

Leaders, Self-Confidence, and Hubris: What's the Difference?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- ▶ Success can easily breed hubris.
- ▶ As leaders become more confident, their success can limit their learning because they develop repetitive patterns of filtering information based on past successes and discount information that does not agree with their patterns of success.
- ▶ It is important for leaders to stay grounded in reality and effective as their success grows.
- ▶ Humility, gratitude, and appreciation will avoid the overconfidence that leads to hubris.
- ▶ Building confidence in others is the mark of a great leader. Hubris is not.



Karlene Kerfoot

SUCCESS CAN SPELL DISASTER for a leader. On the surface, this makes no sense. One would assume if a leader has learned how to be successful, this pattern would continue. However, there are several detours the leader can take to get off the road of success. Goldsmith (2007) notes the success delusion holds many leaders back. He defines this as (a) overestimating

one's contribution to a project, (b) taking credit for what belongs to others that made the project successful, (c) having an inflated opinion of one's professional skills, (d) ignoring the failures the leader creates, and (e) exaggerating the impact of one's project on the organization.

Collins (2009) describes five steps in the stages of decline in an organization, the first of which is the hubris born of success. He describes this stage as developing overconfidence and arrogance as organizations experience success. This results in the drive for more success that precipitates failure because the organization loses its original focus, steers itself in the wrong direction, denies risks and perils, and soon is in a downward spiral. In this process, leaders become arrogant and forget the factors that lead to the original success. These leaders create a sense of success as entitlement and believe they will not fail. It is easy to

KARLENE M. KERFOOT, PhD, RN, CNA, FAAN, is Vice President/Chief Clinical Officer, Aurora Health System, Milwaukee, WI; and a *Nursing Economic\$* Editorial Board Member. Comments and suggestions can be sent to karlene.kerfoot@aurora.org.

Copyright ©2010 *Nursing Economic\$*.

become overconfident when one is on a winning streak. Athletes often fall victim to this trap. Many famous athletes who believe they are invincible take unnecessary chances in their professional and personal life and fall from power. Sutton (2009) notes "Research confirms what many of us have long suspected: People who gain authority over others tend to become more self-centered and less mindful of what others need, do and say" (p. 3). Consequently they create their own hubris.

Defining Hubris

Webster's dictionary defines hubris as arrogance and/or excessive pride (Webster, 2002). In practice, the term usually is associated with a sense of arrogance, haughtiness, overestimating one's capabilities, and being out of touch. Confidence is essential for good leadership. However, confidence and hubris are not the same thing. Unfortunately, it is easy to move from confidence to hubris. As leaders progress, one often hears, "She's changed," "He's not the same person," "She doesn't stop and talk with us or patients anymore, she now only spends time with the other managers," "He used to ask us for our input but now he makes decisions alone," "She only wants us to agree with her now and doesn't want any bad news or discussion about her decisions," and "When we talk to him, he doesn't act as if he's listening." All of these are danger signs the leader has moved out of the range of confidence and into the world of arrogance and hubris.

How Hubris Starts

Success can easily breed hubris. Goldsmith (2007) describes the processes of overestimating your contribution to a project, taking credit for successes that belong to others, and exaggerating your impact as flaws born out of success that lead to a dysfunction in the future. Clearly, for Goldsmith, every successful person must change to continue to be successful. However, it is hard to convince someone the skills that got them where they are today need to be refined and made more relevant for every step into the future. He uses the term "feed forward" instead of "feedback" to help people focus on the skills needed for the future goal, instead of focusing on the past. However, it is hard to help people focus on new behaviors when they want to continue to utilize the skills of the past that made them successful.

Sutton (2010) coined the term "toxic tandem" to describe the dynamics that describe how some people with power seem to become self-absorbed, feel less empathy when listening to subordinates, treat others as if they are invisible, and act as if rules are for others

and don't apply to them. The second part of this tandem is subordinates are exceptionally observant of superiors' moves, devote energy to observing the boss, scrutinize the boss's self-absorbed actions, and often assume the worst case scenario. For example, administrative assistants usually know a lot more about their boss than the boss knows about them. And nurses usually know more about their leader than the leader knows about them. When leaders unknowingly flaunt the privileges of rank, it is difficult for their subordinates to create a positive working relationship with the boss. The combination of the self-absorbed boss and the subordinate's observations create the toxic tandem of poison that does not allow the leader's people to devote much if any of their energy to the boss.

Our brains like to think and explain things by matching the current reality with patterns that have been laid down from past experience. According to Van Hecke, Callahan, Kolar, and Paller (2010), this can be a problem if we do not allow new thoughts and feedback from others to build diverse patterns from which we can recognize new information that we can catalogue and act on. As leaders become more confident, their success can limit their learning because they develop repetitive patterns of filtering information based on past successes and discount information that does not agree with their patterns of success.

Avoiding the Hubris Trap

As people become successful, their self-confidence rises, and they feel they can handle anything. They get into the rush of activity, thrive on the challenges, and their confidence rises to the level of arrogance. As success happens, leaders often become more insulated and their network changes. As the level of complexity and stress increases, leaders often wall themselves off for self-preservation. This can be a real danger. When leaders are isolated and lack the benefit of feedback, their perceptions of their abilities can be different than reality. Isolation must be avoided. It is extremely important the leader receives direct and useful information from everyone in the organization and channels of information and communication do not change. Following are five suggestions leaders can use to stay grounded in reality and effective as their success grows.

Find a trusted sidekick. Maccoby (2004) notes it is very important to have a colleague who can act as an anchor, keep the leader grounded, help the leader stay in touch with the reality as it evolves, and keep a wide range of communications available to the leader at all times. The leader must acknowledge everyone has blind spots. If the leader can recognize this, the sidekick can help the leader sense where these blind spots are and increase the leader's effectiveness.

Avoid making decisions in isolation. As leaders experience success, they often become overconfident in their decision-making ability and begin to make quicker decisions without researching the issue, and soliciting feedback from stakeholders and a diverse group of experts. Without the diversity of input into decisions, the leader's ability to lead the organization into the future is impaired.

Seek out feedback from a variety of people about subjects that may be unpleasant. Listening sessions are one strategy to help people truly feel comfortable discussing and debating with the leader. The ability to solicit a free flow of valuable information is the ultimate test of the leader's ability to get the right information and feedback. In a healthy environment, lively discussions and debates are encouraged as a mechanism to make valuable information available to the boss. If people believe they must always agree with the boss, this environment can not handle critical conversations.

Listening. It sounds simplistic to say leaders should listen, but it is a very difficult skill to master. When it appears leaders are listening, they are often filtering the information through past experience and are not truly able to absorb new thoughts, models, and solutions.

Don't allow yourself to get away from the customer and the front line. The CBS television show "Undercover Boss" is a wonderful story of how bosses believe they are successful until they have the opportunity of walking in the shoes of other people in the organization. Opportunities to "adopt a job" help the boss understand the barriers and opportunities in the organization from the perspective of the front-line person. Kimberly Schaefer, the CEO of Great Wolf Resorts, said, "I felt that I knew the jobs and would be really good at doing them. They were a lot harder than I thought...It's amazing how much more you can learn when you don't think you're the smartest person in the room. I've brought it down a notch" (Fortune, 2010 p. 44). Patient advisory councils are also used effectively in many organizations to learn directly from the patient and family what is working and what is not. We cannot say we are "patient centered" until we have the infrastructure available to stay in close touch with the patient and family.

Summary

In the end, it is imperative the leader continually give credit to others and take little credit for him/herself. Humility, gratitude, and appreciation will avoid the overconfidence that will lead to hubris. Building confidence in others is the mark of a great leader. Hubris is not. \$

REFERENCES

- Collins, J. (2009). *How the mighty fall and why some companies never give in*. New York: Jim Collins.
- Fortune. (2010). Secrets of an undercover boss. *Fortune*, 162(5), 41-44.
- Goldsmith, M. (2007). *What got you here won't get you there*. New York: Hyperion.
- Maccoby, M. (2004). *Narcissistic leaders: The incredible pros, the inevitable cons*. Retrieved from <http://hbr.org/2004/01/narcissistic-leaders/ar/1>
- Sutton, R. (2009, June). *How to be a good boss in a bad economy*. Retrieved from <http://hbr.org/2009/06/how-to-be-a-good-boss-in-a-bad-economy/ar/1>
- Van Hecke, M.L., Callahan, L.P., Kolar, B., & Paller, K.E. (2010). *The brain advantage: Become a more effective business leader using the latest brain research*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.
- Webster. (2002). *Webster's third new international dictionary*. New York: Merriam-Webster.

