

The Quality that Makes You Endearing ... or Irritating

by [Mike Hawkins](#)



Niccolò Machiavelli c. 1550-1600

What is the one quality in people you find most endearing when present and most irritating when absent? If you think about those you most admire and spend time with versus those whom you least enjoy spending time with, does one quality stand out?

Is it people's humility or lack of? Or level of empathy and compassion or lack of? Relational engagement vs disengagement? Work ethic? Competence? Open- vs close-mindedness. Can- vs can't-do attitude?

There are probably many qualities that come to mind when you think about it, but one quality in particular is at the root of many undesirable qualities, including the irritating ones just mentioned. It is *selfishness*. When you think about people's irritating egos, lack of compassion, close-mindedness, and relational disengagement to name a few examples, the underlying driver is often their self-centeredness or selfishness.

[Selfishness](#), as defined by Merriam-Webster, is a concern for one's own welfare or advantage at the expense of or in disregard of others. It is an excessive interest in oneself. In extreme cases, selfishness underlies mental disorders such as [narcissism](#), [psychopathy](#), and [Machiavellianism](#)—named after a Renaissance philosopher who wrote about how rulers could succeed in politics through deception, treachery, and violence.

Many people are quick to label people with selfish tendencies as narcissists. If all it took were selfish tendencies, then we would all be narcissists. We all have some self-centered and self-preserving tendencies.

To clear up any confusion, people who have a clinically diagnosed Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) are chronically selfish to a much deeper degree. Actually, there are two types of narcissists with [grandiose narcissism](#) being the type person who is so self-absorbed they can't see circumstances from others' perspectives. In other words, they are incapable of empathy. The other type of narcissist is referred to as vulnerable. In contrast to grandiose, vulnerable narcissism is less obvious as it lacks the outward arrogance and attention-getting behaviors. This type person has internal feelings of superiority or entitlement, but it manifests as insecurity and an avoidant behavior.

For the remaining 98 percent of the adult population who don't meet the criteria for narcissism, selfishness shows up to lesser and different degrees. Yet for many, it is enough to be annoying and irritating. In the workplace, it causes people to take credit for others' work or put down others for their own benefit. In people's personal lives it causes people to think less of family members, friends, and neighbors or worse, to take advantage of them. Perhaps selfishness is most observable in public figures and elected officials who place their self-interests above the good of the general public.

It is easy to see selfishness in others, but not so easy in ourselves. While we often have good intentions, our biases, blind spots, and mindless actions often cause us to behave at odds with our intentions. Therefore, we all manifest some of the same qualities we despise in others. We judge others based on our exaggerated sense of self. We think our problems are worse than others' problems. We don't help others when they need help, yet complain when people don't help us.

Managers too complain about their underperformers, yet don't accept the responsibility for not having coached them. They fire people without considering they were the ones who hired them in the first place. They expect their employees to work long hours and do whatever it takes, yet only monitor the results instead of providing the resources or help they need. (If you are a manager of people, here are seven principles to avoid if you don't want to be perceived as self-serving: https://alpinelink.com/docs/Power_Has_Its_Weakness.pdf)

Parents too can be selfish when they expect their children's teachers to do all the teaching. Or when they communicate a family value, but don't follow it themselves. Or when they expect the best for their children, but not for everyone else's. They are selfish when doing what is enjoyable or convenient for themselves but impacts their children in an unhealthy way.

The opposite of selfishness isn't selflessness. It isn't simply putting everyone else above yourself. The endearing opposite of selfishness is unselfishness. It is caring about others and valuing their needs. It is doing what is honorable which may include deferring your needs and giving of your resources.

If you are in a position to help others be unselfish, or want to work on your own unselfishness, consider these principles:

1. **Recognize where to compete and where not to.** See family, friends, and colleagues through the lens of collaborators, not competitors. Unless there are extraordinary circumstances, they are on your team. Leave the desire to win for the track, the field, the ice, or wherever you compete.
2. **Be secure in yourself.** Let go of any need to always be right, best, or all-knowing. Let go of any need to have the best image. Accept yourself including your imperfections. Strive to be better without needing to be better than others. Let others have the last word. Let others retain their dignity.
3. **Admire people.** Accept others despite their imperfections. Realize that like yourself, others have issues too. Don't judge others unless you have the responsibility to do so. Only compare yourself to others with the intent to admire something about them rather than to put them down.
4. **Recognize what others have done for you.** No matter how much you've accomplished or gone through, you received help from others. People before you helped you. People around you now are helping you. Be grateful for other people and how much they've helped you.
5. **Think bigger than yourself.** Let go of any need to control people. Consider what is good for both you and others. Think about not only achieving your needs, but also others'. Strive for win-win outcomes. With thought and dialog, find solutions that achieve your needs as well as others. Expect to earn whatever you believe you deserve rather than thinking you are entitled to it.
6. **Show interest in others.** Be curious about and interested in people. Ask questions. Listen attentively. Seek to have meaningful conversations. For more information on meaningful conversations, see https://alpinelink.com/docs/The_Problem_with_Shallow_Conversations.pdf. For more information on asking questions, see https://alpinelink.com/docs/talking_vs_asking.pdf.
7. **Empathize.** Mentally put yourself in others' circumstances. Relate to their thoughts and feelings. Understand their needs. This makes people feel valued and is perhaps the most important trait of great leaders. For more on empathy, see <https://alpinelink.com/2016/07/01/the-1-skill-underpinning-successful-relationships/>
8. **Help others.** Prioritize assisting, coaching, and supporting other people. Be generous with your time and resources. Give. Share. Build up people. Compliment, affirm, and encourage others frequently. Recognize their efforts and contributions. Leave a legacy that you will be proud of.

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