Déjà vu: Whose Hubris?

Graham Robinson, BA, PhD, FRSA

Visiting Senior Research Fellow

Surrey Business School

University of Surrey GU2 7XH

Email: graham.robinson3163@gmail.com

1. Reflection

In the Sunday Times of October 26th, 2018, Lord David Owen observed that he has been writing about hubris in relation to American Presidents and British Prime Ministers for the past fifteen years. This prompted me to consider how my thinking has developed over the past fifteen years. I wondered what it has contributed to my current views concerning leadership and the frequently expressed perception of hubris as something primarily associated with those who occupy positions of power. I deliberately put it in this way because it is very easy to equate the occupation of a powerful position with leadership. But they are not necessarily one and the same thing.

Fifteen years ago, my thoughts about leadership had been largely influenced by various scholars who provided the background to my career as a manager, company director and, later, business consultant. These scholars included, Warren Bennis[1] who argued that the leaders of many of the major institutions of the day were prevented from exercising their leadership role effectively as the consequence of an "unconscious conspiracy". This conspiracy enabled the trivial to be escalated to the top, bogging leaders down in irrelevant bureaucracy, leaving critical decisions in the hands of people unqualified and unauthorised to make them, while reducing the role of the leader to a wielder of rubber stamps to be placed upon *faites accomplis*. Bennis was writing from the perspective of an organisational sociologist who had been appointed President of an American University during the nineteen sixties. While I suspect that the challenges faced by the leaders of Facebook, Apple and Google may be of a different complexion than those that Bennis had to confront, I suspect that his views might well be echoed in 2018 by the Head Teachers of many UK schools.

My thinking was also influenced strongly by the work of Jay Galbraith[2] on designing complex organisations. He suggested that organisations should be seen as complex systems of which the principal, interdependent subsystem elements comprise: *strategy, structure, information processes, people and rewards*. As a consultant actively engaged in change programmes within complex organisations, I was particularly struck by Galbraith's pointing out that a planned change in any one part of the system would inevitably bring about unplanned changes in each of the other parts. That is the nature of systems.

My views were further shaped to a considerable degree by the work of Harvard Professor, Chris Argyris[3] who made the distinction between what he called an organisation's

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[1] "Why Leaders Can't Lead", Warren Bennis, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 1989
[2] "Designing Organizations", Jay Galbraith, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 1995
[3] "Double Loop Learning in Organizations" Chris Argyris, *Harvard Business Review*, September 1977

'espoused theories' and its 'theories in-use'. Putting it in a nutshell, the difference between these two sets of theories is, on the one hand, that which might be reflected in its published statements, policies, and procedures and, on the other, that which might be revealed by the organisational stories that are exchanged informally over coffee, at lunch or in the bar after work. It is unlikely that Argyris has been more dramatically vindicated than by the 2018 revelations that began with Harvey Weinstein in Hollywood, gave birth to the "#Me Too" movement and have recently surfaced in the UK's Houses of Parliament. Perhaps the most disturbing thing about Argyris' ideas was that he claimed that many of an organisation's members will be fully aware of its theories in-use but so used to taking them for granted that they are never discussed and are probably undiscussable: in the words of Leonard Cohen, "Everybody Knows", or of Roger McGough, that's simply, "The Way things Are". This would certainly appear to have been characteristic of Harvey Weinstein's Hollywood, Sir Phillip Green's Arcadia and recently alleged behaviours at the Palace of Westminster.

2. Implications # 1

Ten years ago, in 2008, John Harris and I completed the first draft of our book, "Unsecured Ladders"[4]. The theme of the book was based on the proposition that all business leaders must face the challenges of uncertainty – discrepant events that are not "in the plan" and that are, therefore, unlikely to have been anticipated. Such events are likely to arrive "out of the blue", even with the benefit of detailed and well researched, 'what-if' scenario plans such as are recommended by theorists such as Peter Schwartz[5] and by practitioners such as Arie de Geus[6]. Scenario planning can make brilliant contributions to strategy formulation in conditions of high risk and uncertainty. They can assist in the anticipation of the consequences of major disruptions, such as political upheavals, currency fluctuations, and natural (or unnatural) disasters – such as earthquakes, drilling rig fires and the election of unlikely Presidents. But, almost by definition, they cannot predict the likely outcomes of problems arising from an organisation's theories-in-use – as, I suspect, was the experience, for example, of the leaders, management and staff of Cambridge Analytica early in 2018.

John's and my book drew upon his experiences as CEO of an international energy company and from mine as a consultant and adviser to a wide variety of large, private and public corporations (including John's). It also drew upon my research into the learning and sense-making experiences of nine Chairmen, CEOs and directors (including John), each of whom was accountable for bringing about a major change in his organisation. During the research, which was conducted over a period of between eighteen months and two to three years, each of these business leaders encountered unexpected/discrepant events which had significant consequences both for them and for the changes for which they were accountable. Some of these events were of relatively minor importance for the change process but were highly significant for the individual director. They might, for example, have included a health issue involving a partner or spouse; the impact of a child's leaving for university or the unexpected retirement of a critical ally. At the other end of the scale they involved an international currency crisis, an unexpected and successful merger or a political upheaval with

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[4] John Harris and Graham Robinson, "Unsecured Ladders: Meeting the Challenge of the Unexpected", 2010, London, Palgrave MacMillan

[5] Peter Schwartz, "The Art of the Long View", 1991, New York, Doubleday

[6] Arie De Geus, "The Living Company", 1997, "The Living Company", London, Nicholas Brealey Publishing

knock-on consequences for the way in which a CEO was perceived in the market in which his business operated. These events were critical at the level of the individual leader of a process of change rather than for the process itself. But the way in which each one responded to them had major personal consequences and, therefore, had an impact on the ways in which they led the change processes for which they were accountable.

Studying the responses of the nine business leaders to the uncertain situations to which they were called upon to respond, I concluded that it was possible to distinguish some response patterns according to the extent to which:

A: The focus of the leader's approach to their change responsibilities was primarily *inward*. For example, seeing the change process as a project that they "owned" and for which responsibility was solely theirs. For example, referring to it as, "my legacy" and seeing its success as being largely dependent on the leader's own particular set of knowledge, skills and abilities.

Or:

B: Their focus being primarily *outward*, towards the organisation as a whole, and with their role and the place of the change project being seen as but a part of that wider whole; and themselves as making an integrating contribution as a member of a wider team having a collective responsibility, while acknowledging simultaneously that, ultimately, the buck stopped with them as leaders.

A second and subtly different pattern was concerned with the context within which the leaders located the change process in which they were engaged:

X: The contextual perspective of the change driver tending to be *internal*; bounded by the organisation itself, or even (in the case of a multinational) limited to the national subsidiary in which the specific change was located. Events in the world beyond the change driver's own organisational boundaries tended to be regarded by those with this, internal, perspective as "noise", having little relevance to the change process and its success.

Or:

Y: The change driver demonstrating an *external* contextual perspective, locating his organisation and the change for which he was accountable as part of a much bigger system and process involving not just his company but the industry, markets and political/social environments in which it was located.

These patterns offered the following clusters:

AX: Inward personal focus – Internal contextual perspective

AY: Inward personal focus – External contextual perspective

BX: Outward personal focus – Internal contextual perspective

BY: Outward personal focus – External contextual perspective

Or, to put this in the manner of a "four box model", much loved by consultants

AX: Inward personal focus — Internal contextual perspective	**AY:** Inward personal focus — External contextual perspective
BX: Outward personal focus – Internal contextual perspective	**BY:** Outward personal focus – External contextual perspective

Of course, none of the leaders in the study fitted neatly and exclusively into any one of these "categories" or boxes. But I was interested to note, having ploughed through the transcripts of many hours of recorded interviews and conversations, that those tending towards the **AX** position were more likely to be thrown off course by the impact of unexpected events than were those with a tendency towards **BY**.

Those who showed a tendency towards the latter position were likely to be more laid back in their responses; more inclined to "roll with the punches" and to adjust rapidly to the changed circumstances in which they found themselves. In contrast, those tending towards the **AX** position were more likely to be distressed or angered by the events and their consequences; seeking ways to assign blame for what they saw as having "gone wrong" and to distance themselves from those consequences.

In 2009, just before our book was published, David Owen and John Davidson, in the neurological journal, "Brain", published their paper on, "Hubris Syndrome: An acquired personality disorder"[7]. In the paper, Owen and Davidson identify fourteen symptoms of what they term Hubris Syndrome, noting that several of these symptoms overlap with other, previously identified symptoms of narcissistic personality disorder. The symptoms are reproduced below. For Owen and Davidson, a leader displaying five or more of the following "symptoms" may be seen to be demonstrating Hubris Syndrome:

1. Seeing the world as a place for *self-glorification*** through the use of power
2. Having a tendency to take action *primarily* to enhance personal image
3. Showing *disproportionate* concern for image and presentation
4. Exhibiting *messianic* zeal and exaltation in speech
5. Conflating self with nation or organisation
6. Using the royal "we" in conversation
7. Showing *excessive* self-confidence
8. Manifesting contempt for others
9. Showing accountability *only to a higher court* (history or God)

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[7] Jonathan Davidson and David Owen, ""Hubris Syndrome: An acquired personality disorder? A study of US Presidents and UK Presidents over the last 100 years", in Brain, 2009

10. Displaying *unshakeable* belief that they will be vindicated

11. Losing contact with reality

12. *Resorting* to restlessness, recklessness and impulsive actions

13. Allowing moral rectitude to *obviate* consideration of practicality, cost or outcome

14. Displaying *incompetence with disregard* for nuts and bolts of policy handling

** Italics added by GMR

An issue for consideration is to place the observation of these "symptoms" in their context. Thus, for example, in what context would a concern for image and presentation be 'disproportionate'? At what point should zeal and exaltation in speech be regarded as 'messianic'? Does Shakespeare's Henry Vth display symptoms of "hubris syndrome"? When is self-confidence excessive, or can a belief be shown to be unshakeable?

Notwithstanding questions such as these, I was interested to compare the findings of the research into the nine leaders, accountable for driving major changes through their organisations with Owen and Davidson's symptoms of hubris syndrome. While only an informal comparison could be made, it did not come as a big surprise to find that the fourteen symptoms were observable throughout the data relating to the nine leaders who had been the subjects of my research. What I found particularly interesting, however, was that those leaders with the greatest tendency towards the **AX:** Inward personal focus – Internal contextual perspective, position seemed more likely to demonstrate more of Owen and Davidson's symptoms than those tending towards the other three positions.

Reflecting this finding in our book, John Harris and I concluded that keeping in touch with the wider context within which leaders exercise their role while endeavouring to establish and maintain a focus upon a few values and touchstones, both within and external to oneself are probably keys to a leader's long-term success, well-being and health.

In 2010, our book was published, and John and I met with David Owen to discuss our common interests in risks associated with leadership roles. Shortly afterwards, Lord Owen and others established the Daedalus Trust, an educational charity formed to encourage awareness and research into issues associated with leadership hubris. At an early meeting of the Trust's Steering Group, Sir Bob Reid, a highly respected UK business leader, having been the Chief Executive of Shell-UK, Chairman of British Rail prior to becoming Chairman of the International Commodities Exchange, expressed the view that several of Owen and Davidson's proposed symptoms were *precisely* the characteristics he would be seeking when making an appointment to a senior leadership position in a major corporation. Those in such positions, he argued, had to demonstrate high levels of self confidence and self-belief; be willing to take risks and to render judgements (often in the absence of adequate information); to generate support by demonstrating their own zeal, energy and commitment and to establish an identity between the organisation and themselves. This last would be likely to involve frequent use of the word "we", whether royal or otherwise. The challenge to those making such appointments was to know where the boundaries between necessity and excess might lie. These boundaries were likely to be dependent both on circumstance and on their context. It was necessary as well to recognise that both individuals and the contexts within which they function are subject to change, potentially making them less fit for the particular role that they occupied.

Sir Bob Reid's argument raises many very important questions. The italicised phrases in the list of Owen and Davidson's symptoms of hubris Syndrome all qualify the symptom as being

an issue of degree or of excess. But what determines whether a leader's self-confidence is excessive; her zeal messianic or his actions primarily driven by a need for self-glorification? These failings are frequently identified in the wake of a leader's being seen to have failed – as too is the phenomenon increasingly labelled 'Hubris'. But by this time, it is too late.

Speaking at a workshop at Surrey Business School in 2016, the then Chief Executive of the Equitable Life insurance company, Chris Wiscarson, made a plea that attempts to find ways to mitigate the negative consequences of leadership hubris need to take account of the attitudes and behaviours of a company's board of directors and of its shareholders rather than focus on the Chief Executive him or herself. His plea is entirely consistent with the observations of Sir Bob Reid.

On BBC Radio 4, on October 31st, 2018, the former UK Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, observed that the Conservative government of which he had been a member when led by Prime Minister, David Cameron, had failed to appreciate the strength of feeling held by those who opposed Britain's membership of the European Union. They had also woefully underestimated the need for the government and Pro-European movement to present more actively than they had, the benefits and advantages that membership offered. The outcome of the referendum called by the government on EU membership which resulted in the UK's leaving the union was, he said, a direct consequence of that failure. They had assumed that the views of a significant majority of voters would coincide with their own. In other words, the outcome could be said to have been a consequence of the government and remain campaign's hubris – regardless of whether one was in favour of the country's retaining its membership or not. Those who voted to remain in the Union could feel let down by the hubris of their government in failing to recognise and seek to assuage the anger and disaffection of those who opposed them, while those who voted to leave it could attribute their success to having visited nemesis upon an arrogant government.

In contrast to Osborne and his colleagues who, he acknowledged, were out of touch with the mood and needs of, voters, when a Presidential candidate, Donald J. Trump consistently derided what he called "the Washington swamp" and the political elite that dwelt therein and which, if elected, he promised to "drain". The fact that Trump did not discriminate between the Democrat and Republican swamp dwellers was irrelevant to the angry voters with whom his derisive description struck a chord. This enabled him to capitalise on their anger to his personal advantage, regardless of the costs to the party that he was claiming to lead.

Karl Marx suggested that the revolution would begin when a member or a portion of the bourgeoisie broke away from their social class identity to lead the establishment of a "dictatorship of the proletariat". Being somewhat cynical, I had always thought that this proposition might have stemmed from a desire on the part of Marx to secure his own place (as a bourgeois intellectual) in post-revolutionary society. It would be ironic if Trump's election were to prove the accuracy of Marx's prediction, though not quite in the way that he had thought.

3. Responses

The Surrey Hubris Project/Hub has suggested[8] that, rather than concentrate attention upon the character and performance of individual leaders, it would be helpful to think of the risks associated with hubristic leadership in terms of a "toxic triangle" involving the leader; those who are led by that leader and the nature of the different contexts within which they all operate.

The project team also concluded that the level of complexity within the organisation, its wider context and the circumstances faced by leaders when confronted by the need for decision making in situations of high risk (often with only limited information being available to them) was also likely to be a contributory factor as to whether such decisions were or were not perceived by others as having been hubristic.

In considering this issue, the Cynefin model developed by Dave Snowden[9] and his colleagues at IBM has proved to be very helpful to members of the Project group. Once again, the model comprises four boxes:

The Cyenfin Model©

In a well-established organisation operating within a stable context and delivering predictable products, services or outcomes, a breakdown, systems failure or the impact of an unexpected event may, in a majority of cases, be tackled in the sequence: *sense* the problem; *categorise* it; and then *respond* to it. In such situations the best outcome is likely to be achieved by following a sequence of actions that have been clearly specified in a manual of good practice. It is interesting to observe that when major problems occur in public sector bureaucracies the response of their leadership is very often to announce that, "investigations are being undertaken as to whether or not the proper procedures were followed".

However, in 21st Century societies, only a small proportion of organisations are so stable that they could be said to be in a position where their leaders can be confident that all

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[8] Following: Padilla, A., et al "The toxic triangle: Destructive leaders, susceptible followers, and conducive environments". *The Leader ship Quarterly*, 18(3), 2007, 176-194

[9] Dave Snowden and Mary Boone, "A Leader's Framework for Decision Making", *Harvard Business Review*, November 2007

contingencies are adequately covered by "proper procedures". They are much more likely to be complicated in a variety of ways, whereby an unexpected event may have mutiple, systemic consequences, some of which may be predictable while others will be contingent, not only upon the event itself but also upon the responses that are made (or not made) to it. But the fact that an organisation is complex does not mean that the outcomes of an unexpected event are entirely unpredictable. Such events may be analysed and categorised, enabling appropriate responses to be planned and executed. Good practice in such circumstances would be to *sense* the issue, *analyse* its implications and then to *respond* appropriately. Scenario and similar planning techniques are likely to be of considerable value in such circumstances, whereas they would be likely to be 'overkill' in the stable organisation where the origins of the problem and the 'correct' course of action to follow are likely to be more obvious.

The experiences of the U.S. and coalition forces in Iraq during the aftermath of the 2003 invasion of Iraq have been described by General Stanley McChrystal in his book, "Team of Teams"[10]. Reviewing the issues that he confonted when taking command of the Joint Special Operations Task Force in 2003, he quickly concluded that conventional, well-established military tactics were failing. The operations of the opposing forces were based on widely distributed cells and individuals, linked instantaneously by internet-based social networks, embedded within many levels of Iraqi society. The military situation was characterised by high levels of complexity and uncertainty, whereas, what had been previously regarded as good practice had become largely irrelevant. It was necessary to operate in the manner of the 'Complex' quadrant of the Cynefin model i.e. to *probe* the wider environment in which an event or threat had occurred; to *sense* its implications and to *respond* appropriately to the situation and its specific circumstances. These were frequently unlike anything that had been previously encountered. Rather than rely upon the tried and tested command and control structures of traditional military organisations, McChrystal and his colleagues developed a network of interdependent teams capable of probing, sensing and responding with considerable autonomy, while being closely coupled to the rest of the network by means of sophisticated but readily accessible communications systems – creating what he called a "team of teams". Such structures and processes place a very different set of demands upon leaders than are called for in more conventional military arrangements. In these situations, good practice is likely to 'emerge' from the sense-making processes involved in the "probing" that is made in order to understand the complexity of what is happening.

The fourth quadrant of the Cynefin model is concerned with decsion making in circumstances that are chaotic, such as was the case in the fire that destroyed the homes within the Grenfell Tower in West London on June 14th, 2017 at the cost of 72 lives. The fire spread so rapidly for reasons which only became apparent in its aftermath and of which the members of the rescue services called in response to it were unaware. The well-researched, developed, tested and established modes of good practice became dysfunctional, hindering rather than facilitating the efforts being made to deal with the situation.

With hindsight it can be seen that the emergency services should have acted, as their highest prority, to get people out of the building as quickly as possible and by any safe means available to them. Instead, they followed the procedures appropriate to prescribed best practice, and advised residents of the tower to remain in their homes, sealing their doors

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[10] Stanley McChrystal et al, "Team of Teams: New Rules of Engagement for a Complex World", 2015, London, Penguin Random House,

against the smoke and flames inside the building and to await rescue. The consequences were dire.

The priority in chaotic situations such as this, where the unknowns are unknown, seeking the "right" solutions is pointless. The relationships between cause and effect are impossible to determine because they are constantly changing so that few if any patterns are discernible by those in positions of leadership (or, indeed, by anyone) - all is turbulence, as was the case at Grenfell and even more dramatically so in New York on September 11th, 2001.

In their article in the Harvard Business Review issue of November 2007, "A Leader's Framework for Decision Making", Dave Snowden and Mary Boone write:

> "In the chaotic domain, a leader's immediate job is not to discover patterns but to stanch the bleeding. A leader must first *act* to establish order, then sense where stability is present and from where it is absent, and then respond by working to transform the situation from chaos to complexity, where the identification of emerging patterns can both help prevent future crises and discern new opportunities. Communication of the most direct top-down or broadcast kind is imperative; there's simply no time to ask for input."

Unfortunately, most leadership "recipes" arise from examples of good crisis management. This is a mistake, and not only because chaotic situations are mercifully rare. Though the events of September 11 were not immediately comprehensible, the crisis demanded decisive action. New York's mayor at the time, Rudy Giuliani, demonstrated exceptional effectiveness under chaotic conditions by issuing directives and taking action to re-establish order. However, in his role as mayor—certainly one of the most complex jobs in the world—he was widely criticized for the same top-down leadership style that proved so enormously effective during the catastrophe. He was also criticized afterward for suggesting that elections be postponed so he could maintain order and stability. Indeed, a specific danger for leaders following a crisis is that some of them become less successful when the context shifts because they are not able to switch styles to match it".

Snowden and Boone continue as follows (the italics are mine):

> *"Moreover, leaders who are highly successful in chaotic contexts can develop an overinflated self-image, becoming legends in their own minds. When they generate cultlike adoration, leading actually becomes harder for them because a circle of admiring supporters cuts them off from accurate information."*

Welcome back, hubris!

The authors conclude:

> "The chaotic domain is nearly always the best place for leaders to impel innovation. People are more open to novelty and directive leadership in these situations than they would be in other contexts. One excellent technique is to manage chaos and innovation in parallel: The minute you encounter a crisis, appoint a reliable manager or crisis management team to resolve the issue. At the same time, pick out a separate team and focus its members on the opportunities for doing

things differently. If you wait until the crisis is over, the chance will be gone."

While I take their point, I suspect that proposals to establish separate teams to explore opportunities for innovation on 11th September 2001 or 14th June 2017 would have been given short shrift by those attempting to manage the chaotic situations that they encountered.

4. Implications #2

I am captivated by the little 'hook' at the bottom of the diagram of the Cynefin model. This, apparently, is to indicate the colossal damage potential that arises when leaders confuse their situation and its context as occupying one quadrant of the model when it is located in another. The adored saviour leader in a chaotic situation may well adopt a 'ready-fire-aim' approach in one that is simply complicated or complex. While, in a routinised organisation operating in a highly stable situation, where the responses to operational problems can be, and usually are, codified in procedures and manuals of good practice, such an approach to leadership would be disastrous.

Airlines were forced to confront the problem of inappropriate leadership situational responses following a number of accidents being identified as having been caused by pilot error. An example of such an accident is provided by the crash of Korean Air Boeing 747, flight number 801 on August 6th, 1997 in which 254 people were killed. The subsequent investigation report revealed not only that the aircraft's captain had issued instructions that were erroneous, but that other members of the cockpit crew were aware of the errors and had queried them. However, the captain dismissed their concerns and overruled them. As his was the ultimate authority, the crew followed his instructions and the aircraft crashed.

Much of the debate that followed in the wake of this accident was concerned with issues of culture and the suggestion that Asian cultural respect for seniority and authority could have blindsided common sense. However, investigations into subsequent cases of accidents resulting from pilot error suggested that the cause of the Korean Air crash was by no means unique to that incident. Misjudgements by aircraft captains, coupled to command and control authority structures had, in several other fatal accidents, led to those misjudgements failing to be successfully challenged by crew members who had nevertheless recognised them for what they were. This led to a revision of the protocols for dealing with in-flight emergencies which have since been adopted by the world's airlines.

These new protocols recognise that in normal circumstances, the proper operation and control of an aircraft from take-off to landing can be proceduralised and subject to a system of routinised checks that lend themselves to a traditional, command and control management system. However, in an emergency, this system is likely to be less appropriate. While rapid decision making is essential in such a situation, the risk of such decisions being erroneous is greatly increased. A different, team-based process was, therefore, developed (Crew Resource Management - CRM) enabling decisions to be proposed, queried and checked very rapidly, involving the captain, the cockpit crew and, where possible, ground control. These changes tacitly acknowledge the different leadership requirements of complicated, complex and, sometimes, chaotic situations and have led to a significant reduction in airline accidents due to human error. They have since been successfully extended to other, potentially high-risk environments, such as hospital operating theatres.

David Owen has referred to the importance of the role of a "toe-holder" in mitigating the risk of leaders' succumbing to hubris or, as John Harris has put it somewhat more prosaically, that of "coming to believe in their own bullshit". CRM formally recognises the need for a rapid reaction system of challenge, checks and balances in addition to a capacity for fast and unambiguous decision making.

But the issue of culture that arose in the case of the crash of Korean Air Flight 801 is an important one, even though it should not be reduced to the simplistic notion of one nation's culture being in some way more or less authoritarian than that of another. This leads to a consideration of sense-making and identity construction which is of importance when it comes to situations that involve conflicts between values and different perceptions of ethical priorities.

Karl Weick[11] argues that sense-making is grounded in identity construction, while Kwame Anthony Appiah suggests that identity is 'negotiated between insiders and outsiders' and tends 'to be eagerly embraced by those it categorises, as a badge of honour, uniting them and serving to distinguish them from the 'others'. The latter may be identified by class, race, nationality or status – such as, for example, immigrant or redneck; Republican or Democrat; Brexiteer or Remoaner; Corbynista or Maybotchik etc.

In 2007, the rock star and so-called 'Godfather of Grunge', Neil Young, re-united with his erstwhile companions David Crosby, Stephen Stills and Graham Nash to embark upon a nationwide, 'Freedom of Speech', tour of the United States. The tour was prompted by Young's view that the 2003 invasion and subsequent disastrous occupation of Iraq represented a shameful return to the political values of the era of the Vietnam war, against which the group had been highly visible and very popular protestors in the nineteen-seventies. The 2007 tour included songs with titles such as 'let's Impeach the President' and '(We're) Looking for a Leader'. These provoked scenes of devotion and outrage in pretty-well equal measure amongst the audiences on the group's tour of the USA. Helpfully for the piece that I am writing here, Young chose to hire and direct a film crew to record the key events of the tour.

Neil Young has developed several personae during a long and highly successful career. One of these is of a typical, nineteen-sixties, peacenik hippy, another is of a grunge driven, heavy metal rocker, much beloved by bikers and other 'red-neck' fans. The film crew unflinchingly recorded the reactions of both groups of admirers to a highly politicised series of concerts right across the United States. These reactions were consistently ones of outrage and anger, either at the government and the President over their conduct of the war and its aftermath or at Young and his colleagues for their perceived lack of patriotism and betrayal of the values of Young's, Harley-riding admirers. Viewing the film reveals starkly the emotional intensity with which tribal differences may be emphasised and preconceptions maintained at the expense of common interest.

The film clearly anticipates the divisions and anger that were characteristic of the Presidential campaign ten years later which resulted in the election of Donald J. Trump. The intervening years of the Obama administration are likely to have offered a level of solace to one half of Young's audience while further stoking the anger and sense of rejection

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[11] Karl Weick, "Sensemaking in Organizations", 1995, Thousand Oaks: SAGE

experienced by the other. Interestingly, in the context of a consideration of cycles of leadership hubris-nemesis, the title of Young's film is, "Déjà vu".

This digression has been written in order to assist me in coming to terms with what I, and some of my colleagues, have come to regard as a major shortcoming in the discussion and debate on the topic of hubris. This is that it has concentrated far too much on the characteristics and identifiable failings of individual leaders, while neglecting those of the socio-political or organisational contexts within which their leadership has been exercised. The election of President Trump has only served to give further emphasis to such a concentration and focus.

Situations of conflict imply winners and losers. The winners write the history, celebrating the nemesis that has deservedly befallen the losers while ignoring the hubris that their own victory may well entail. The Greeks of antiquity recognised that hubris and nemesis are but two sides of the same coin. Tim Wray at Surrey Business School is pursuing the proposition that hubris-nemesis involves a cyclical process that has an inevitability about it. As Snowden and Boone suggest, successfully leading an organisation out of a situation of crisis and chaos is likely to gain leaders accolades and admiration, subsequently rewarding them with power and authority in situations for which their knowledge and skills are likely to be almost totally inappropriate. Nevertheless, their followers' belief in them and their own enhanced levels of self-belief doom them all to hubris and, in turn, to nemesis.

5. Where next?

I have yet to read Lord Owen's latest book[12], which I suspect will bring us full circle. The book is entitled, "Hubris – The Road to Donald Trump" - a title that could be taken to imply that the road is at least as significant as the President himself which, I now believe, to be the case.

The Surrey Hubris Project/Hub has, for many of the fifteen years that Owen has been writing about hubris, been seeking to find ways and tools that might be employed to anticipate its development or mitigate its negative consequences. The project team has developed employed the notion of a toxic triangle[13] – a conducive situation, a potentially hubristic leader and a group of susceptible followers - as an aid to identifying ways in which it might be possible:

1. To empower company board members to act more effectively in holding their Chief Executive and management teams to account
2. To learn from organisations such as John Lewis and Partners, Visa International and the Mondragon Cooperative how they have achieved and maintained consistent levels of high performance with unconventional, team-based organisation and managerial structures
3. To act in order to reduce the isolation of CEOs by, for example, the provision of mentors, the development of peer group support teams and processes
4. To identify/pick up the weak signals (perhaps of what Argyris has labelled 'theories-in-use) of developing leadership or organisational hubris from informal sources such as, for

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[12] David Owen, "Hubris – The Road to Donald Trump", 2018, York, Methuen
[13] Padilla, A., et al "The toxic triangle: Destructive leaders, susceptible followers, and conducive environments". *The Leadership Quarterly*, *18*(3), 2007, 176-194

example, the stories that are exchanged between organisational members about that organisation and its leaders.

To study the language that leaders employ to help to determine whether they are developing or experiencing Hubris Syndrome. Vita Akstinaite, a project team member, has conducted research that indicates that patterns in the language use of leaders can indicate whether they are more or less likely to adopt a style of leadership that might suggest that they are experiencing Hubris Syndrome.

While the Surrey Project together with the (now defunct) Daedalus Trust have certainly increased understanding and raised levels of awareness of the ancient phenomena of hubris-nemesis, its progress towards the development of what it has termed an anti-hubris toolkit has been, at best limited. Yet the need to address the societal challenges arising from the behaviours of hubristic leaders, complacent elites and increasingly angry and polarised communities worldwide is more urgent than at any time since the 1930s.

If we wish to change the World, it might be helpful to consider the weather as a relevant metaphor for what we are up to. The Earth's climate is changing because of our actions but in ways that are not yet under our control. Mitigating the negative consequences of such change will necessitate a global consensus, away from which we appear to be moving at present and the implementation of an agreed long-term strategy. In the meantime, while consensus is sought, and strategies debated, hurricanes, typhoons, landslides and floods occur with greater frequency and with increased catastrophic consequences.

If we are to achieve our goal of mitigating hubris, we might need to acknowledge that, in the short term at least (maintaining the metaphor), we have learned that an investment in waterproof clothing, umbrellas and flood barriers is more effective than attempting to change the weather.

This might encourage us to re-visit approaches such as Hersey and Blanchard's[14] Situational Leadership Model (Telling, Selling, Participating, Delegating) – once again a four-box model which, although somewhat simplistic, it does have some similarities with the Cynefin approach in that it places emphasis upon the demands of context and circumstance. It also suggests that a micro, organisational level approach might yield more positive outcomes, in the short term at least, than ones that are directed at a more macro, even global, level.

Meanwhile…déjà vu.

6: What next?

Nothing in the preceding pages is new. They began with a reflection prompted by David Owen's reference to the fifteen years that he has spent writing and speaking about issues associated with the hubris of political leaders. My own reflections have taken me back more than fifteen years to consider the influences of a number of the writers and thinkers who have helped lay the foundations of my own views of the same and related issues.

The Cynefin model developed by Dave Snowden and his colleagues at IBM is similarly underpinned by earlier thinkers, having been anticipated by Henri Poincaré in the nineteenth

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[14] Hersey, P. and Blanchard, K. H. "The Management of Organizational Behavior: Utilizing Human Resources" (3rd ed.) 1977. New Jersey: Prentice Hall,

century; Warren Weaver in a brief paper published in 1948[15] and its precepts having been taken up more recently by Stanley McChrystal who writes:

> "Complex systems are fickle and volatile, presenting a broad range of possible outcomes; *the type and sheer number of interactions prevent us from making accurate predictions.* As a result, treating an ecosystem as though it were a machine with predictable trajectories from input to output is a dangerous folly."

How much more dangerous it must be, therefore, to attempt to manage one's way out of a chaotic situation by reference to a manual of procedures; a guide to best practice, or by putting out a tender to consultants.

It is interesting to note that McChrystal attributes to hubris the frequency with which leaders resort to such folly:

> "A predictive hubris, perhaps led by centuries of success, has fooled us into believing that with enough data and hard work, the complex riddles of economies can be decoded."

On the other hand, a decisive leader who follows the guidance of Snowden and his colleagues may well – in responding to a chaotic situation by seeking to locate a point of stability within the maelstrom and then acting quickly to mitigate its most negative consequences, before seeking to determine what the cause of the situation might be and determining an appropriate response, when confronted by a problem that is merely complicated or simply a breakdown in a process that is largely routinised or mechanised - respond in ways that inject some chaos into the system. Leaders who thrive on crisis may well generate the crises upon which they thrive.

It seems, to me at least, that we have reached a point where levels of awareness of hubris, whether in politics, business or elsewhere, and of the negative consequences of its presence in leaders, their followers or in the political parties/movements which they may personify, is probably now as or more widely shared as it was in the Greek society in which the idea originated.

But are we any closer to being able to pin it down; able to define it quite separately from its consequences?

It has been suggested that Hubris Syndrome might be a collection of behavioural traits that are symptomatic of a possible acquired personality disorder. It also appears that markers of the development of such traits may be found in the language and patterns of word use in the speeches and presentations that such leaders make. Or, it may be that hubris arises when a much-admired leader who has been highly successful in one set of circumstances applies the same approach when it is totally inappropriate in another. Or that hubris and its partner, nemesis, are inevitable aspects of a cyclical process to which all human groups, tribes, cultures or societies are subject – rather like the weather.

I believe that a great deal more interdisciplinary research is required before we shall be able to claim to fully understand what hubris/nemesis really is or, perhaps, discover that it is a

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[15] Warren Weaver, "Science and Complexity", American Science, #36, 1948

chimera; a catch-all label to describe a range of interdependent phenomena that are themselves the unintended consequences of actions taken to address unexpected or discrepant events.

But we should not wait until research provides us with: **The Answer**.

We have, I think, reached a fork in the road.

One fork leads us to conduct further research in order to increase our understanding of the nature and origins of the phenomenon that we have come to call, 'hubris'. The other requires us to take action, urgent action, to protect ourselves, our organisations and even our societies from the negative consequences of that same phenomenon.

Such action might have a greater chance of success if it were to follow the example of the digital behemoths that have come to have such influence over all our lives, by starting local and going global. This might best be achieved by working with smaller, younger, developing organisations (even start-ups) assisting them in finding ways to inoculate themselves and their leaders from the negative consequences of believing their own bullshit, while not curbing the passions and enthusiasms that are necessary to their success.

Graham Robinson

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