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The Leadership Killer

Reclaiming Humility in an Age of Arrogance

John R. Havlik and Bill Treasurer • Little Leaps Press © 2018 • 148 pages

Leadership

Take-Aways

- Hubris is every leader's most destructive enemy – the “single most lethal leadership killer.”
- It poisons leaders' minds and makes them misapply their power.
- Hubris causes problems in mission, morale, performance, loyalty, ethics and reputation.
- Everyone has good and bad urges. The leader's primary challenge is to choose the good over the bad.
- Leaders must get in touch with themselves to understand how their ego may negatively influence their actions.
- Failed leaders almost always have only themselves to blame.
- Hubristic leaders think only of themselves, not of the people they lead.
- Worthy leaders faithfully serve their organizations and their employees.
- To dampen their egos and stay humble, leaders must remember that, in the great scheme of things, they aren't really all that important.
- You never have to be a bad actor to be a good leader.

Recommendation

Bill Treasurer and John Havlik detail how you can survive leadership with your soul unsullied and your honor intact. They explain the dangers hubris poses for leaders and how they can guard against it. Both authors draw on extensive leadership experience. After college, Treasurer captained the US High-Diving Team. Later, he became Accenture's first full-time executive coach, teaching the consulting firm's executives how to become better leaders. As the founder of Giant Leap Consulting, he has counseled thousands of leaders. A former US Navy SEAL, Havlik headed the redeployment of all US Special Forces troops during the Iraq War drawdown in 2011. Treasurer and Havlik's thoughtful book will educate leaders and all those who want to become leaders. The authors provide wise insights and important admonitions that all aspiring and experienced leaders should take to heart.

Summary

Hubris

Hubris is "exaggerated pride or self-confidence." It inflates the ego and, thus, diminishes and eventually destroys moral character. Hubris pushes leaders to seek power and amass it for self-aggrandizement, not for the good of the people they lead or for the benefit of their organizations.

"Hubris turns a leader's attention away from enriching the lives of others to enriching himself."

With leadership comes power. This breeds hubris, a malignant vice for leaders. It's corruptive and compromising; it strikes at a leader's integrity and effectiveness. It provokes leaders to abuse their power. Hubris ruins leaders and damages the people they lead.

But because of leaders' exalted position, the threat of insidious hubris comes with the territory. Hubris leads to rigidity, incompetency and complacency, plus a tendency to intimidate others and a lack of gratitude. Hubris turns otherwise good individuals into jerks, raging narcissists and all-around horrible people. Eventually, hubris robs leaders of their moral foundations.

The Repercussions of Bad Leadership

Bad leadership undermines several important factors of a leader's impact:

- **Mission** – Strong leaders purposely pursue worthy goals. Hubristic leaders subvert their organizations' goals to their own personal goals.
- **Morale** – In any organization, success depends on high morale among the workforce. Hubristic leaders destroy morale. They make their followers feel as if they are cogs in machines that exist to extol their leaders' virtues.
- **Performance** – People don't work hard for leaders they dislike.
- **Loyalty** – The only loyalty hubristic leaders feel is toward themselves. It's no surprise that their followers aren't loyal to them.

- **Ethics** – Strong leaders are ethical. Hubristic leaders are the opposite. Eventually, they exude “moral decay” and cause others to compromise their ethics as well.
- **Reputation** – Leadership should be a noble activity dedicated to the firm and to people you lead. Hubristic leaders care only about themselves and develop contemptible reputations within their organizations.

Bad Leaders

Unfortunately, far too many bad, hubristic leaders operate in the business world. Consider Hollywood film mogul Harvey Weinstein, who for decades auditioned young female talent on his infamous casting couch. Or, remember United Airlines CEO Oscar Munoz, whose boorish insensitivity went viral after a “bloodied customer” was dragged off of a United flight. In one week, United lost more than half a billion dollars in market capitalization because of Munoz’s behavior. Then there is former Wells Fargo CEO John Stumpf, who tried to blame “some 5,300 employees” for gross corporate malfeasance that became public. During a US Senate Banking Committee hearing, one senator called Stumpf “gutless.”

Good Leaders

Good leaders are exemplary, decisive people with discipline, integrity, good judgment and high ideals. They work to improve themselves as leaders – and as human beings. They focus on others, not themselves. Good leaders respect the people around them and work to ensure their success. Nothing in life is guaranteed. Good leaders may do everything right and still fail miserably. Because of their character, they don’t let failure undermine them. They understand that it has a saving grace: It keeps people humble. Good leaders are experts at “ego management.” They are confident, but not arrogant. To stay grounded, they remind themselves that, in the larger scheme of things, they are insignificant.

Reality Checks

Good leaders can turn to these reality checks to remain humble:

- **“Ask questions”** – You don’t know everything, so don’t pretend you do. Others will appreciate that you know you don’t have all the answers.
- **“Show your warts”** – No one’s perfect. Your mistakes demonstrate that you’re human, just like everyone else.
- **“Surround yourself with people who are smarter than you”** – As Steve Jobs advised: “It doesn’t make sense to hire smart people and then tell them what to do; we hire smart people so they can tell us what to do.”
- **“Spend time with people you outrank”** – They are closer to the work than you are, and you can learn from them.
- **“Open yourself up to feedback”** – It’s impossible to gauge your own leadership prowess objectively. Ask for “honest, unfiltered feedback.”
- **Give someone “permission to help you check yourself”** – Identify a trusted confidant to look out for you when your ego works against you.

- **“Say ‘thank you’ sincerely and often”** – Being grateful is respectful and polite; being ungrateful is arrogant.
- **“Pick a side”** – As a leader, decide if you are there to help others or to help yourself. Choose whether you will “lead or rule.”

Two Wolves Inside You

According to an old Cherokee legend, two wolves live inside every person. One is aggressive, manipulative and angry. That is your bad wolf. The other is generous and trustworthy and strives to do what’s right. That is your good wolf. These two wolves struggle within you for dominance. It’s your job as a leader – and as a responsible human being – to choose the good wolf over the bad wolf. So, “feed the good wolf” – but don’t ignore the bad wolf. That only makes it more vicious. Redirect its energies; provide a reasonable outlet for your aggressive wolf – perhaps through exercise or a martial arts class. “Rather than starve one, guide both.”

“Unless you have mastery over the totality of your own nature, you will be prone to causing a lot of leadership damage.”

Leaders must be introspective and vigilant to ward off hubris. To avoid a swelling ego and its bad effects, raise your consciousness.

“Points of Pressure”

Leaders often work under heavy pressure, which takes the form of the “Three Rs”:

1. **“Responsibility”** – Because leaders have many duties and obligations, they often forget to take good care of themselves. They tend not to eat well, exercise or get enough rest.
2. **“Results”** – Since leaders must constantly meet goals, they may sacrifice the means for the ends, losing track of being a good leader and a good person.
3. **The “role” of a leader** – Leaders must assume an elevated role, which “comes with many demands,” often leaving them facing unrealistic expectations that they can be unshakeable and invincible at all times.

“No leader gets to be a god on Earth. As close as a leader may fly to the sun, his wings will melt eventually and he will freefall back down to the hard dirt floor.”

These pressure points mark the times that hubris can worm its way into your heart. Think of hubris as a stealthy, pestilential entity that burrows deep inside you. Hubris exploits the moments when you feel the most pressure so it can poison your thinking and cause you to act in selfish, shabby and dishonorable ways.

Success

Don’t measure leadership by how much you succeed; measure it by how much you improve your firm and the lives of those you lead. The sole, avid pursuit of success often ends in disgrace. Consider three examples: Seven-time Tour de France winner Lance Armstrong lost his titles due to illegal doping. Fred Lorz, the 1904 Olympic Marathon winner, had to give up his gold medal after it became public that his

manager drove him in a car for 11 miles of the race. Tonya Harding, the 1994 US figure-skating champ, lost her title when her ex-husband was involved in an assault on rival skater Nancy Kerrigan. Harding received probation for conspiring to block the government's case against her ex.

“What the hell is going on? Why do so many seemingly good leaders go bad?”

Be on guard when you succeed. At your peak, hubris may go into overdrive to convince you that success makes you special, the rules don't apply to you and as a big winner you can do whatever you want. This faulty mind-set accounts for the shameful fall of many formerly respected leaders. Catering to your ego is a negative dynamic. “Thriving leadership” is a positive dynamic built on leading “with virtue, integrity and humility.” Use your “leadership power” on behalf of your firm and those you lead. Help them get ahead. When leaders lead properly, optimism becomes their defining characteristic. Effective leaders are enthusiastic, energetic, happy about the present and confident about the future. And the people they lead feel the same way. They'll look forward to going to work in an environment where employees and leaders thrive together.

“Ten Tips for Thriving Leadership”

To remain “humble, balanced and focused,” follow these 10 tips:

1. **“Lead yourself first”** – You can't lead others if you can't govern yourself. Signs that you don't have a handle on your actions include: You're often angry. Your life is a disordered disaster. You miss deadlines. You're negative and judgmental. You complain all the time. If these traits define you, assess yourself objectively. Take the necessary steps to improve yourself and your life.
2. **“Value values”** – Great leaders live up to their principles and morality. They align their “goals, priorities and actions” with their core beliefs.
3. **“Name your fear”** – Often, fear rules hubristic leaders. They deal with their fears by making others fear them so they feel less vulnerable. They fear being disrespected or judged, not getting what they want, not being in charge and not being rewarded when they believe they are due. Face your fears; reject those that make you a lesser leader.
4. **“Start and end your day with two questions”** – At the start of each day, American scholar, inventor and politician Benjamin Franklin asked himself, “What good shall I do this day?” This helped him orient his actions toward being of service and offering a positive influence. Reflecting at the end of the day, he asked, “What good have I done today?”
5. **“Respect self and others”** – Some leaders disrespect others, yet assume others will respect them because of their position. Leaders must merit respect through their actions: treating others as being of equal importance, letting them speak about their concerns and listening with interest. When others make mistakes, leaders should be understanding.
6. **“Play the tape forward”** – The first part of the word “leadership” is “lead,” which means, “stay out in front.” Focus on the future, not the past. Plan for the skills the people you lead will need in the years to come. Be thoughtful about your firm and its future requirements. Forecast the goals you want to achieve and plan the necessary actions to attain them.
7. **“Balance, why, what and how”** – Leaders must communicate about three issues: 1) Why the group engages in the activities it does; 2) What activities the group needs to handle better; and 3) How

each team member's actions tie into a larger organizational effort. Leaders commonly focus on the "what" because it represents results. The "why" and the "how" matter just as much. Your employees need to understand how to do their work and why their targeted results matter. Don't neglect the "why" and the "how" in service of the "what."

8. **"Polish your conscience"** – Would you be proud of how *USA Today* would tell your life story on its front page? Keep a clear conscience. Do things that enable you to feel good about yourself and the way others see you. Give time to a charity. Assist others. Become a mentor to newer employees.
9. **"Be grateful and gracious"** – Life is short. You're here and then you're gone. Make your time on Earth positive. Be thankful to those around you, including those you lead. Express your appreciation daily to those who share your journey through life.
10. **"Earn your trident every day!"** – Leading others is a singular privilege. But leadership is difficult and arduous. You must deal with perplexing situations and capricious people, often with inconclusive information. All US Navy Seals aspire to earn the Trident – the Navy's Special Warfare breast insignia. As a leader, you must earn your trident every day. Accept leadership's formidable complexities, and work to lead others with respect and honor.

About the Authors

Bill Treasurer is the "chief encouragement officer" of Giant Leap Consulting, which helps people and organizations become more courageous. He also wrote *A Leadership Kick in the Ass*, *Leaders Open Doors*, *Right Risk* and *Courage Goes to Work*. **Captain John "Coach" Havlik**, US Navy (Ret.), separated from the Navy in 2014 after more than 31 years of distinguished naval service, 29 of those years in the Naval Special Warfare (SEAL) community.



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