

## Hubristic leadership: A processual perspective

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### Abstract

Hubris has long been associated with failures of leadership, from the exploits of Alexander the Great, the downfall of Napoleon, through to hubris in modern times as witnessed in the demise of Lehman Brothers, Enron, and HBOS etc. (Currall and Epstein, 2003; Kets de Vries, 2003; Kroll, et al., 2000; Perman, 2012; Stein, 2013). Researchers have explored the behaviours of hubristic leaders and explained hubris in terms of cognitive biases, over-confidence, unbridled intuition, hyper core self-evaluation, excessive pride, and as a personality syndrome (Claxton, Owen and Sadler-Smith, 2014; Li and Tang, 2010; Malmendier and Tate, 2008; Owen and Davidson, 2009; Sadler-Smith, 2015). Others have conceptualised hubris as a paradoxical trait with “bright and dark” sides (Judge, Piccolo and Kosalka, 2009, p.855) or as being “simultaneously good and bad” (Picone, Dagnino and Mina, 2014: p.460). The rationale of the present research is not to redraw a traditional picture of the negative consequences of the traits and behaviours of hubristic leaders. Rather it is to take a different view, one in which leadership is considered to evolve through time and to comprise leaders, followers, and context. In so doing this research seeks new insights regarding the *process* of hubristic leadership rather than the attributes of hubristic leaders.

There is little hubris research in business and management which has considered the “critical importance and inescapability of time” (Langley, et al., 2013, p. 4). However, appreciating the role of time is at the heart of the processual perspective that underpins this research. This perspective is one that considers reality to be inherently processual, ever becoming, and never in a fixed state of being (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). In his foundational work in this area Pettigrew (1997) considered a processual reality to be one in which actions are embedded in contexts, contexts are shaping and shaped by actions, actors are producers and produced, and the present and future are intrinsically influenced by the events of history. From a processual perspective, and distinct from a traditional view (see Northouse, 2016), leadership is less a ‘thing’ possessed or done by a ‘leader’ and more a process the course of which is continually constituted through the actions and inter-actions of those it involves and by contextual circumstances (Lord and Dinh, 2012; Tourish, 2014). Therefore this research conceptualises hubristic leadership as a process whose unfolding course involves interplays between leaders and followers and their situating in dynamic organisational and environmental contexts.

Commensurate with a processual methodology, this research will analyse qualitative data pertaining to the temporal dynamics of two cases of hubristic leadership (Langley, et al., 2013). The initial output of each case study will be chronologically ordered descriptions of the unfolding events and activities in the leadership process. The second output will contain analyses of these narrative accounts through the process methods of temporal bracketing and visual mapping. The former involves conceptually “decomposing” (Langley, et al., 2013, p. 7) a process into phases (demarcated by periods of inferred changes in the overall process). This technique allows for the analysis of actions and events in each phase and to consider how those of one phase may have conditioned those of subsequent phases. Visual mapping involves illustrating the unfolding dynamics of processes. Insights will emerge from iterative cycles of induction and deduction, in which theory will emerge from the data at the same time as processual theories pertaining to dialectical, teleological and evolutionary forces are applied to the data. The final stage of analysis will involve comparing the processes of each case so as to explore similarities and differences in any theoretical mechanisms or patterns or that explain their course.

In summary, this research aims to provide fresh insights in to hubris in business and management through exploring how the process of hubristic leadership unfolds through time. The objectives of the research are to explore any phases in the process, and analyse how the actions and events of one phase may structure those of the present and the future. In so doing the research seeks to illuminate not only phases in which hubristic leadership is seen to fail, but also how these often follow phases of success. The applied contribution of the research will be to assist practitioners interested in mitigating the risk of hubris to consider the temporal, social, and contextual dynamics of hubristic leadership alongside assessments of the hubris of individual leaders.

**About the researcher:** Tim Wray is a PhD researcher at the University of Surrey. His research is supported by the Daedalus Trust and the Surrey Business School and focusses on the social and contextual dynamics of hubristic leadership and understanding how this process evolves through time.

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