
Beyond Narcissism: How Leaders Can Avoid the Hubris Trap



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Overcoming the hubris syndrome requires a dose of reality, humility and humour.

Throughout history, leaders have been seduced by success, leading them down a path of hubris. This ancient Greek term, literally translating to "excess", describes a state of exaggerated self-belief and arrogance.

An extreme example is Xerxes, king of the Persian Empire. Feeling invincible from past triumphs, Xerxes sought to conquer Greece. However, when a storm destroyed his bridge across the Hellespont, derailing his plans, he reacted outlandishly. Xerxes had the engineers who built the bridge beheaded and ordered his soldiers to **whip the sea** with chains and poke it with red hot irons. It's evident that Xerxes, blinded by overconfidence, couldn't fathom the possibility of setbacks. In essence, he was intoxicated by hubris.

People suffering from hubris imagine that the way they view the world is the way the world is supposed to be. They overestimate their capabilities, often

to an extreme degree, and see themselves as limitless. Even in the face of failure, they cling to the illusion of their own rightness.

Naturally, such an attitude contributes to irresponsible behaviour, a sense of recklessness and even immoral actions. Unchecked self-absorption drives many leaders on a path of self-destruction, dragging their organisations or countries down with them.

Why hubris is more dangerous than narcissism

While hubris often accompanies narcissism, the two have notable and important differences. Narcissists have an inflated self-image and crave the approval and admiration of others. However, unlike hubristic individuals, narcissists are not so drunk on power that they completely lose touch with reality.

Narcissism is a personality trait formed in early life, while hubris is a change in a person's character that occurs when they attain significant power. Hubris is therefore more of a temporary condition specific to leadership positions rather than a fundamental personality flaw.

Even if narcissistic leaders enjoy being the centre of attention, as long as they maintain a grasp on reality and make decisions aimed at improving their positive self-image, their narcissism remains "bounded".

In the case of hubris, however, we encounter a form of narcissism that's unbound. Hubristic leaders do not need a stage to shine. Unlike bounded narcissists, they test the limits of acceptable behaviour, believing that they are far superior to anyone else. Over time, their exaggerated self-belief, verging on a sense of omnipotence, results in reckless and impulsive behaviour, ultimately leading to their downfall.

Although both narcissistic and hubristic individuals dabble in the darker side of leadership, narcissistic leaders often exude charisma and can influence and rouse others. Their confidence, energy, willingness to take risks and oratory skills contribute to visionary, inspiring leadership – qualities that can lead to considerable success.

While narcissistic behaviour has both dark and bright sides, hubris is typically characterised by dysfunctional excess. Hubristic leaders use their power in maladaptive, unproductive and unrestricted ways, resulting in extremely toxic behaviour. They push for ambitious goals, both personal and organisational.

Although the roots may vary, a narcissistic personality can lead to the emergence of hubristic behaviour. Hubris might fade away, though, when individuals are no longer in positions of power.

Combatting hubris

As leaders are more susceptible to the allure of power, they must take proactive measures to prevent the emergence of hubris. To achieve this, they need to understand their driving forces and have a strong sense of self-knowledge. They must also be open to feedback and criticism, know how to laugh at themselves and lead with humility.

Sharpen self-understanding

Those in powerful positions need to gain a realistic understanding of their strengths and weaknesses, as well as the intricacies of their personality. It helps if they have a healthy dose of self-criticism. A willingness to assess oneself objectively can serve as an effective countermeasure to hubris.

Unmask blind spots through feedback

Since hubris often leads individuals away from self-knowledge and self-awareness, it's beneficial for them to be constantly reminded of their strengths and shortcomings. If an individual is open to regular feedback, this can help them identify areas of success and areas needing improvement. Essentially, regular and constructive feedback instils a sense of accountability in their actions.

Transform criticism into growth

To avoid slipping into hubristic behaviour, individuals should embrace a consultative approach. In other words, they need to be willing to listen to those in a position to provide advice or criticise their actions. Being open to admitting mistakes and learning from them is an important quality to prevent heading down a problematic path.

Lean into humour and irony

Another effective remedy for hubris is irony. It highlights the contrast or incongruity between appearances and reality, often serving as a subtle form of criticism. Qualities like humour and cynicism can indeed shield against hubristic behaviour. A leader's capacity to laugh at themselves can be quite liberating.

Lead with humility

Modesty is another important characteristic for leaders to cultivate as a way to prevent hubris. It's important to handle power without arrogance and excessive pride. While power can be thrilling, it should be tempered with realism and humility. Thoughtful leaders strive to preserve their previous way of life and, in fact, choose to avoid the trappings of power.

Indeed, power can swell the head and shatter the crown. Figures like Xerxes, who view themselves as gods, tend to fall the farthest, and the hardest. Unfortunately, Xerxes is not an isolated case. Many before and after him have suffered similar fates. Hubris has been a recurring theme in numerous tales – some rooted in mythology, others in legend, and some reflecting real-life events.

For contemporary business leaders plagued by hubris, consequences often extend beyond their personal downfall. The hubris-driven scandals initiated by figures like Adam Neumann of WeWork, Sam Bankman-Fried of FTX and Elizabeth Holmes of Theranos also affected those who believed in them, resulting in the destruction of their fortunes.

However, the suffering caused by these hubristic business leaders is overshadowed by the impact of political figures such as Kim Jong-Un of North Korea, Bashar al-Assad of Syria or Vladimir Putin of Russia. The harm they inflict isn't just financial; it has resulted in the loss of countless lives. This prompts us to question whether we should ever trust people to control others when they are unable to control themselves.

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