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Hubris

‘Intoxicated with power?
What, me?’

How to stay on the ‘bright side’ of yourself

sowing seeds



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What is hubris?

Hubristic behaviour is a syndrome, constituting a cluster of features, evoked by a specific trigger (power). Hubris is seen as an acquired condition and therefore different from most disorders of the personality which are traditionally seen as persistent throughout adulthood. The key concept is that hubris is a disorder of the possession of power, particularly power which has been associated with overwhelming success, held for a period of years and with minimal constraint on the leader.

“The concept of ‘truth’ as something dependent upon facts largely outside human control has been one of the ways philosophy, hitherto, has inculcated the necessary element of humility. When this check upon pride is removed, a further step is taken on the road towards a certain kind of madness – the intoxication of power.”

Bertrand Russell, 1961

Who is affected?

‘If you are a strong willed and accomplished person, you may often give the impression that you are invulnerable to feeling inadequate or insecure or hurt. This can be very isolating and ultimately cause you and others great pain. Other people will be all too happy to take in that impression and to collude in propagating a ‘Rock of Gibraltar’ persona, one which does not allow you to have any real feelings. In fact, you can all too easily get out of touch with your own true feelings behind the intoxicating shield of image and aura. This isolation happens a lot to fathers in the nuclear family and to **people in positions of relative power and authority everywhere.**’ (Kabat-Zinn, 2004)

How hubris can affect others

“A hubristic leader can create a particular kind of ‘toxicity’ who, by virtue of their destructive behaviours and their dysfunctional personal qualities or characteristics, inflict serious and enduring harm on the individuals, groups, organisations, communities and even the nations that they lead.”

Jean Lipman-Burman, 2014

One could ask ‘who in their right mind would behave that way?’ Indeed many can find themselves in the grip of this extreme form of narcissism which can bring down organisations, whole countries and start wars. This can be brought about by the ‘intoxication of power’ (Claxton, 2016) and sometimes manifests when a person is under extreme personal stress. Many books have been written about this (see references and recommended reading), including the pioneering work of Lord David Owen (a neurologist and former foreign secretary) and other clinicians, academics and business analysts who study the phenomena. This publication is adapted from many seminal works on the subject.

In this edition of Sowing Seeds we will be exploring three elements of hubris.

- 1. As a personality disorder**
- 2. As unbridled intuition**
- 3. As an overused skill**

We may find that these are not unrelated!

In the final section of this edition of Sowing Seeds we will also see that hubris needs certain conditions in which to thrive.

The 'acquired personality disorder' argument

Owen's early work with psychiatrist, Jonathan Davidson, 'Hubris Syndrome' (2009) refers to hubris as an 'acquired personality disorder' which is an extreme form of 'narcissism'. One can argue that a healthy amount of narcissism is necessary if one is to have the confidence to rise to a leadership position, but left unchecked can tip into a disorder of the personality as described below by Oldham and Morris (adapted from 'Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders', 2000).

A narcissistic personality disorder manifests in an individual as:

S: special (believes he or she is special and unique)

P: preoccupied with fantasies (of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love)

E: entitlement

C: conceited (grandiose sense of self importance)

I: interpersonal exploitation

A: arrogant (haughty)

L: lacks empathy

Owen and Davidson (2009) identify certain narcissistic characteristics that are unique to hubris:

1. An identification with the nation or organisation – to the extent that they regard the outlook and interests of the two as identical
2. A tendency to speak of themselves in the belief that rather than being accountable to the mundane court of colleagues or public opinion, the real court to which they answer is much greater: history or god
3. An unshakeable belief that they will be vindicated in that court
4. Speak of themselves in the third person or use the royal 'we'
5. Restlessness, recklessness and impulsiveness
6. A tendency to allow their 'broad vision', especially their conviction about the moral rectitude of a proposed course of action, to obviate the need to consider other aspects of it, such as its practicality, cost and the possibility of unwanted outcomes.



Owen and Davidson closely studied the behaviour of Tony Blair and George Bush in the run up to the Iraq war. Even in the early days of his premiership Blair demonstrated an 'over occupation' with image and self promotion.

He quotes this leaked memo from number 10:

'search around for two or three eye-catching initiatives that I should be personally associated with as much of this as possible'.

It is Owen's belief that both Blair and Bush were in the grip of hubris and demonstrated many of its characteristics, particularly the demonstration of characteristics 2, 3 and 6.



Blair was not the only British prime minister to demonstrate hubris. Margaret Thatcher, in her famous announcement, "**We have become a grandmother**" (2010) demonstrated one of the 'linguistic markers' of hubris. Thatcher at other times would refer to herself in the third person as 'the lady' demonstrating characteristic 4. (Owen and Davidson, 2009)

© Newsfocus1 | Dreamstime.com - Margaret Thatcher Photo

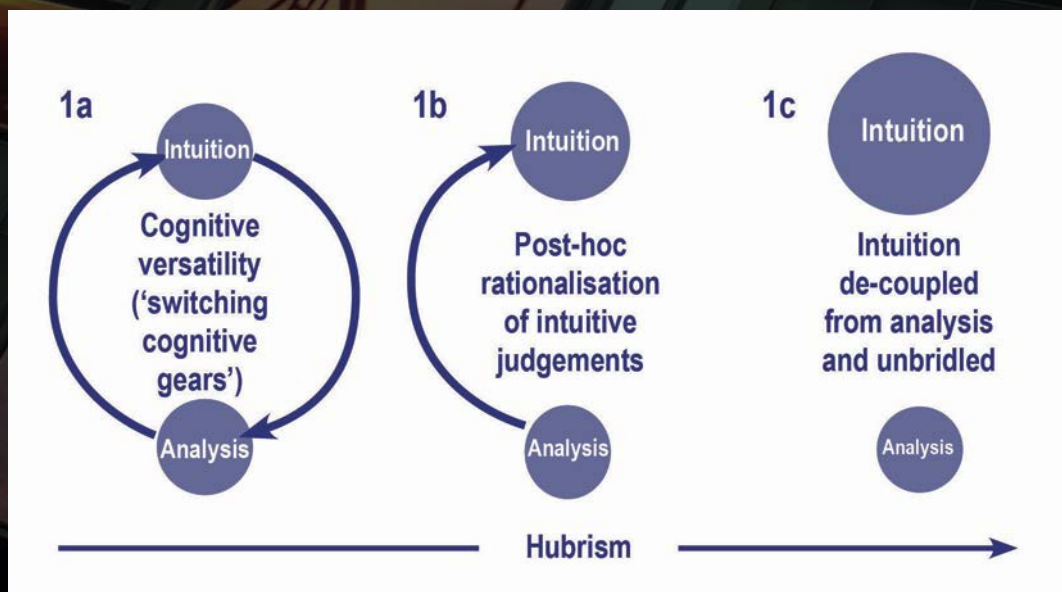
Do you recognise any of these characteristics in yourself or other leaders? Would anyone around you tell you? Would you be able to tell them? History tells us that ultimately, hubristic leaders will meet their 'nemesis' if uncontained, and nemesis will often emerge from someone within their own ranks.

The 'unbridled intuition' argument

Psychologist Guy Claxton (2016) argues that hubris can arise when an individual's 'intuition' is uncontained:

'Intuition involves a mental leap. It is not part of a logical continuum or the steady application of reasoning ending with a commonsensical judgement. Hubris can be bridled when intuitive and analytical systems are in balance, the feeling of rightness is subject to analysis and evaluation is done through conscious deliberation and discussion, quiet reflection and debate and public testing. Judgements are held back while public and private appraisal takes place. The individual can shift cognitive gears.

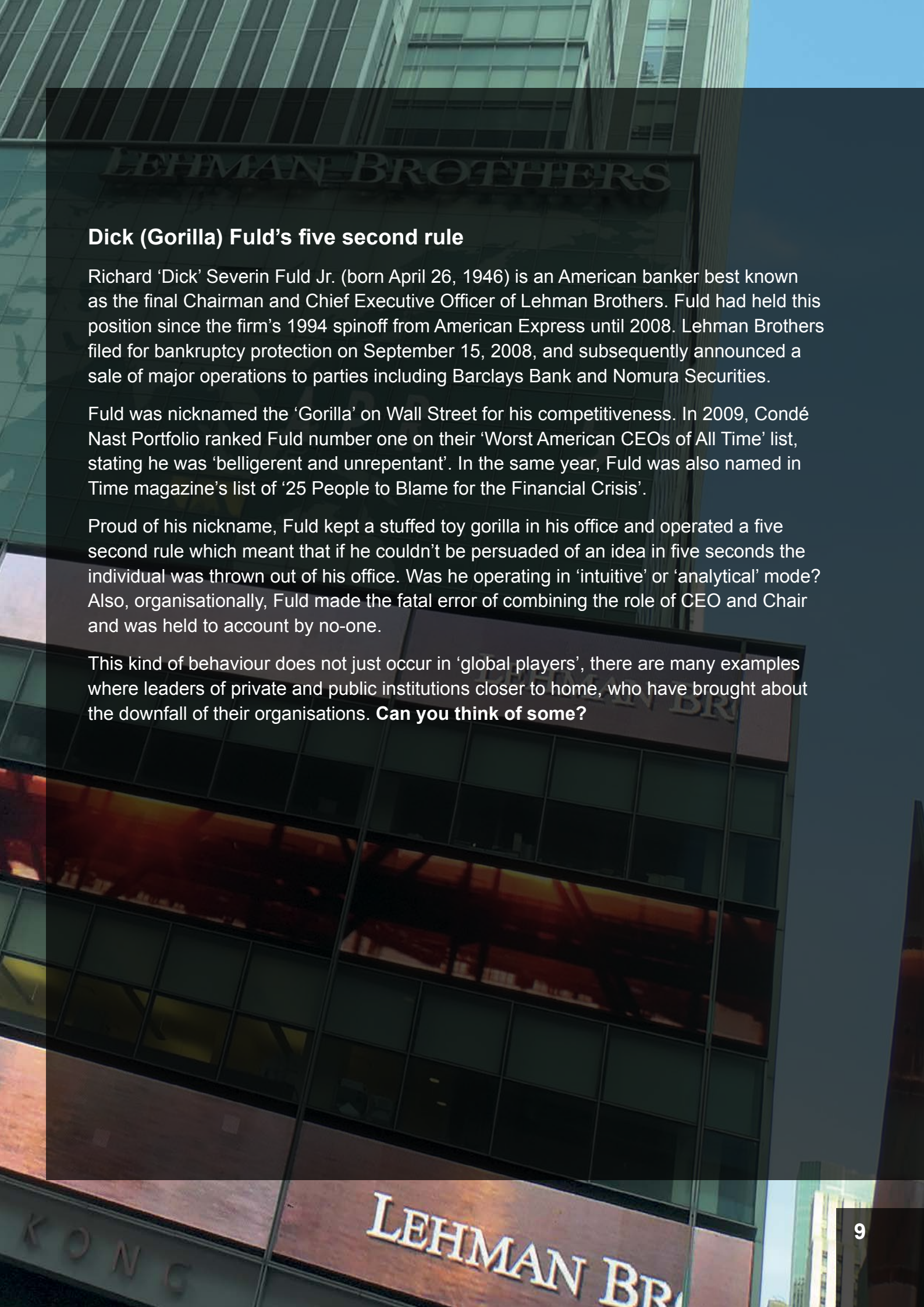
'By contrast, with developing Hubris Syndrome the feeling of rightness is self-strengthened and operates unchecked. The switching between reflexive intuitive mode and the reflective analytical mode does not take place, self-checking breaks down, intuition 'crowds-out' rational analysis and the leader becomes 'stuck' in an intuitive mode in which facts are ignored.'



Owen, (2012) reports on his observations of Blair and Bush thus:

Peter Mandelson on Tony Blair '**Tony has great intuition**'

Tony Blair on George W Bush '**George has great intuition**'

The background of the slide is a photograph of the Lehman Brothers building in Hong Kong. The building is a modern skyscraper with a glass facade. The name 'LEHMAN BROTHERS' is visible in large, dark letters on the upper part of the building. At the bottom of the image, the word 'KONG' is partially visible on the left, and 'LEHMAN BR' is visible on the right. The sky is a clear blue.

Dick (Gorilla) Fuld's five second rule

Richard 'Dick' Severin Fuld Jr. (born April 26, 1946) is an American banker best known as the final Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of Lehman Brothers. Fuld had held this position since the firm's 1994 spinoff from American Express until 2008. Lehman Brothers filed for bankruptcy protection on September 15, 2008, and subsequently announced a sale of major operations to parties including Barclays Bank and Nomura Securities.

Fuld was nicknamed the 'Gorilla' on Wall Street for his competitiveness. In 2009, Condé Nast Portfolio ranked Fuld number one on their 'Worst American CEOs of All Time' list, stating he was 'belligerent and unrepentant'. In the same year, Fuld was also named in Time magazine's list of '25 People to Blame for the Financial Crisis'.

Proud of his nickname, Fuld kept a stuffed toy gorilla in his office and operated a five second rule which meant that if he couldn't be persuaded of an idea in five seconds the individual was thrown out of his office. Was he operating in 'intuitive' or 'analytical' mode? Also, organisationally, Fuld made the fatal error of combining the role of CEO and Chair and was held to account by no-one.

This kind of behaviour does not just occur in 'global players', there are many examples where leaders of private and public institutions closer to home, who have brought about the downfall of their organisations. **Can you think of some?**

Can hubris be predicted?

Hubris as an 'over-used skill'

The history of personality assessments dates back to the 1930s when assessment centres were used to select individuals for dangerous wartime assignments. Drawing on this tradition, Drs Robert and Joyce Hogan introduced their assessment, the Hogan Personality Inventory, in 1980. Hogan Assessment Systems was founded in 1987, with the goal of taking personality assessments into the business community.

Hogan and Hogan (2014) probably describe toxicity and the potential for an individual to develop it in the most constructive way, when they say that it is the negative consequences of an 'over used skill'. Their Career Derailers Psychometric Assessments measure:

'The Bright Side of Personality, Job Satisfaction and Fit and The Dark Side of Personality'.

The Bright Side – Hogan Personality Inventory (HPI) is a measure of normal personality – the characteristics that appear during social interaction and that facilitate or inhibit a person's ability to:

- a) get along with others, and
- b) achieve his or her goals.

It is based on how a person is perceived by others and is concerned with the structure of reputation, because a reputation is based on social consensus regarding trends in a persons' behaviour.

The Dark Side – The Hogan Development Survey (HDS)

interprets extreme scores on the HPI and their possible negative consequences. The HDS refers to three 'clusters' and describes them as being an individuals' way of managing insecurities.

Although clusters 1 and 3 can result in other forms of toxicity it is the middle cluster which might indicate potential for hubris.

Excitable	<p>Moving Away:</p> <p>The first cluster is defined by the Excitable, Sceptical, Cautious, Reserved and Leisurely Scales. Components include feelings of insecurity, mistrust, hostility and social withdrawal. These seem to correspond to the interpersonal theme that has been characterised as ‘moving away from others’ as a method for dealing with insecurity.</p>
Sceptical	
Cautious	
Reserved	
Leisurely	
Bold	<p>Moving Against:</p> <p>The second cluster is defined by the Bold, Mischievous, Colourful and Imaginative scales. This syndrome includes social (but not necessary private) self-confidence, impulsivity, energy, competitiveness, and a talent for self-display. This seems to correspond to what has been labelled ‘moving against’ people – overwhelming, co-opting, intimidating, persuading, manipulating – as a technique for managing insecurity.</p>
Mischievous	
Colourful	
Imaginative	
Diligent	<p>Moving Towards:</p> <p>The third cluster is defined by the Diligent and Dutiful scales. This is a syndrome consisting of conformity, obedience, and eagerness to please – what might be described as ‘moving toward’ people, building alliances, and securing approval as a way of dealing with one’s insecurities.</p>
Dutiful	

High scores in the ‘Moving Against’ cluster does not necessarily mean the individual will go on to develop hubris. There are mitigating factors in the other elements of the profile which will appear in Job Satisfaction and Fit which explores values and ambitions. For example, an individual may have high scores on the ‘Moving Against’ cluster but may show low scores on ‘desire for power’ and high scores on ‘altruism’. Likely to be creative or intuitive types they may welcome the containment others bring with planning and structure.

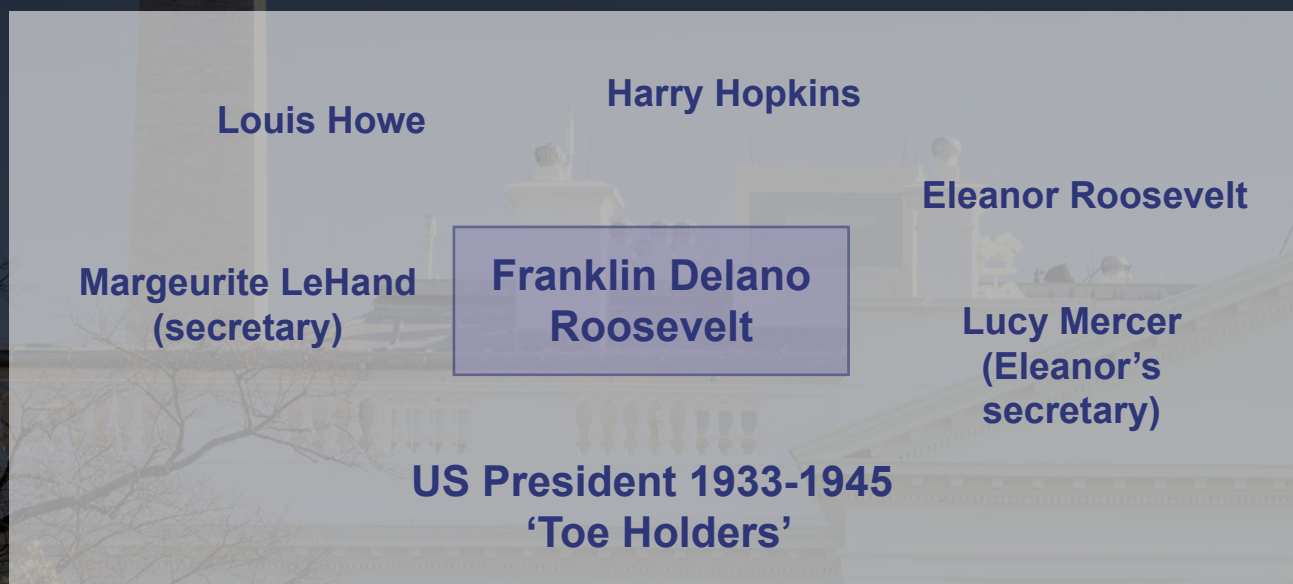
(Adapted from Hogan Assessment Systems, 2014)

By undergoing this assessment you will have an opportunity to receive feedback and reflect upon the elements of your personality which may get ‘over-used’ and possibly lead to hubristic behaviour. Having this knowledge will enable you to put in ‘safety mechanisms’ that ensure you don’t go to the ‘dark side’.

These mechanisms are explored in the next chapter – ‘**Can hubris be contained?**’

Can hubris be contained? The role of the 'toe holder'

In Owen and Davidson's study of US Presidents and UK Prime Ministers over the last 100 years' (2009), they describe the moderating effect certain individuals had on leaders of the last century who came close to, or began to exhibit signs of hubris.



They attribute the expression 'toe holder' to Louis Howe who served as Franklin Delano Roosevelt's advisor from his first term until Howe's death in 1936. He always called him Franklin and could be relied upon to tell him the, often, brutal truth. FDR skated close to hubris when he tried to pack the Supreme Court with sympathetic associates, but was stopped by Howe saying 'that's the stupidest idea I ever heard – even from you Franklin!'

Harry Hopkins, a former social worker who had worked with FDR on the New Deal, became the president's 'legs' as his health deteriorated. Eleanor Roosevelt, his wife, remained a trusted advisor often acting as the president's 'conscience', and both Eleanor and his secretary Marguerite LeHand were known for their moderating influence on him.

Winston Churchill's Letter from Clementine Churchill (Owen, 2012):



© StampGirl | Dreamstime.com - Winston Churchill
Postage Stamp Photo

My Darling

I hope you will forgive me if I tell you something I feel you ought to know.

One of the men in your entourage (a devoted friend) has been to me and told me there is a danger of you being generally disliked by your colleagues and subordinates because of your rough, sarcastic and overbearing manner. It seems your Private Secretaries have agreed to behave like school boys and 'take what's coming to them' and then escape out of your presence, shrugging their shoulders. Higher up (say at conference) you are supposed to be so contemptuous that presently, no ideas, good or bad, will be forthcoming.

According to Owen and Davidson (2009), having a strong spouse has been a moderating influence on many world leaders.

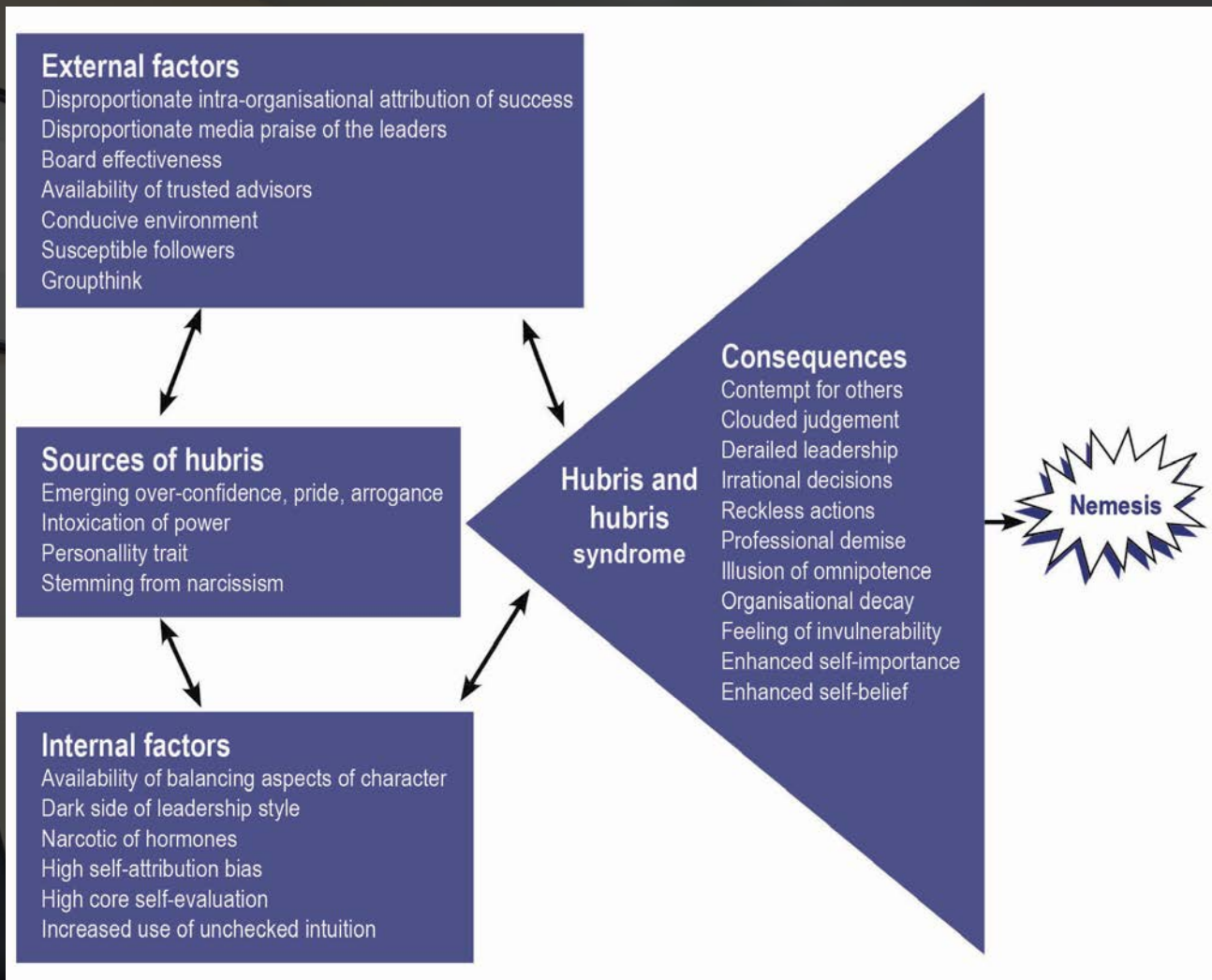
Who are your 'toe holders'?

One of the main characteristics of hubris is the inability to receive and pay attention to feedback, unless it is flattering. Often colleagues will collude with a hubristic leader by using flattery, often afraid to be forthright and honest. This leads to further isolation of the leader. 'Toe holders' are people you can rely on and allow to tell you the truth.

Make a list of yours.

So what if it's YOU? Conquering hubris in yourself

Although we have only examined a few elements in this publication, hubris is multi-causal and dependent on certain conditions, as identified by Tim Wray (2016):



Starting with ourselves, here are some strategies for keeping our own hubris in check.

1. Practice Humility

Jim Collins spent 30 years investigating why certain organisations are more successful than others. Collins found that companies led by modest leaders consistently outperformed their competitors. He also found that humble leaders tended to stay in their organisations longer than their arrogant counterparts, and that their organisations continued to perform well even after they leave, because humble leaders often ensure a succession plan before they depart.

The characteristics common to these successful leaders are: **‘Humility, will, ferocious resolve, and the tendency to give credit to others while assigning blame to themselves’** (Collins, 2001).

2. Actively seek feedback

Proactively seeking out feedback, informally or from 360 degree assessments or psychometric assessments, according to Collins and many other business experts, is part and parcel of what he describes as ‘Level 5’ leadership – this ‘paradoxical combination of personal humility plus professional will’.

And, of course, use your ‘toe holders’, your colleagues, coach/mentor or other trusted advisors.

3. Reframe the role of the ‘Critic’

The Disney Creative Strategy was designed by Robert Dilts, co-developer of the field of NLP (Neuro Linguistic Programming), a branch of Positive Psychology which models the thinking strategies of successful people in any field. Dilts’s strategy offers a constructive way to allow ‘dreamers’ or creative people to dream without constriction, but create ‘containment’ by welcoming the realists and the critics to bring planning to the process and wisdom to explore any unwanted or unforeseen outcomes.

Dreamer asks
– what do we want / what’s possible?

Realist asks
– what are the steps we need to take?

Critic asks
– what could go wrong/what’s missing?

Instructions for the practical use of this strategy in teams appear in *The NLP Workbook* (O’Connor, 2002)

4. Practice Mindfulness

Dr David Denyer of Cranfield University, in a 2013 speech made to the Healthcare People Management Association in the wake of the report on Mid Staffordshire NHS Trust, called ‘How to Make a Bad Barrel’ cited:

‘A lack of ‘mindfulness’ across the organisation i.e. attention, alertness and care’

Mindfulness is a secular meditation practice which causes us to pay attention to the here and now. It creates more self-awareness and resilience to stress, better decision making and, according to neuroscience, can create balance between the creative and analytical hemispheres of the brain.

Academi Wales also offers a half day course in mindfulness and there is an edition of *Sowing Seeds* and podcasts available on the website: www.gov.wales/academiwales

What does this mean for public service leaders?

We can conclude that, given the right conditions and as Kabat-Zinn (2004) says, hubris can affect 'people in positions of relative power and authority everywhere'. We do not need to be world leaders or head of a global business to be vulnerable to its grip.

As mentioned in the introduction, there are many books and papers written of hubris and other forms of 'toxic' leadership. In the age of the 'Rock Star CEO' (Hogan Thought Leadership Yearbook 2014) it would appear to be on the rise. Many offer complex and sometimes sensational accounts of varying kinds of toxicity. This publication offers a signpost to those resources (please see references and recommended reading).

However the reality, according to The Health and Safety Executive 2014/15, is that 'poor interpersonal relationships' are the second biggest reason for stress and burnout, the first being 'overload'. It is particularly high in the public sector and costs the UK economy £6.5 billion a year in sickness absence. The less obvious effect in the workplace is likely to be employee disengagement, which means people are only giving 60-70% of their potential. According to CIPD the role modelling provided by the leader is vital to retaining:

- vigour (energy, resilience and effort)
- dedication (for example, enthusiasm, inspiration and pride)
- absorption (concentration and being engrossed in one's work).

Utrecht University, 2016

Ultimately, this publication is about you and the kind of leader you aspire to be. It may also help you to recognise hubris in others and offer some ways to tackle the issue. The rule of thumb is to never 'label' someone with the title hubristic, but to focus on the behaviours, and encourage them to use the strategies discussed in this edition of Sowing Seeds.



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Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg / This document is also available in Welsh.