Hubristic Leadership:
Understanding its causes, combatting the consequences

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LEADERSHIP
constructive leader attributes and behaviours
.....destructive leader attributes and behaviours
<table>
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<th>Destructive Leadership</th>
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<td>Social undermining</td>
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<td>Abusive supervision</td>
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<td>Narcissistic leadership</td>
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<td><strong>Hubristic leadership</strong></td>
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<td>Managerial despotism / tyranny</td>
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<td>Etc.</td>
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TASK
What skills do managers in your organization need to combat the hubris hazard?
Hubris
“Icarus had fallen in love with the sky, and soared higher and higher until the wax which fastened his plumage was dissolved by the scorching rays of the sun.” (Ovid Metamorphóses, Book 8)
Hubristic leaders are intoxicated by power and success...
...prone to recklessness

“Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely”
(Lord Acton, 1934-1902)
Over-confidence
Over-ambition
Contempt
Arrogance
Hubristic pride
Recklessness
Hubristic Hall of Fame
Hubris – Is thy name Richard Fuld?
FINANCIAL TIMES September 14th 2008

Is it just coincidence that both Lehman Brothers and Bear Stearns were led by entrenched men who lost touch with their employees, businesses and mission? Did hubris cause the collapse of these two venerable banks? As 158-year-old Lehman disintegrates, and potential buyers sniff the carcass, it is worth asking whether blame for the fall of both Lehman and Bear might be attributed, not only to a failure of risk management, but to a failure of character.
Failed RBS banker Fred the Shred cost you billions. But he's got legal gag to stop him being called a banker...

What a banker!

Christine ‘I want babies with Frank’

Gaddafi bombs Sun squad

SUPER-INJUNCTION EXPOSED


5 Mar 2009: Base rate cut to 0.5%

Source: Bloomberg/Bank of England
"Carillion’s rise and spectacular fall was a story of recklessness, hubris and greed."

From ‘Executive Summary of Second Joint report from the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and Work and Pensions Committees of Session 2017–19’ Published 16th May 2018
"Is it really surprising that a group of people who were feted time and again by politicians might end up believing that they were untouchable? There is an element of Greek tragedy in all of this:

The hubris of the hero who discovers that the virtue that made him (and they are nearly all men) stand out in the first place is also destined to become his fatal flaw."

Heath Monk, TES, October 2016
“I often think I became a brain-surgeon to justify my own sense of self-importance. It’s for fear of egomania that doctors shouldn’t work in isolation. Look at Shipman. People working on their own get out of touch and it corrupts you...it’s hubris isn’t it? The funny thing about medical hubris is that nemesis is visited on the patients rather than the surgeon.”

Henry Marsh, Neurosurgeon and author
Prior success
Power
Over self-evaluation

Minimal / removal of restraint on leader

Unintended negative consequences

Risk Factors
RISK FACTOR: Over self-evaluation
Positive self-evaluation is a good thing... up to a point
"If you can dream it, you can do it."

-Walt Disney
Self-evaluation: Too much of a good thing?
Actually, throughout my life, my two greatest assets have been mental stability and being, like, really smart. Crooked Hillary Clinton also played these cards very hard and, as everyone knows, went down in flames. I went from VERY successful businessman, to top T.V. Star.....

...to President of the United States (on my first try). I think that would qualify as not smart, but genius....and a very stable genius at that!
“Pride goeth before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall”

(Book of Proverbs)
Inflated (hyper) self-evaluations lead to over-confidence and over-ambition* which invite unintended negative consequences

* ‘the winner effect’
Paradox of Hubristic Leadership

Success

Success breeds hubris

Paradox of ‘strengths-into-weaknesses’

Strengths lead to success

Hubris

Hubris turns strengths into weaknesses

Strengths

Weakness
Strengths into Weaknesses

- **Positive Alignment**
  becomes **over-identification** with the organization (‘I am this organization’, ‘its’ all about me’)

- **Sound Judgement**
  becomes **excessive self-confidence** (‘just trust me’, ‘I just know’)

- **Proper Ambition**
  becomes **exaggerated self-belief**, bordering on omnipotence (‘we can do anything’)

RISK FACTOR: Weak restraint (on leader)
The white flags are flying in Stanley

Ceasefire as enemy surrender their arms
THE Sun
FACE OF DEFEAT
'Traitor' taunt as Scargill caves in

Today's Bingo Winners and Numbers - Page 7

Coal Not Dole
REVOLT
Poll tax
Tories turn on
Thatcher
Sad Thatcher's final farewell to No 10

TEARS IN THE BACK SEAT

JOBS FOR THE BOYS Page 2 • THE NEW BOY Pages 2, 4, 5, 6 and 7
David Cameron doesn’t have a Willie – and it shows
Margaret Thatcher knew what a political leader needed to avoid foul-ups: “Every prime minister needs a Willie,” she proclaimed. The Prime Minister needs an enforcer who can bring order to chaos in the Cabinet.

*Telegraph, October 2012*
Affection, loyalty, mutual respect

Constrains leader by speaking truth to power

Weakening of TH can create conditions for hubris to emerge
Complicit Followers

- Lost Souls (seek direction)
- Bystanders (passively watch)
- Acolytes (share the vision)
- Opportunists (spot an opening)

Conformers

Colluders

Complicit Followers

Toxic triangle of hubristic leadership

Toxic triangle of hubristic leadership

Toxic triangle of hubristic leadership

A Toxic Triangle of Hubristic Leadership

- Hubristic leaders
- Kids Company collapse
- Politicians, celebrities, media
- Child poverty
- A Toxic Triangle of Hubristic Leadership
Consequences...

“When deciding whether to hand over taxpayers’ money Ministers/Government departments must carry out due diligence...should not override official advice...should not allow charity representatives to exploit access to Government in ways that may be unethical...proved to be an improper way to conduct Government business or handle public money” (HC433 01.02.16)
Hubristic leadership – what to do about it
Anti-hubris Toolkit
TASK
What skills do mangers in your organization need to combat the hubris hazard?
What skills do managers need if they are to mitigate hubristic leadership?

- Emotional intelligence
- Self-awareness (‘know thyself’)
- Coaching
- Conversation
- ‘Gritty listening’
- Questioning
- Using social media
- Exercising / taking responsibility
- Speaking truth to power
Hubristic leadership...

...is a form of destructive leadership

...caused by power, success, over self-evaluation, etc.

...characterised by over-confidence, over-ambition, arrogance, contempt and recklessness

...can lead to unintended negative consequences

...followers / managers can encourage / constrain leader’s hubris
Hubris calls for nemesis, and in one form or another it’s going to get it, not as a punishment from outside but as the completion of a pattern already started

(Midgley 2004)
THE HUBRIS HUB

https://www.thehubrishub.com/

Sadler-Smith E, Robinson G, Akstinaite V & Wray T (2019) Hubristic leadership: Understanding the hazard and mitigating the risks. *Organizational Dynamics* (for a copy, e.sadler-smith@surrey.ac.uk)
“An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure”

(...line managers can help prevent)
CEOs are / can be...

- Exceptional
- Isolated
- Lonely

Reduce hubris risk by...

- De-isolating
- Looking sideway to re-calibrate
- Having a toe-holder
2. Listening for faint signals

- Anecdotes
- Artefacts
- Jokes
- Stories
- Social media

Faint ≠ Weak
What do these three situations have in common?
3. High Reliability Organizing

- Trusting/empowering front-line experts
- Right/responsibility to challenge decisions
- Learning from mistakes
• Domineering, coercive, manipulative, self-seeking, reckless leader behaviors
• Negative employee effects: attitude to leader, job satisfaction, turnover intention, well-being, commitment, performance
• Prevalent and costly, e.g. 14% of US workers / $23.8bn
• Causes harm intentionally / unintentionally