

Why modern executives are more susceptible to hubris than ever

Article

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Why Modern Executives Are More Susceptible to Hubris Than Ever

Success builds greater self-confidence, but increased achievement can skew healthy self-confidence into hubris.

Today's CEOs are much more visible than their predecessors from the 1950s. The executives of our parents' and grandparents' times, who were mostly unknown and unrecognized by anyone outside the company, shunned the press, speaking only in sentences crafted by PR departments. Today's executives, in comparison, are front and center on every social media platform. They blog, Tweet their own opinions, post on Facebook, and comment on LinkedIn. Modern CEOs write books, hire publicists, promulgate personal philosophies, and give spontaneous interviews. Even the ordinary citizen with little interest in business or entrepreneurship recognizes these big-name executives, now celebrities in their own right. Their faces adorn billboards and magazines everywhere, and they appear on every public stage (even at the edge of space), opining on issues that shape our public and personal agendas.

Today's CEO isn't just a name and a face; they're a brand. And they're encouraging others to be brands too. We're becoming a society known for what our brand is, not what our character is. And that's often where hubris — confidence that has morphed into arrogance — begins, as my new book [Too Proud to Lead](#) concludes.

Unfortunately for recruiters and boards, there may be no sign of hubris when a leader is hired. In fact, hubris may be acquired only as a person grows in their role and ascends the ranks. The higher a leader climbs, the fewer peers they have — which means fewer and fewer people monitor their thinking, decisions, strategies, and actions. It is usually at this point that subordinates become aware that their new leader is developing hubris. But if the leader is too powerful, subordinates may become reluctant to speak up for fear of retribution — which only advances the hubris further.

One success after another builds greater self-confidence. But in the same way, increased achievement can skew healthy self-confidence into hubris. Hubristic people can easily become hooked on their own egos, so confident in their own self-importance that they assume they can do no wrong. Naturally, the more wins an individual with the Midas touch accumulates, the less open they are to critical feedback: Why would a winner need feedback when they already have the code to success?

Additionally, as fans and minions (descriptors some celebrity CEOs use to define other people) continue to cheer them on, hubristic individuals typically seek to feed their self-glorifying adulation tendencies. They become intensely focused on repeating their successes, seeking to make the next one ever bigger and better. Finally, the individual ascends (in their own mind) to godlike status, above any rule or order.

In mythology, Icarus flew toward the sun on wings his father Daedalus crafted of wax and feathers. So enchanted with his newfound freedom and the supernatural power of his wings, Icarus forgot both his father's warnings and his greatest shortcoming: his own mortality.

Similarly, warnings are easily forgotten in moments of perceived greatness. Just as Icarus's hubris led him close to the sun before he plunged to his death, so too have many leaders seen their careers perish after ascending to new heights. Feeling that they could do no wrong, they flew toward greatness, ablaze with glory — until they were consumed by it all.

Human nature drives us to escape the bonds of mortality by building a legacy that outlives us. A motivator for many in business and politics is to craft a name for yourself: Buildings and

businesses live on as monuments to the individuals who created them; nations rise and fall on the political aspirations of those who wish to shape the world in which they live. Many of these efforts start as altruistic endeavors, but given the right mix of hubris, power, and societal opportunity, even the most generous, good-natured individual can destroy both themselves and their hard-won careers in the flames of naked ambition — all in order to “be successful.”

When such a leader can't top that last success, they reach a point of diminishing returns. Stockholders and board members who grow accustomed to fantastic achievements are less satisfied with merely good ones; there is always the demand and expectation that each successive achievement will be greater than the last. Unfortunately, even the savants among us can pull off only so many stellar achievements. As any addict knows, there's a point where your addiction kills. You can't keep “upping the dosage” without paying the piper.

Success is never due to the work or contribution of a single individual, yet some leaders delude themselves that they are the unique linchpin of such success. Leaders may regard a particular decision or “genius” insight (that, of course, they themselves provided) as the turning point, the killer punch, the key to the success, which allows them to hold on to that coveted feeling of fulfillment that success brings. But the more a person experiences the thrills of success, their desire to hold on to it multiplies exponentially as the risk of losing becomes too fearful to contemplate.

In climbing the path toward success, most of us develop areas of weakness: a belief that we are capable of anything, a lazy reliance on our go-to strategies, and a dismissive attitude toward unfavorable evidence and contrary advice. It is then that hubris causes a downfall.

But it's possible to stop hubris in its tracks before it's too late by reconsidering the yardstick that defines success for you. Perhaps your individual definition of success is motivated by the success of those who you are close to or the fact that your presence is having a positive impact. Alternatively, it could be that you're happiest when others seek out your opinions, help, or practical insights, indirectly conveying that you are a respected individual in your chosen field. Whatever you choose as a marker of success, remember Rory Vaden's Rent Axiom: Success is never owned; it is merely rented, and the rent is due every day. What price are you willing to pay for success?