
Is Stargazing Your Preferred Management Style?



By Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries , INSEAD

For too many leaders, astrology acts as a crutch that gives them a false sense of control in an uncertain world.

“Who needs astrology? The wise man gets by on fortune cookies.” – Edward Abbey

Steve was the CEO of a highly respected company, a whiz kid in data analytics, but he was also known to consult horoscopes for auspicious signs before making important business decisions. When his friends told him to stop wasting his time on superstitions, his response was always, “Of course, I don’t believe in this rubbish. It’s just harmless fun.” But in fact, horoscopes very much influenced him.

Some 3,000 years ago, the Babylonians introduced the notion of the zodiac, an imaginary belt in the heavens made up of 12 constellations represented by animalistic and human forms. In the 4th century BCE, this Babylonian star catalogue entered Greek astrology, to subsequently circulate widely across other cultures. For instance, astrology was highly regarded in the Islamic world and in Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, with astrological practices woven

into the Mayan calendar.

The allure of pseudoscience

Despite their long history, the propositions of astrology have never been found to have any scientific basis. Yet, according to the [Pew Research Center](#), 29 percent of Americans believe in the validity of astrology. Another [poll](#) by the National Science Foundation showed that more than 40 percent of Americans think astrology is a science – and they weren't confusing astrology with astronomy.

Each day, hundreds of millions of people look to the stars for advice on things like love, health, their choice of profession, finances and other matters. This interest can be found among all sectors of society, including politicians. Theodore Roosevelt, for example, kept his birth chart on a table in his drawing room. Before making any major decision, Ronald Reagan was known to consult an astrologer. Charles de Gaulle and François Mitterrand also sought advice from astrologers.

Likewise, many business leaders also turn to astrologers for answers. In fact, astrological business consulting has been on the rise, offering advice on how to figure out the “right energy” for a given day or when to use “the most auspicious timing for strategic decisions”.

The need to manage uncertainty

Astrologers have benefitted from the explosion of social media. Astrology has become ubiquitous on YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, as well as in downloadable workshops, classes and webinars. By joining the wellness industry, astrology has become a [multi-billion-dollar business](#) worldwide, offering simple answers in an age of information overload.

Astrology, like all belief systems, helps to ease anxiety about the human condition. Amid confusion and uncertainty, we yearn for guidance and support. Astrology offers hope and provides an illusion of security, predictability, and control in an otherwise chaotic world. The allure of horoscopes is that they help people to deal with the emotional discomfort, financial, and physical insecurity of day-to-day life.

In a way, this wish to create certainty out of uncertainty is a continuation of our childhood. When we were growing up, caregivers helped us make sense of the vicissitudes of life. In times of great uncertainty – whether on a

personal, national or global level – many people regress and become more prone to magical thinking. And astrologers assume the role once taken by our caregivers.

The ability of astrology to enchant is also linked to its bias towards positive thinking. Its predictions are often very comforting, targeting singular issues that are meaningful to people. At the same time, they lack specificity, making them easily applicable to everyone. Written in such a vague way, they can be interpreted to mean whatever we want it to mean. This contributes to what has been called the *Barnum Effect*, named after the famous showman P. T. Barnum who claimed that his shows, like astrology, “had something for everyone”.

An illusion of control

Astrology also takes advantage of the *confirmation bias*, a process whereby we selectively search for, interpret, favour and recall information in a way that supports our beliefs or values. In the case of astrology, we home in on sections of a horoscope that confirm our beliefs while ignoring the rest. In other words, when we can't reconcile scientific data with our own beliefs, we minimise one of them – science – and escape into mysticism.

Furthermore, what makes astrological predictions believable is that our brains are hard-wired for *pattern recognition* and *sense-making*. We like to think that things happen for a reason. In other words, when two unrelated or random events happen, our mind still tries to see a connection – even when there isn't one.

Astrology also helps create an *illusion of control*, providing a sense of stability when we fear that things are going off the rails. Even hard-nosed businessmen like Steve find that the readings provide them with a sense of balance, boundaries and order. They obtain the “certainties” that they crave for.

Psychologists have also noted that more astrologically inclined people possess what has been described as an ***external locus of control***, meaning they tend to believe that their successes or failures result from external factors or forces beyond their influence. Hence, they are more willing to have their fate ascribed to them by others.

Astrology's darker side

People's dependency on horoscopes brings up the question whether astrology can be dangerous and lead people astray. Should Steve be warned about his reliance on horoscopes?

While using horoscopes for motivation and guidance may not make much of a difference, we can't say the same thing about important decisions. A terrible example of the misuse of horoscopes happened in India in May. A [quirk of the astrological calendar](#) made it a supposedly "auspicious" timing to organise a mass gathering during a pandemic - with tragic results.

Astrological predictions or advice can cause people to do things they would otherwise never have done. Sometimes, it can even lead to tragedies like [suicides](#) and murders. In fact, people like [Adolf Hitler](#), the ancient Aztecs and their human sacrifices, the modern serial killer known as the Zodiac killer, modern witches and Satanists, have used astrology for evil purposes.

A more empowered way to go through life

A belief in astrology implies a belief in cosmological predestination. It is a form of fictitious determinism. If we imprison ourselves in a fate already written in the stars or other such things (tarot cards, tea leaves, palm reading, crystal balls), we give up the reins of self-determining our own lives.

One of the significant signs of emotional maturity is the ability to make our own choices and to control our own life. We shouldn't have to rely on the stars to explain the vicissitudes of our life. Instead, we should decide what we really want and to make concrete, well-considered plans as a way of achieving our goals. If we allow horoscopes to determine our choices, we lose our agency and ability to shape our destiny.

A pseudoscience like astrology poses a concrete threat as it might weaken our critical thinking, limiting our ability to make sound judgments about the challenges we face every day. Furthermore, when we blur the line between science and pseudoscience, as we have seen during the pandemic, it can lead to dire consequences.

Perhaps we should listen to Voltaire. The French Enlightenment writer noted: "Superstition is to religion what astrology is to astronomy, the mad daughter of a wise mother. These daughters have too long dominated the earth."

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