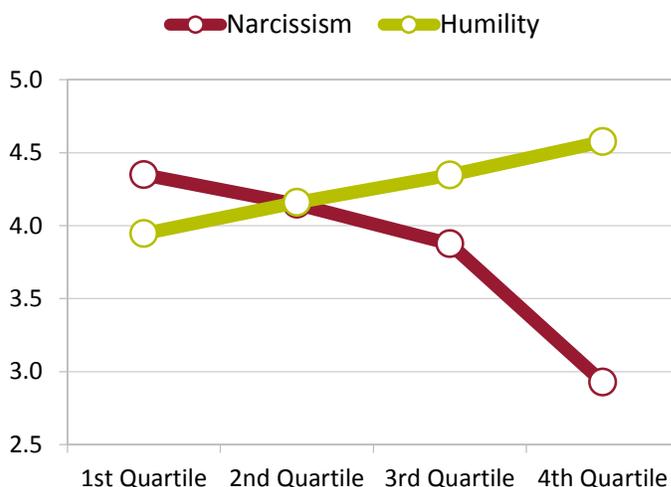
**Figure 10: CEO's Beliefs About the Board**



the first 2016 report "Current Practices in CEO Succession." First, we reported how CHROs described the CEO's and the board's involvement in CEO succession in terms of the extent to which they make it a priority, take ownership of it, review succession plans, meet with candidates, maintain objectivity, and focus on equal opportunity. Both CEOs and boards seemed to score high on this scale, which would indicate that they are both actively involved.

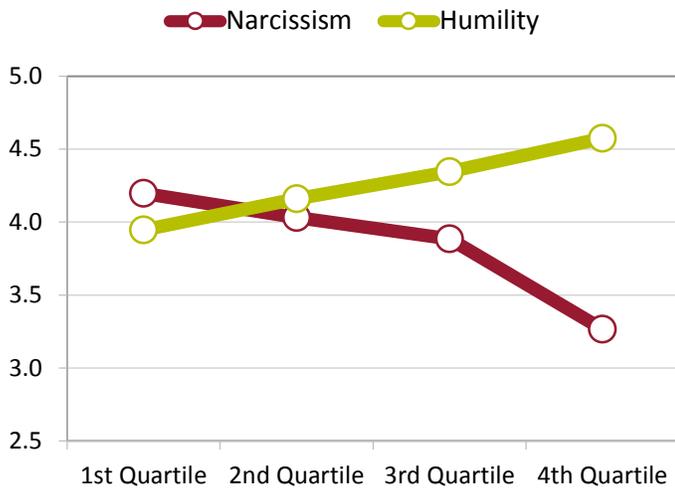
However, as can be seen in **Figures 11 and 12**, narcissistic CEOs seem to drive some dysfunction in

**Figure 11: CEO Involvement in Succession**



the CEO succession process. Narcissism and humility correlate with the CEO's involvement in CEO succession  $-.36$  and  $.38$ , respectively (both statistically significant), indicating that narcissistic CEOs put less emphasis on CEO succession and are less focused on objectivity and equal opportunity in the process.

**Figure 12: Board Involvement in Succession**



While this may not be problematic since ultimately boards bear the governance responsibility for CEO succession, as can be seen in **Figure 11**, these effects bleed over into the board's involvement. Narcissism and humility correlate  $-.30$  and  $.29$ , respectively (both significant), indicating that narcissistic CEOs seemingly discourage boards from taking ownership of the process, placing high priority on it, and maintaining objectivity and equal opportunity.

## Conclusion

Contrary to the image portrayed in the popular press, only a small minority of CEO's can be categorized as narcissistic, with survey results only identifying approximately 5% as narcissists. Instead, CEOs are 12 times more likely to be considered humble than narcissistic, implying that

the stereotype that all CEOs are arrogant, selfish, and unconcerned about others is false.

However, this study does show that narcissistic CEOs exist, and that problems stem from their leadership style. Narcissism in a CEO drives several dysfunctional outcomes such as low ELT morale, poor dynamics with the board, and a lack of sufficient attention to CEO succession by both the CEO and the board.

In the most recent CES study "Defining Success in CEO Succession" we reported that some of the board members we interviewed suggested that CEOs who failed often did so because they were too egotistical and unwilling to accept feedback. One member stated that in today's environment, CEOs need to display more humility and openness to feedback to effectively manage their teams and their organization. These board members emphasized how important the CEO's relationships with the ELT and the board were in their assessments of success. Given that our results show narcissistic CEOs have poor ELT dynamics, a lower reputation with the ELT, and a poorer relationship with the board, this study provides empirical evidence for the previous anecdotal observation.



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The Darla Moore School of Business building has generated significant buzz since it opened its doors in August 2014, both for its striking appearance and for the ways it promises to transform business education. Drawing on extensive input from students, faculty, staff and the business community about how space can be configured to optimize business education, the \$106.5-million building is the university's most ambitious construction project to date.

With its many sustainable features, the building has earned LEED Platinum certification, making it a model for sustainable architecture and sustainable business practices. Its open and flexible design facilitates enhanced interaction and collaboration among faculty and students and makes the building an inviting hub for community engagement. In these and other ways, the building is a physical embodiment of the Moore School's commitment to forward-thinking leadership for the business community.

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