

# DAEDALUS TRUST

## CALL FOR RESEARCH PROPOSALS

### Hubris and leadership

*The Daedalus Trust ([www.daedalustrust.org.uk](http://www.daedalustrust.org.uk)) is offering enabling funding for innovative and interdisciplinary research into hubristic behaviour across many areas of human activity, particularly business. The deadline for proposals is 15 April 2014.*

The Daedalus Trust ([www.daedalustrust.org.uk](http://www.daedalustrust.org.uk)) was founded in 2011 to promote interdisciplinary study into the behaviour of leaders in business and other organisations. We are interested in exploring the interconnections between their behaviours and those of leaders in politics and other walks of life, and particularly how the exercise of power may be associated with changes in behaviour, or hubris.

### Hubris Syndrome in context

In Ancient Greek literature, the concept of hubris referred to the arrogant pride of those humans whose behaviour suggested that they considered themselves to be the equals of the gods. Hubris was one of the most dangerous traits one could exhibit and was thought invariably to bring the worst kind of destruction to those in its grip.

In modern times, hubris in leaders refers to actions and their negative consequences, especially when they appear to be associated with a lack of knowledge or interest in facts, overconfidence, and a lack of humility. Hubris may be considered to be an occupational hazard for leading politicians, and for leaders in the military, business and other institutions.

David Owen and Jonathan Davidson published an article in 'Brain' (2009) entitled 'Hubris Syndrome: An acquired personality disorder?' They argued that aspects of hubris have appeared in the behaviours of numerous political leaders over the past 100 years but pointed out that the syndrome is equally likely to occur in leaders of industrial, financial and commercial organisations. They also suggest that 'Hubris Syndrome' is characterised by the following manifestations of behaviour on the part of an individual. He or she:

1. Sees the world as a place for self-glorification through the use of power
2. Has a tendency to take action primarily to enhance personal image
3. Shows disproportionate concern for image and presentation
4. Exhibits messianic zeal and exaltation in speech
5. Conflates self with nation or organisation
6. Uses the royal 'we' in conversations
7. Shows excessive self-confidence
8. Manifestly has contempt for others
9. Shows accountability only to a higher court (history or God)
10. Displays the unshakable belief that he or she will be vindicated in that court
11. Loses contact with reality
12. Resorts to restlessness and impulsive actions
13. Allows moral rectitude to obviate consideration of practicality, cost or outcome
14. Displays incompetence with disregard for the nuts and bolts of policy-making.

Among the 14 behaviours above, the authors suggest that five may be considered to be 'unique' (items 5, 6, 10, 12 and 13). Owen and Davidson state that at least three of the 14 defining behaviours should be present, of which at least one should be among the five unique components, to satisfy the diagnostic criteria of the Hubris Syndrome. (The identification of certain personality changes does not necessarily imply an illness, though behavioural manifestations that cluster together can constitute a syndrome (Brennan and Conroy 2013; Caxton et al 2013; Coates 2012; Garrard et al 2013).

Key to the diagnosis is that the person is in a position of substantial power and has been in this position for a certain period of time, as a precursor to developing and regularly displaying some of the above behaviours. They suggest that such behaviours are likely to abate once power is lost.

Whether 'Hubris Syndrome' can truly be considered as an acquired personality change or trait remains to be confirmed empirically. Others have suggested that the behaviours described by Owen and Davidson have their origins elsewhere, for example as social or cultural phenomena or learned behaviours.

It has also been argued that leaders may be selected precisely because they displayed such symptoms; so long as they perform successfully, such behaviour would not be perceived as demonstrating hubris. From this perspective, hubris is a term assigned by those who are not supportive of the leader or by others only after the leader has been seen to fail (Russell 2011).

More background on hubris, including papers, books, articles and news items, is available at our website, [www.daedalustrust.org.uk](http://www.daedalustrust.org.uk)

### **Our call for proposals**

More interdisciplinary research into the behaviour of leaders in all walks of life is needed to establish the existence, or otherwise, of an identifiable 'Hubris Syndrome'. If such a syndrome were to be clearly identified, hubris might be easier to predict, prevent and even perhaps treat with appropriate interventions.

Accordingly, the Daedalus Trust is now offering enabling funding support for innovative and interdisciplinary research related to hubristic behaviour across many areas of human activity, particularly business. Proposals should ideally link neuroscience to social and/or behavioural approaches.

Finishing or match funding might also be considered as may applications for PhD Scholarships or Research Fellowships.

### **Potential areas of research**

Examples of areas of potential research include the following:

- The concept of individual and collective hubris and of the possible effects on personality of exposure to power and the isolation and admiration of others that often accompanies such power
- The positive as well as the negative consequences that may arise from charismatic and hubristic styles of leadership and, for example, an assessment of

the balance of opportunities and risks associated with what have been described as the 'animal spirits' found within financial and commercial markets

- The institutional conditions and enforceable rules of governance, behaviour and dialogue that might facilitate the development and maintenance of positive behavioural risk management practices to mitigate the onset of 'Hubris Syndrome', and the policies and rules within organisations that might encourage its development
- Whether obligatory participation in organisational decision-making processes, together with enforceable rules of decision-making, might reduce the risk of potentially disastrous decisions while improving the quality and the overall speed of implementing effective organisational decisions.

### **Research questions that might be explored include:**

- How can hubristic and visionary leadership be distinguished from each other? What characteristics are shared by successful and hubristic leaders?
- What are the important factors (biological, psychological, social, organisational, and cultural) that might exacerbate poor decision-making and increase excessive risk-taking by leaders?
- What processes (biological, psychological, social, organisational and cultural) might institutions be able to deploy to improve decision-making and decrease excessive risk-taking by leaders?
- Where is hubris most prevalent and dangerous?
- How does hubris come about? Does it have experiential, biological or personality antecedents? Is it a natural consequence of the isolation and chronic stress that many successful leaders experience, or of lasting biological or personality patterns?
- Is hubris associated with particular forms of social organisation? Might some ways of organising increase or mitigate the risk of hubris?
- What are the factors that might inhibit its occurrence? Where, and why, has it not occurred?
- How have social organisations been able to protect themselves from hubristic leaders?
- What are the wider societal and institutional implications of hubristic behaviour in the current social, political and economic climate?
- What possible positive features of hubristic leadership might there be?

### **Process and applications**

Applications are welcome from Neuroscience Departments, Schools of Business and Management and all Social Sciences disciplines (e.g. Psychology, Philosophy and Anthropology etc.). Applications for PhD Scholarships and/or Research Fellowships

will also be considered but must be submitted by the Head of the Academic Department.

Priority will be given to applications from, or in collaboration with, academic institutions.

Your proposal, of up to 2,000 words maximum, should fully describe the research aims, objectives, methods, expected outcomes, dissemination of results and budget. There should be an appendix together with brief biographical profiles of the applicant/s and a statement of any current research grants.

All applications will be peer reviewed.

Any grants that may be made should be seen as enabling, seed corn or finishing funding. The total sum available for distribution is £50,000. The Daedalus Trust does not pay overheads.

Submission should be by email to [jane@daedalustrust.org.uk](mailto:jane@daedalustrust.org.uk) and the deadline is 15 April 2014.

For more information or enquiries, contact our Research Administrator, Jane Hill, at [jane@daedalustrust.org.uk](mailto:jane@daedalustrust.org.uk)

## References

Brennan, Niamh M. and Conroy, John P. (2013): Executive hubris: the case of a bank CEO. *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal*, Vol. 26 Iss: 2

Caxton, G., Owen, D., and Sadler-Smith, E. (2013): Hubris in leadership: a peril of unbridled intuition? *Leadership*, DOI: 1177/1742715013511482

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