



## Are you Prone to Hubris?

Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries  
INSEAD, [manfred.ketsdevries@insead.edu](mailto:manfred.ketsdevries@insead.edu)

Since ancient times, leaders have been plagued by the destructive nature of hubris. This article sheds light on the inner workings of hubris from a psychodynamic-systemic perspective, discussing first its origins in ancient Greece. It follows with a detailed definition applicable to contemporary leaders, pointing out that hubristic people tend to inflate their sense of importance, possess an unrealistic assessment of their capabilities, and are intoxicated with power. It notes that while hubris often accompanies narcissism, the two have notable and important differences—narcissism is a disorder of the person with much earlier origins, while hubris is a malady that manifests itself once someone is in a leadership position and should be viewed as an adjustment disorder. The article goes on to discuss under what conditions hubris is likely to develop among leaders and offers specific suggestions for preventing the development of hubristic behavior in business.

Keywords: Hubris; Hubris Epidemic; Narcissism; Greek Mythology; Nemesis; Adjustment Disorder; Power

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*It is only hubris if I fail.*

—*Julius Caesar*

*Put aside your pride,*

*Set down your arrogance,*

*And remember your grave.*

—*Ali ibn Abi Talib*

*He knows nothing; and he thinks he knows everything. That points clearly to a political career.*

— *George Bernard Shaw*

In 480 BCE, Xerxes the Great, a 5th century king of the ancient Persian empire, was preparing himself to cross the 1.2-kilometer-long Hellespont Strait—that narrow stretch of water that separated Europe and Asia. He was in a jubilant mood, just having been victorious in suppressing an uprising against his rule in Egypt and Babylon. Now, some 300,000 troops were ready to pour into Greece to avenge the defeat the Greeks had perpetrated on Xerxes' father, King Darius. To expedite the crossing of his massive army over the Hellespont, his engineers had built a momentous pontoon bridge. Unfortunately, this construction had not exactly turn out as he had planned. Before Xerxes and his troops arrived, a violent storm descended, completely destroying the temporary bridge. Infuriated, Xerxes took out his anger out on the sea, marching his troops into its midst, where they whipped it three hundred times, poked it with red hot irons, and cursed its

existence. Handcuffs were then tossed into the sea to symbolize its required submission to Xerxes' authority. This bizarre spectacle was culminated by his order to decapitate the engineers behind the bridge's construction. After these dramatic actions, the bridge was rebuilt by tying together 600 ships with papyrus and flax ropes in order to traverse the gap between the two continents. According to contemporary historians, the crossing of the strait took Xerxes' army seven days and nights. Tragically for him, all these efforts were for naught. In Greece, Xerxes suffered a crushing defeat, ending the Persians' dream of subduing their citizens.

Xerxes behavior of whipping the sea has been described as an excessive case of hubris, the kind of behavior that's not only characterized by extreme pride and dangerous overconfidence, but also, in many cases, a perturbing arrogance. Clearly, Xerxes believed, given his previous victories, that he was capable of anything. To him, a setback was unimaginable. He was intoxicated by hubris.

Hubris seems to be a disturbance that comes from too much success. Hubris (or *hybris*, literally translated as "excess") is a term which the ancient Greeks used to refer to human behavior that was excessive in nature. As the story of Xerxes amply demonstrates, it is both a transgression of human boundaries symptomatic of outrageous behavior and a regression towards delusionary thinking. People suffering from hubris imagine that the way they view the world is the way the world is supposed to be. It also suggests a loss of contact with reality. Hubristic people overestimate what they are capable of accomplishing, often in extreme ways, putting no limits on themselves. Convinced of the

rightness of whatever they have decided to do, there is no room for criticism, whether it be related to practicality, costs, or likely success. And even if their efforts end badly, they still believe that they were doing the right thing.

Given the outrageous nature of hubristic behavior, the ancient Greeks considered hubris nothing less than a crime. It was for them an insidious poison. An essential component of the Greek moral code was the notion that all human beings have their limitations. If there were those so adamant as to ignore human fallibility, they should be prepared under such a code to pay a very high price. A good example of this from Greek mythology is the story of Arachne, a talented young weaver, who was transformed into a spider when she claimed, though accurately, that her talents exceeded those of the goddess Athena.

Therefore, a recurring theme in Greek mythology focuses on people who lose sight of these human limitations and act arrogantly, behaving as if they are one of the immortals. No wonder that they had carved above the temple of Apollo in Delphi, the ominous exhortations "Know Thyself" and "Nothing too much." No common mortal should try to surpass a god in a particular skill or attribute. Doing so would be nothing less than a transgression against the gods, inviting terrible retribution. Consequently, for the ancient Greeks, hubris was inseparable from Nemesis, the goddess of vengeance. Whoever suffered from any form of hubristic intoxication was sure to be punished by her.

### **Narcissism versus hubris**

Hubristic behavior is often indistinguishable from narcissistic conduct as many of the attributes of hubris and narcissism tend to overlap. Quite often, hubris and narcissism are used as synonyms of one another. Nevertheless, even though narcissistic people might be prone to hubris, to be narcissistic shouldn't be simply equated with being hubristic. Essentially, there are various differences. To illustrate, narcissists have an inflated view of themselves, preoccupied as they are with fantasies of personal power to garner the approval and admiration of others, which then bolsters and enhances their ego. These people are trying to construct a reality that reiterates and reinforces their grandiose personal image. But unlike hubristic people, they are not intoxicated by power to that degree that they lose their sense of reality. Thus, while narcissism is a stable quality of character, hubris can be looked at as a transformation of a person's personality that emerges in response to attaining significant power. Even though narcissistic leaders like to be the center of attention, by making decisions that are singularly focused on enhancing a positive-self-image—as long as their sense of reality remains intact—their narcissism remains somewhat “bounded.”

This “bounded narcissism,” however, disappears when people become hubristic. In the case of hubris, we are dealing with a form of narcissism that's “unbound.” As these people become drunk on their power, they engage in excessive behavior, setting the stage for hubris.

Hubristic leaders do not need a stage to shine. Their interest does not primarily lie with seeking opportunities to garner attention purely to bolster their self-image. However,

unlike the bounded narcissist, they will test the boundaries of acceptable behavior in the belief that they are far superior compared to anyone else. Eventually, their exaggerated self-belief bordering on a sense of omnipotence—making for reckless and impulsive behavior—will lead to their demise or downfall.

In other words, even though there will be a co-occurrence of hubristic and narcissistic behavioral patterns, narcissism in itself tends to be more nuanced. Although both narcissistic and hubristic people are no strangers to the darker side of leadership, narcissistic leaders can also be quite successful. After all, a leader's high level of narcissism positively relates to charisma, the ability to attract, influence, and inspire people. Such a leader's supreme self-confidence, energy, willingness to take risks, skilled oration, and grandiose belief systems can contribute to inspiring and visionary leadership, a behavioral pattern that can make him or her quite successful.

Thus, while narcissistic behavior will have its dark and bright sides, hubristic behavior is typically presented in terms of the dysfunctional excess. In a leadership context, to be more specific, it places hubris firmly on the dark and destructive side of leadership. Hubristic leaders tend to use their power in maladaptive and unproductive ways. The grandiosity of such leaders knows no bounds, ending up in extremely toxic behavior. They will exercise their power to achieve unrestrained ambitious goals, both personal and organizational.

Consequently, from a conceptual point of view, the origins of the hubristic and the narcissistic behavior are quite distinct. While narcissism seems to be an enduring characteristic that emerges before adulthood, hubris should be looked at as an acquired condition that occurs later in life, triggered by the accession to a position of significant power. In that respect, it is a disorder of the leadership position rather than a disorder of the person.

Generally speaking, hubristic people are highly disrespectful toward others, an outgrowth of their inflated sense of importance and unrealistic assessment of their capabilities. Intoxicated with power, given their prior successes, they have begun to overestimate their abilities. Consequently, it makes it more likely that these people will test the boundaries of realistic behavior. As a result, their hubristic activities will come to the fore, given their lack of constraint regarding how they exercise power—Xerxes being a prime example. As is evidenced by their excessive self-confidence, perception of being infallible, contempt toward people who criticize them, and detachment from reality, people subjected to hubris suffer from a serious character flaw, an attitude that typically brings about their downfall.

It should be noted, however, that possessing a narcissistic personality will be a contributory factor in developing hubristic behavior. Narcissistic people, while being in a position of power, may acquire an elevated sense of self-confidence, and an increasing sense of superiority, thereby creating the conditions that reinforce an inflated self-view, an overestimation of their abilities, a sense of entitlement, and arrogant behavior. If these

psychological dynamics continue, these people may enter a state of self-intoxication. It makes hubris a pathological expression, a derivative of narcissistic behavior. Hubris might disappear, however, when these people are no longer in possession of significant power. In that respect, hubris should be looked at as an adjustment disorder, not a character disorder like narcissism. It only comes to the fore after a person has attained a position of power.

Many leaders epitomize narcissism in their personalities but behave hubristically regarding their leadership behaviors. Thus, it is no wonder that in the context of hubris, some have even suggested the existence of a hubris syndrome, once more pointing out that it is a personality disorder that's specifically tied to people who have attained leadership positions.<sup>1</sup> And in describing this disorder, it is made very clear that it is not only fatal from a personal perspective, but it also from a social perspective, where when left unchecked can have disastrous consequences.

### **Hubristic leadership**

As suggested, hubristic characteristics are triggered when people acquire a position of power. Typically, it may worsen the longer people hold power and the more power they have accumulated. Being a powerholder thus makes it more likely that people in this position will act inappropriately, leading to negative, unintended consequences. This will be especially the case when this person's decisions and actions have been successful before. Once more, Xerxes's example is illustrative. After having been victorious in Egypt

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<sup>1</sup> David Owen and Jonathan Davidson (2009). Hubris syndrome: An acquired personality disorder? A study of US Presidents and UK Prime Ministers over the last 100 years. *Brain*, 132(5): 1396–1406.



and Babylon, his ego seemed to have become even more inflated to the point of losing any sense of perspective.

Clearly, hubristic leaders, intoxicated as they are with power and prior success, become overconfident in their abilities, and overestimate the probability of becoming even more successful. They begin to suffer from irrational exuberance, thinking everything is possible and underestimating or ignoring what could go wrong. Consequently, when they are in the thrall of hubris, any criticism of the improbability of success will be ignored. In fact, they become unstoppable. Limitations are for others, but not for them. Naturally, such an attitude contributes to irresponsible behavior, a sense of recklessness, and even leads to immoral actions. These people will transgress, the morality of their actions be damned.

In the Book of Proverbs in the Bible, this intoxication with power is captured by the expression “Pride goes before the fall.” Another well-known metaphor referring to the intoxication of power is attributed to the English politician and historian Lord Acton who noted, that “power tends to corrupt; and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” And as he made quite clear, this kind of corruption doesn’t make for happy endings.

Presently, we don’t have to look far to find leaders suffering from hubris. In fact, one might even say that we’re in the midst of a “hubris epidemic.” Unable to put the brakes on their own self-absorption, too many leaders appear bent on a path of total self-destruction—with their organizations or countries falling quickly in tow.

There can be key external factors that set the stage for the development of hubris among leaders—the possession of a considerable amount of power, the existence of minimal constraints concerning the exercise of power, and the length of time they stay in power. When such factors are at play, it doesn't take much before a cultural environment of omnipotence to surround the leader. Political leaders are particularly vulnerable, especially those in dictatorial regimes because there are few, if any, constraints to their behavior. And in our contemporary world we don't have to look far to see the manifestations of such leadership behavior and its terrifying consequences.

A recent example of hubris can be seen in the actions of Russia's Vladimir Putin. Due to his hubristic state of mind, his paranoid logic has been unrelenting, believing himself to be the savior of a "holy Russia" against the unholy forces of the Western countries. In his convoluted *Weltanschauung*, Russia seems to be threatened by Nazis and Wokism, a bizarre figment of his imagination. However, it was such a pathological perspective that encouraged him to start a vicious war, sacrificing the lives of hundreds of thousands of people.

### **Countervailing measures**

Because people in a leadership position tend to be more susceptible to the intoxication of power, measures need to be taken to prevent hubris from raising its ugly head. Of course, the best way to go about this is to prevent hubris from cropping up in the first place. But to make that happen people need to have developed the kinds of "scripts" in

their internal theatre that prevents them from going down the deep end. They need to understand their driving forces. In other words, a major internal restraint to the unfettered use of power is the possession of a solid dose of self-knowledge and self-awareness. People in powerful positions need to acquire a realistic sense of their strengths and weaknesses, as well as the ins and outs of their personality. And as part of this self-knowledge, it helps if they have a solid dose of self-criticism. After all, if they are prepared to assess themselves realistically, this quality can serve as an antidote to hubris.

Since hubris typically involves a departure from self-knowledge, it will also be helpful to present these people with specific data to illuminate their strengths and weaknesses. They should be able to acknowledge, when tempted to regress towards excessive behavior, that they may have a problem. Consequently, a willingness to receive regular feedback may help these people understand what they're doing well, and what may need improvement. Institutionalizing this process may stop them from descending into potentially hubristic behavior. In effect, regular, constructive feedback will bring a sense of accountability into the way they behave. This also implies, however, that they will respect institutional checks and balances, and not make efforts to circumvent such measures.

In addition, to prevent people from falling into a hubristic mode, they should accept the need to be consultative. In other words, an important quality to prevent going down the deep end is a willingness to listen to those who are in a position to give advice. To be open enough to admit mistakes and learn from them can go a long way.

In this context, another rather effective antidote to hubris is irony. It shows the contrast or incongruity between how things appear and how they are in reality. Often, it is a subtle way of offering criticism. In fact, qualities such as humor and cynicism can offer protection against hubristic behavior. A leader's ability to laugh at him or herself can be quite liberating.

The attitude of modesty is another character trait worth retaining or developing in leaders as a means of preventing hubris. There is something to be said about handling power without pomposity. Even though power can be exhilarating, it needs to be balanced by an equal amount of realism and humility. After all, boastfulness and excessive pride is an unlikely roommate with humility. Thoughtful leaders will try to maintain their previous lifestyle. In fact, they would prefer to eschew the trappings of power.

Furthermore, leaders would do well to have valued confidants, people who are prepared to criticize their actions. Examples of such people could be wives, husbands, colleagues, or friends. Such people will help to prevent hubris from coming to the fore.

Still, in spite of these various countervailing measures, the human mind has a fantastic ability to trick itself out of its own best interests when it involves hubris. That's the reason—even though power can be very exhilarating—that it always needs to be balanced by an equal amount of self-awareness, humility, openness to criticism, realism, and a well-

developed sense of humor. When those character traits are in place, it is more likely that leaders will keep their feet on the ground, even when they have attained significant power.

When everything is said and done, however, people in positions of power would do well to read this passage on Xerxes written by the historian Herodotus:

For it was not a god invading Greece, but a man; and no man now existed or ever would exist who was not liable to misfortune from the day of his birth—and the greater the man, the greater the misfortune. Their invader, therefore, being only human, was bound to fall from his glory.<sup>2</sup>

Clearly, power swells the head and shatters the crown. And people like Xerxes, who think of themselves as gods tend to fall the farthest, and the hardest. Sadly enough, Xerxes hasn't been an exception. Others have gone before and after him. Many tales have been told and are still told of hubris—some mythological, others legendary, still others real-life events. Another dramatic example taken from Greek mythology, the tale of Icarus, illustrates again the seductive power of hubris and the inevitable downfall that comes in its wake. Using wings made from wax and feathers, created by his father, the master craftsman, Daedalus, Icarus became overconfident in his new-found ability to fly. Thus, intoxicated by hubris, he ignored his father's warnings not to fly too low or too high. And

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<sup>2</sup> Herodotus, Battle of Thermopylae: 7.198-238

the result was inevitable. Flying too close to the sun, his wings of wax melted, and down he came, drowning in the sea.

For contemporary business leaders who have suffered from hubris, the downfall they set in motion did far more than simply melt the wax on their own proverbial wings. The impact of the hubristic-infused scandals initiated by people like Adam Neumann of WeWork, Sam Bankman-Fried of FTX, and Elizabeth Holmes of Theranos extended to all those who believed in them and whose fortunes were destroyed. Still the pain incurred by these hubristic business leaders pales when compared to that wrought by those in politics, the likes of Kim Jong-Un of North Korea, Bashar al-Assad of Syria, or Putin of the Russian Federation. The damage that they cause is not counted simply in financial terms but in the numbers of lives lost. This must leave us wondering whether we should ever trust people to control others when they are unable to control themselves.