UN-BARRED

Find what's lost.

White Paper

Can Your Board Name It?

A Field Guide to High-Stakes Governance Blind Spots

Executive Summary

A harmful leader rarely operates alone. However striking the individual pathology looks from outside, the years of damage almost always depend on a surrounding structure that permits it — a board that doesn't ask hard questions, a staff culture where dissent costs you something, a governance model built on personal trust rather than independent accountability. Take the structure away, and the same person has far less room to do harm. The question worth asking isn't "what was wrong with that person" — it's "what, in our own design, would let that happen here."

This guide covers a brief grounding in the relevant personality pattern, five structural features that reliably enable it, a composite illustration of how those features combine in practice, and a concrete early-warning checklist a board can actually use before a crisis — not only after one.

I | Recognizing the Pattern

A recognizable cluster of tendencies helps explain how someone rises to this kind of leadership and does this kind of damage: a grandiose sense of self paired with a persistent hunger for admiration and difficulty sustaining real empathy; a strategic, manipulative approach to relationships in which people are treated primarily as instruments toward one's own ends; and a notably diminished capacity for guilt or remorse, often paired with impulsivity and a willingness to disregard others' wellbeing in pursuit of personal aims. These tendencies exist on a spectrum in the general population, and no single behavior is proof of any of them on its own — what matters is the pattern, observed over time, not a checklist for diagnosing any one person from a distance.

What matters for an organization is the behavioral signature, far more than any clinical label: charm that shifts depending on who's watching, a loyal inner circle sitting alongside a trail of discarded former allies, an unusual comfort bending rules and calling it vision, and a consistent pattern of the institution's needs outweighing the wellbeing of the people inside it. None of this requires a diagnosis to act on. It takes attention, and a governance structure willing to actually notice.

Leadership becomes the destination for this pattern for a reason: the tendencies themselves supply the motive. A hunger for admiration and a craving for visibility point straight at roles with platform and authority, and the confidence those tendencies produce gets mistaken, on short acquaintance, for real leadership potential. Research backs this up — people who show this cluster are reliably more likely to emerge as leaders, in settings ranging from leaderless group discussions to military cadet cohorts to ordinary organizations, an effect researchers trace mostly to extraversion and social confidence rather than any actual skill at the job. The same research complicates the simple story about effectiveness: a large meta-analysis found no straightforward relationship between these tendencies and how well a person actually leads, as judged by the people reporting to them, even though those in the role rate their own performance highly, and the real relationship follows a curve rather than a line — rated most favorably at moderate levels, worse at the extremes. What the research does find, consistently, is that the impression fades with time: colleagues who work with this kind of leader longer rate him less favorably than the ones who just met him. Organizations should expect this pattern in leadership disproportionately. It isn't an unlucky exception. It's closer to how the selection process actually works.

A scope note: this guide focuses specifically on this exploitative pattern, not on leadership dysfunction in general. Laziness, incompetence, and burnout cause real damage in organizations too, but they call for a different diagnosis — performance accountability, workload redesign, succession planning — than the concealment and isolation this guide addresses. Treating both as the same problem would blur the correctives for each.

II | Why the Vulnerability Runs Deeper Here

Religious and mission-sending organizations carry a structural vulnerability a typical company doesn't, and the reasons are specific enough to spell out rather than wave at as background fact.

Boards are frequently drawn from within the same faith community as the leader — chosen for shared conviction, friendship, or loyalty to a common calling, rather than for independent governance expertise — and often serve as volunteers without the training, time, or leverage a professional board might bring. The culture of spiritual trust that makes these organizations function also tends to discourage the kind of scrutiny that secular governance takes for granted: asking hard, procedural questions of a spiritual leader can be read, subtly or otherwise, as a lack of faith rather than as ordinary due diligence.

International field operations compound this further. Leadership on the ground is often physically and relationally distant from whatever board oversight exists at home, operates across legal and regulatory environments with widely varying standards for nonprofit accountability, and is largely insulated from the informal checks — a local press, an active regulator, a competitive peer organization — that might otherwise surface a problem earlier. None of this requires an especially bad person to produce serious harm. It requires only an ordinary person with the traits described above, placed inside a structure that was not built to check them.

A third dynamic explains why the first two so often calcify into silence rather than correction: the same structural weaknesses don't just fail to prevent harm — they actively incentivize concealing it. When an organization's entire warrant for existing rests on donor trust and a reputation for moral and spiritual integrity, transparency can look, to the people deciding whether to pursue it, catastrophically costly — not just embarrassment, but the collapse of funding, of local relationships, and, in a religious organization's own self-understanding, apparent damage to the credibility of the faith it exists to represent. That perceived stake can make concealment feel like the responsible choice instead of the self-serving one. Features 3 and 5 below run on exactly this logic: protecting the institution over the person, and letting fear of scandal outweigh fear of harm, aren't aberrations. They're the predictable output of an organization that has come to believe exposure would cost more than the harm itself.

III | Five Features of an Enabling Culture

A harmful leader doesn't manufacture all of these conditions alone — some drift into place gradually, through inattention rather than intent. But a leader who personally selects, shapes, or otherwise constructs his own oversight structure has already shown you a red flag, visible from the outset to anyone willing to look for it. And a board or sending institution that fails to ensure its own oversight is selected and constructed independently of the leader it exists to oversee owns part of that manufacturing too. Each of the following features is a structural choice a board or staff culture can recognize and correct before it hardens.

FEATURE 1

Loyalty Is Rewarded Over Honesty

Ask: *When someone raises a hard question about leadership, what actually happens to them a year later?*

HEALTHY	AT RISK
Dissent is treated as valuable information. People who raised hard questions are still trusted with responsibility.	Disagreement is penalized indirectly — passed over for advancement, excluded from decisions, or eased out under an unrelated pretext.

FEATURE 2

The Leader Is Isolated From Real Accountability

Ask: *Who in this organization has the standing, independence, and information to tell this leader no — and has actually done it?*

HEALTHY	AT RISK
At least one person or body has genuine independence from the leader's favor, pays active attention to governance rather than deferring to it, and has a track record of exercising that independence.	Oversight fails for one of three common reasons, and they often overlap: every person with formal authority owes their position to the leader's continued goodwill; the board was selected, deliberately or not, because its members were already known to be agreeable; or the board simply is not paying close attention, and takes whatever it is told at face value.

FEATURE 3

The Institution Is Protected Over the Person

Ask: *When a complaint is raised, is the first instinct to investigate it or to contain it?*

HEALTHY	AT RISK
Complaints trigger a process designed to find out what happened, independent of who is implicated.	The first response to a complaint is reputational: managing the story, the optics, or the donor relationships before establishing the facts.

FEATURE 4

Charisma Substitutes for Governance

Ask: *If this leader's personal charm were subtracted, would our oversight structure still function?*

HEALTHY	AT RISK
Governance operates on documented process and shared authority, regardless of who currently holds the top role.	Board members describe their confidence in leadership in personal terms (“he's always been so trustworthy”) rather than in terms of a functioning process.

FEATURE 5

Fear of Scandal Outweighs Fear of Harm

Ask: *If handling this well were guaranteed to become public and costly, would we still handle it the same way?*

HEALTHY	AT RISK
The organization's stated response to harm does not change based on who might find out.	Decisions about how to respond to an allegation are shaped primarily by what would happen if it became public.

IV | A Composite Illustration

> **This is a composite pattern assembled from common features across many organizations. It does not describe any specific individual, board, or ministry.**

A founding leader builds an organization around genuine, well-documented early sacrifice, and a great deal of real good is done under that leadership. Over time, the board that forms around the organization is largely handpicked — people who admire the founder, owe their appointment to the founder, or both. Staff who raise concerns about decision-making or working conditions are told, gently at first, that they “don't understand the vision.” Those who persist are eventually managed out, always for a stated reason unrelated to the concern they raised.

When a serious allegation eventually surfaces, the board's first meeting turns to the organization's public image, its donor relationships, and how to “control the narrative,” and the alleged harm barely comes up. An investigation is eventually opened, conducted by someone with a longstanding relationship to the leader. Its findings are never published in full. The person who raised the original concern is now gone. The leader remains, the language of the organization's mission is unchanged, and every one of the five features above was present well before the allegation — not caused by it.

V | A Board's Early-Warning Checklist

These are concrete, adoptable practices — not a philosophy, a checklist. Each one is a specific mechanism, not a general aspiration to "be more accountable."

- **An independent reporting channel.** A way for staff to raise a concern about leadership that does not route through leadership itself, and that a board actually reviews.
- **Genuinely independent board members.** At least a portion of the board with no financial, professional, or personal dependence on the leader's continued goodwill — and a real record of exercising independent judgment.
- **A predetermined response protocol.** A written, pre-agreed process for any serious allegation, decided before a crisis arrives — including who investigates, how independence from the accused is ensured, and what gets communicated to whom.
- **Board-level visibility into staff departures.** Staff exit interviews reviewed by the board itself, not only by leadership — patterns in why capable people leave are often the earliest available signal.
- **A regular executive session without the leader present.** At least once a year, the board meets without the leader in the room, specifically to discuss how leadership and governance are actually functioning — not as a response to any complaint, but as a standing item on the calendar, with the discussion and any resulting action items recorded in minutes the leader does not see in advance.

None of these mechanisms require suspecting anyone of anything. They are the ordinary infrastructure of good governance — valuable whether or not an organization ever needs them, and the only thing standing in the way when it does.

One honest caveat about this whole checklist: every mechanism above assumes a board already has at least some members with genuine independence to exercise. In practice, most boards in this sector were not built through an arms-length search or a formal process — they were built by personal invitation, often extended by the very leader the board exists to oversee. That is common. It is not best practice, and no governance policy fixes it after the fact if the underlying composition was never independent to begin with. Board selection and formation — how members are actually identified, vetted, and brought on, independent of the sitting leader — is arguably the more foundational fix, and substantial enough to deserve its own treatment. A future piece on best practices for board selection and formation is a strong candidate to follow this one.

VI | Sources

These three peer-reviewed sources support the personality-and-leadership research summarized in Section I. The structural claims in Section II are reasoned argument built from the general nonprofit-governance literature, not individually cited findings.

Paulhus, D. L., & Williams, K. M. (2002). The Dark Triad of personality: Narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. Journal of Research in Personality, 36(6), 556–563.

Brunell, A. B., Gentry, W. A., Campbell, W. K., Hoffman, B. J., Kuhnert, K. W., & DeMarree, K. G. (2008). Leader emergence: The case of the narcissistic leader. Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 34(12), 1663–1676.

Grijalva, E., Harms, P. D., Newman, D. A., Gaddis, B. H., & Fraley, R. C. (2015). Narcissism and leadership: A meta-analytic review of linear and nonlinear relationships. Personnel Psychology, 68(1), 1–47.