Hubristic leadership and the intoxication of power: Individual, relational and situational factors

Eugene Sadler-Smith, *Surrey Business School, University of Surrey*

Introduction

This paper will address the darker side of the power of leadership. Specifically it will examine the concept of 'hubristic leadership', conceptualized as an 'intoxication with power and success' and framed as a form of destructive leadership. The paper challenges the individual-level behavioural/psychological interpretation of hubristic leadership by arguing that the negative outcomes associated with hubristic leadership emanate from threefold interactions between individual, relational and situational factors. The concept of a 'toxic triangle of hubristic leadership' will be illustrated with reference to the leadership in President GW Bush's administration in the lead-up to the decision to invade Iraq in 2003 and the unintended negative consequences that emanated from this action.

Hubris

In the *History of Western Philosophy* (1946) Bertrand Russell described hubris as 'an intoxication of power' which results in a 'certain kind of madness' which presents one of the 'greatest dangers of our times'. In Greek mythology, Icarus became intoxicated with the power of flight, and this led ultimately to his demise. Likewise, hubristic leaders systematically and repeatedly take decisions that are over-confident and over-ambitious, often to the point of recklessness; they are immune to and contemptuous of the advice and criticism of others, their rashness is fuelled by prior successes and praise so much so that they are seduced into significantly over-estimating the chances of success and seriously under-estimating what can go wrong (Sadler-Smith, Robinson, Akstinaite and Wray, 2018). For recent reviews of hubristic leadership see: Garrard and Robinson 2015; Picone, Dagnino and Minà, A., 2014; Sadler-Smith, Akstinaite, Robinson and Wray, 2017. Hubris researchers, in the main, attribute over-confident, contemptuous and reckless leader behaviours to a variety of personality-related (e.g. as an acquired personality change, see: Owen and Davidson, 2009) and cognitive (e.g. as unbridled intuition, see: Claxton, Owen and Sadler-Smith, 2015)

factors. However, focusing solely on the individual leader offers only a partial view of the causes and consequences of hubristic leadership. This is a shortcoming which this paper seeks to address.

Destructive Leadership

Destructive leadership has been defined in various ways, manifests in a variety of forms, and is associated with a range of negative outcomes (see: Craig and Kaiser, 2012; Einarsen et al., 2007; Kaiser and Craig, 2014; Krasikova et al, 2013; Schyns and Schilling, 2007). Padilla et al (2007) operationalized destructive leadership in terms of several requisite features (dominating, coercing and manipulating followers and situations, rather than influencing, persuading and gaining followers' commitment; selfish orientation which focuses more on leaders' needs than those of the wider group; produces outcomes that compromise the quality of life for constituents; no requirement that destructive leadership is absolutely, exclusively or entirely destructive). Intention and volition also are important in framing hubristic leadership as a type of destructive leadership (see: Einarsen, 2007; Krasikova, 2013; Padilla et al., 2007): hubristic leaders do not, on the whole, set out to bring about destructive outcomes, they nonetheless behave volitionally in ways that invite such outcomes (Sadler-Smith, 2019). For example, Richard Fuld did not seek to contribute significantly to the global financial crisis of 2007/08 nor did George W Bush seek to create the conditions for the ISIS insurgency which resulted from the regional chaos and instability following the invasion of Iraq in 2003 (Smith, 2016). Nevertheless, Fuld and Bush were volitionally reckless which in turn created the conditions for unintended negative consequences to emerge. In this paper it will be argued that hubristic leadership is a form of destructive leadership that is associated with unintended negative consequences; this will be demonstrated with respect to the model of destructive leadership proposed by Padilla et al. (2007).

Toxic Triangle of Hubristic Leadership

Padilla et al.'s (2007) model offers theoretical traction for hubris researchers in that Padilla and colleagues argue that destructive outcomes are not attributable exclusively to a leader, such outcomes are also the products of interactions between leaders, followers and the context in which leadership is enacted (Figure 1). In this paper it will be argued that the unintended negative consequences that are associated with hubristic leadership are the

products of interactions between a hubristic leader, susceptible followers, and a conducive context.
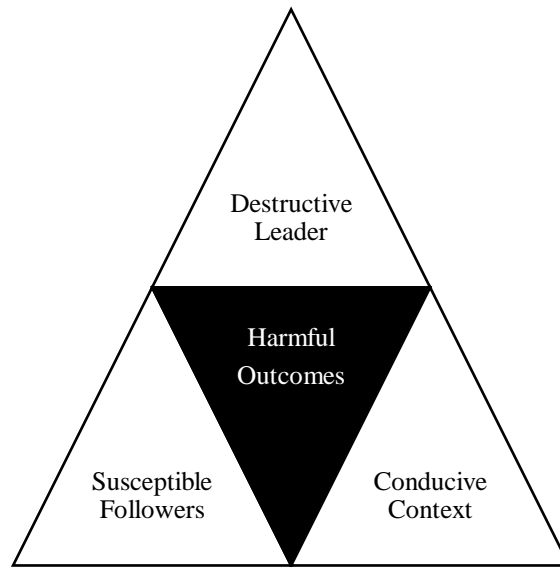

Figure 1. The toxic triangle framework of destructive leadership (Padilla et al., 2007)

Building on and developing Padilla et al.'s generic framework and Thoroughgood et al.'s (2012) typology of followers, a toxic triangle model of hubristic leadership is proposed which has three inter-connected domains: (1) hubristic leader (individual): personalized use of power, over-confidence, over-ambition, intuitive decision style, recklessness and contempt; (2) susceptible followers (relational): 'active colluders', 'reluctant conformers' and 'anticipatory compliers'; (3) conducive context (situational): environmental instability, perceived external threats, cultural and social norms and values, and absence of checks and balances on leader's power.

Case Study: The Invasion of Iraq 2003

The idea that hubristic leadership, and its destructive consequences, is more likely to emerge when there is a co-existence of a hubristic leader with susceptible followers in a conducive context will be illustrated using the example of the decision of the Bush administration to invade Iraq in 2003. This case will be analysed using the toxic triangle of hubristic leadership model. In overview: (1) Individual: Bush was a hubristic leader (Claxton et al., 2015; Owen, 2007; Owen and Davidson, 2009); (2) Relational: there were three types of followers in the administration: active colluders (Cheney, Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz); reluctant conformer (Powell); anticipatory complier (Rice) (Anderson, 2011; Mitchell and

Massoud, 2009); (3) Situational: 9/11 and the 'war on terror' created a propitious set of circumstances for the decision to invade (Beinart, 2010; Smith, 2016).
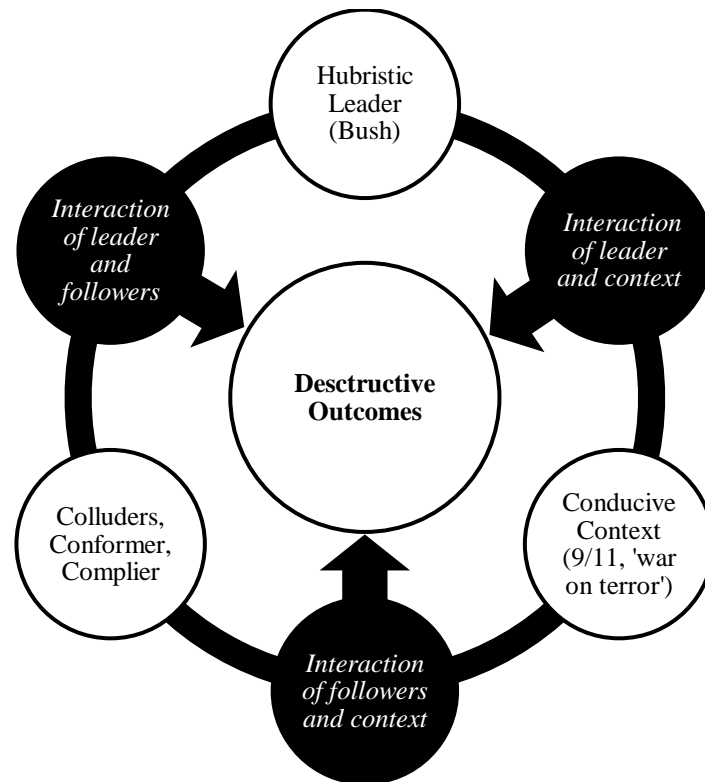

Figure 2. Toxic triangle of hubristic leadership, 2003 Iraq invasion

Building on Padilla et al. (2007), Thoroughgood et al. (2012) and Sadler-Smith (2019), the paper offers an interpretation of the 2003 Iraq invasion and its unintended negative consequences in terms of the individual, relational and situational domains and their interactions (see Figure 2).

Conclusion

This paper contributes to leadership studies in a number of ways: (1) it frames power in a way that is contrary to the 'heroic' view of leadership (i.e. power as a source of positive influence, used to inspire followers); (2) instead it adopts a critical approach by locating hubristic leadership on the 'darker side' and frames it as an intoxication with power that leads to over-confident, reckless leader behaviours that invite unintended negative consequences, and nemesis ultimately; (3) it goes beyond a behavioural/psychological approach by positioning the unintended negative consequences associated with hubristic leadership at the nexus of individual, relational and contextual factors. Recent and on-going events in business management (e.g. the financial crisis, the collapse of Carillion, etc.) and political

leadership (e.g. the Presidency of Donald Trump) attest to the significance and relevance of hubristic leadership and the darker sides of power and success of which it is a manifestation.

Word count: 1094 (exc. Figures)

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