

Villanueva, Jaume; Sapienza, Harry J.

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The mask of the red death: Leadership, hubris, and the Covid-19 crisis

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Jaume Villanueva¹ and Harry J Sapienza²

Abstract

Throughout history, societies have been beset by disasters that took them by surprise, often with widespread and devastating consequences. When crops, animals, or people began dying with unusual frequency, especially when the causes were not observable, people often failed to respond, responded very slowly, or responded in surprisingly misdirected ways. In this essay, we focus on the role of leadership in addressing or failing to address such crises, paying special attention to the responses to the Covid-19 crisis during 2020. Our central thesis is that leadership hubris was a central (though not the only) culprit in poor responses, and we introduce the problem of inaction as a symptom of hubris. We conclude with some reflections for practitioners and researchers, suggesting a few areas worthy of examination to better understand how societies and business organizations may construct defenses against the dangers of leadership hubris.

JEL CLASSIFICATION M14; L26; D70; N00

Keywords

Hubris, leadership, crisis, Covid-19

In a tale set in the aftermath of the bubonic plague, Edgar Allan Poe's *The Masque of the Red Death* (Poe, 1975 [1842]) depicts a fictional Prince Prospero who gathers his closest followers into a walled castle to make merry as the "red death" rages outside. At a masked ball, the revelers (all "hidden" behind their own masks) become aware of a sinister presence, the red death itself. Despite the arrogant and abusive rantings of Prospero, the Red Death prevails, so that Prospero and all his followers expire along with the extinguishing of the flames within the walled fortress.

Nothing is more emblematic of 2020 and of the diametrically opposed responses to the Covid-19 crisis than that of the simple protective mask. The mask has been *hailed* by many as the single most effective protection for oneself and for the safety of others and has been *denigrated* by others as a symbol of state control and loss of individual freedom. The view taken by society at large in any given locale has been strongly influenced by the leaders in that domain. The role of leaders in society's response to our current unforeseen and unseeable plague can hardly be overstated. The mask itself is merely a symbol of opposing conceptions of leadership responsibility. Prospero's self-absorbed

leadership led many faithful followers to their demise. In this essay, we explore how people have responded to widespread disaster over time and how we are coping today. Our purpose is to bring attention to leadership during times of disaster and to explore the possible sources and implications of inadequate response.

In this article, we specifically focus on responses to the Covid-19 global crisis that started in 2020. Inevitably, when unexpected crises arise, good choices and poor choices will be made by those in a position to do something about the impending dangers. Most puzzling from a managerial and theoretical perspective is the question of why some leaders (or managers) act rashly or fail to act sensibly when the

¹Rutgers Business School, Rutgers University, Newark and New Brunswick, NJ, USA

²Carlson School of Management, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN, USA

Corresponding author:

Jaume Villanueva, Rutgers Business School, Rutgers University, 1 Washington Park, Newark, NJ 07102, USA.
Email: jvillanueva@business.rutgers.edu



responses would seem to be clear or obvious to even casual observers. We develop some observations in this article that may help to inform management and entrepreneurship scholars to develop and test theory about leadership failure in times of crisis. In forming our perspective, we focus on an understudied area of leadership: the role of hubris (i.e., excessive overconfidence/lack of humility). Furthermore, although most of the existing research in this domain has focused on how hubris leads to rash actions, we also introduce the problem of *inaction* as a symptom of hubris. We highlight the role that organizational members and organizational power structures play in what may become a “pathology” of inaction. In developing these ideas, we conclude with a few suggestions for practice that might provide some guidance to better deal with these issues.

Responses through history

A true global pandemic like the one raging now does not happen very often, but it is hardly a new phenomenon. Global pandemics have occurred throughout history, sometimes with devastating and long-lasting, even paradigm-shifting, consequences. For example, some historians see the Antonine plague of 165–180 A.D., in which an estimated 5–10 million people died, as the starting point for the decline of the Roman Empire (Duncan-Jones, 1996). The plague of Justinian of 541–542, in which an estimated 30–50 million people died, is thought of by some as the start of the transition from late antiquity to the early Middle Ages (Meier, 2016). Most notorious of all is the bubonic plague (the “black death”) of 1346–1353, in which anywhere from 75 to 200 million people (about half of the population of Europe at the time) are estimated to have perished. Many historians consider the bubonic plague the cause of the demise of the medieval feudal system, both because of the peasants’ increased power due to the shortage of labor, and because of the increased secularism that spawned the renaissance (Cohn, 2002).

Finally, our last truly global pandemic, the “Spanish” flu of 1918–1919, killed about 50 million people worldwide (more than the Great War itself). In short, global pandemics are rare, but also a recurring feature in human history. They offer unique opportunities to examine human behavior during crises, since they are emblematic examples of what constitutes a rare, ground-shifting, unexpected disaster.

In pre-modern times, understanding and communicating about such disasters was especially difficult. When crops, animals, or people began dying with unusual frequency and without visible causes, isolated communities tried to make sense of what was happening. Lacking scientific knowledge and means of communicating across distances, people might turn to religion or common superstition to try to deal with the crises in their own communities; individually they may experience shock, denial, disbelief, or even fantasy. We see a variety of responses to the plague depicted in Ingmar Bergman’s film *The Seventh Seal*. In this film, we see a 14th-century society ravaged by

the Black Death. A knight (Antonius) and his squire have just returned from the crusades. As they wash up on the shore, instead of grateful and cheering crowds they are greeted by desolation and death, as the country is being ravaged by an unseen killer, the black death. Desperate and bewildered, Antonius undergoes a crisis of faith—searching for meaning and spirituality amid the desolation. Death appears in an all-too-real guise of a pale man dressed in black. Like many confronting an overpowering, unforeseen, and unthinkable reality, the knight struggles to make sense of what is in front of him. To delay the inevitable, Antonius “buys time” by engaging Death in a game of chess to determine whether he will live on or will die.

Bergman’s film portrays the several ways in which people coped with the disaster of the Black Death. The most pervasive cognitive framing in the general population at the time was that the order of the universe was directly established by God (Suedfeld, 1997), so a very common reaction to plagues in the pre-modern world was to attribute them to divine punishment; thus, a common reaction might be “bands of itinerant flagellants who wandered through the European countryside during the Great Plague . . . whipping and sometimes crucifying themselves” (Suedfeld, 1997, p. 853). Other reactions might include “merry-making” to forget or ignore reality. Indeed, Bergman depicts wandering minstrels and “players” in the film as well. From contemporaneous accounts, such as Boccaccio’s *Decameron* (Boccaccio, 2003 [1353]), we also know that some people reacted with denial, or disbelief, while others became resigned, despondent, and depressed, and yet others reacted with an elated sense of hedonism mixed with grief, trying to enjoy as much as possible whatever time was left (Wigand et al., 2020). Religious, cultural, and technical differences notwithstanding, people’s psychological coping mechanisms to disastrous pandemics have occurred throughout history, up to the present day. Denial, repression, suppression, avoidance, projection, or rationalization are common psychological mechanisms people use to cope with panic and anxiety (Cramer, 2015). Most of us will recognize some of these thoughts in ourselves, family members, and colleagues during this crisis.

The 20th century

In these earlier times, coordinated responses across communities or regions were quite limited because of lack of general “scientific” knowledge of the source of the problems, because of the atomistic nature of the political landscape, and because long-distance communication was limited. In these times, leaders were hence limited in the effects they could enact, at least in the short run. As societies developed and became more complex, the role of leadership, both for good and ill, has become a lot more important, indeed crucial, as the case of the “Spanish flu” of 1918–1919, the last global pandemic before this one, demonstrates.

The “Spanish flu” started during the Great War in the first quarter of the 20th century. The popular name of the pandemic, the “Spanish flu,” is itself a consequence of the censorship efforts of wartime leaders, who tried to hide the pandemic. It was because the first reports of the flu appeared in Spanish newspapers (Spain was a neutral in WW1) that the pandemic acquired its popular (but misleading) name. Although there was no vaccine for the virus, there were modern preventive public health measures that could have been implemented to slow the progression of infections within and across societies. Some of these measures, such as the notification and recording of cases for tracing and quarantining, the disinfection of public spaces, the provision of soap and clean water for hand-washing, and even face mask mandates, were in fact implemented, albeit inconsistently across countries and regions (Martini et al., 2019). President Wilson of the United States was informed about the emergence of the pandemic in fall of 1918 but completely ignored it, never mentioning it in public, although he himself contracted the disease and collapsed during the Versailles peace negotiations. Subsequently, millions of people across the globe died, though so many of them could have been spared. Wilson and the leaders of the other countries engaged in the war could have made the information public and orchestrated needed preventive steps, yet they did not. The result was a staggering death toll worldwide, a result that could have been significantly curtailed if not for wartime propaganda and secrecy (Flecknoe, 2020).

This pandemic illustrates how much has changed in the world’s capacities and in the potential of leadership to make a difference in global calamity. Yet, it also shows how much may stay the same if leadership fails. In modern societies, leaders with access to public health organizations and global communication infrastructures can exert influence at different levels of society and help craft and coordinate swift, effective responses to a global pandemic. Yet, as the 1918–1919 experience also showed, it should not be taken for granted that leaders will use their influence in a positive manner. These lessons reverberate in today’s Covid-19 pandemic response.

Covid-19—societal and leadership responses

Responses to the Covid-19 crisis have been inconsistent and diverse across countries and regions. They have differed in the measures adopted and the speed of response. Speed of response has been a crucial factor in limiting the spread of the virus. The cases of Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore, and New Zealand illustrate the importance of reacting quickly. Responses in these countries were swift and thorough. Taiwan, for example, activated its pandemic emergency measures before the WHO declared a global health emergency at the end of January 2020. As of October 2020, 10 months after the start of the pandemic, Taiwan,

with a population of 23 million, had recorded only seven Covid-19 related deaths. A central claim by critics of the American response to the pandemic is that thousands upon thousands of lives could have been saved by responding sooner. One analysis estimated that by May 3, “nationwide, 61.1% of reported infections and 55% of reported deaths could have been avoided” if the same actions been taken just 1 week earlier (Pei et al., 2020); this translates to about 700,000 infections and 36,000 deaths by that very early time. Who knows how many since then?

Local authorities in China originally hid the fact that the virus had emerged, and the Chinese government initially equivocated about the nature and severity of the virus, which allowed it to spread beyond its borders. Eventually, however, the Chinese authorities acted very swiftly and decisively. Wuhan, where the virus had originated, and every city in the surrounding Hubei province were placed under a strict two-and-a-half-month lockdown from January 23, 2020. In the rest of the country, population movements were severely curtailed, schools did not reopen, health checkpoints were established in transportation hubs, and a system of testing and contact tracing was set up at the national level (Burki, 2020). As a result, China has few Covid-19 related deaths since April 2020.

In contrast, many other countries and regions, especially in Europe and the Americas, failed to respond promptly to the threat. Covid-19 information from China started filtering to the rest of the world in December 2019. In fact, the WHO declared a global health emergency on January 31, 2020. Yet, few actions were taken in Europe or the Americas during February: some included limited global travel restrictions and cancellations of some large international gatherings (e.g., February’s Mobile World Congress in Barcelona, with its 100,000 international attendees). Almost nothing was done at the domestic level. Although the United States declared a public health emergency on February 2, it did not restrict mass gatherings such as Mardi Gras or Spring Break. In Europe, events with massive crowds continued to take place all the way to mid-March, when some parts of the continent were already being locked down and quarantined. For instance, Atletico de Madrid played against Liverpool F.C. at a fully packed Anfield Stadium, in Liverpool, on March 11, 2020. To put things in perspective, consider that the government in Italy imposed a national quarantine on March 9 (yes, two days *earlier*). In other words, while 60 million people were under quarantine in a neighboring country, thousands of Spanish fans traveled to Liverpool to fill a crowded soccer stadium and to roam around the city. Experts say this event led to an acceleration of the contagion in the United Kingdom, one of the hardest hit countries in Europe. Why this cavalier attitude? Why were authorities, leaders at many levels of society, and the public in general, so slow in taking the threat seriously? To the average Spaniard or English person, Italy is not a remote Asian enclave. Yet, as one country after another fell like dominoes (first Italy, then Spain, then the United Kingdom), neighbors stood by stupefied, unable to react.

Differences in reactions to the pandemic across societies can be attributed to a number of contextual factors, including culture, religion, attitudes toward science, public health infrastructure, prior collective experience, acceptance of authority, individualism, and political systems. In China, people take respiratory infections very seriously (due to prior experiences with SARS), and the government can set constraints on individual freedoms that would not be acceptable in other countries. As Burki (2020) reports,

Drones equipped with echoing loudspeakers rebuked Chinese citizens who were not following the rules. The state-run Xinhua news agency released footage taken from the drones. “Yes Auntie, this drone is talking to you,” one device proclaimed to a surprised woman in Inner Mongolia. “You shouldn’t walk around without wearing a mask. You’d better go home and don’t forget to wash your hands.” (p. 1240)

This scene is difficult to imagine taking place in the United States, where the level of perceived personal freedom and skepticism toward government intervention is very different from China’s.

Another factor affecting response to a pandemic crisis is leadership. Leaders play an important role in ordering action and in setting the tone of public discourse. By relaying advice from the scientific community, by communicating facts in a clear and timely manner, and by reinforcing the meaning and motivation behind any measures adopted, especially in the period of inevitable initial confusion, leaders can help overcome resistance to public health measures from a confused or ill-informed population. At the individual level, people across the world will react to the threat of Covid-19 as they have reacted throughout history. Many will react with skepticism, denial, or disbelief, as the news of pestilences in far-away places get closer to home. Some may panic; some may rationalize their risky behavior, or fantasize alternative realities (Cramer, 2015). Matters are complicated by the uncertainty surrounding a novel pathogen for which there is no known resistance, natural or man-made, and which has already killed hundreds of thousands of people around the world, especially when many infected people never develop symptoms and most survive. As it has been the case in all global pandemics, there was at first a lot of confusion regarding the nature and the scope of the threat: How does it spread? How can the risk of infection be reduced? Does immunity develop after infection? Little is fully known at first, prompting myths and disinformation to spread. Thus, leaders play a critical role as a conduit of information, as a vehicle for coordination, and as a model for appropriate behavior. As alluded to above, contextual factors matter and also determine the extent to which individual leadership has an impact on the members of an organization or a society. Especially across countries, culture plays a role on the influence and reach of individual leadership. Societal cultural value orientations, such as power distance or individualism/collectivism, affect the

extent to which leaders can influence followers’ attitudes and behaviors.

In our view, leader differences across locales constitute an important explanation of the differences in outcomes. The similarity of the character and stances of leaders of countries with some of the poorest Covid-19 responses are likely not coincidental. Boris Johnson, Jair Bolsonaro, and Donald Trump presided over some of the worst Covid-19 related death tolls in the world during the first year into the pandemic. Their response was not identical, of course, but what they shared was their utter arrogance toward the threat of the virus, which they minimized and even mocked. Each demonstrated disdain toward the scientific community that identified the seriousness of the threat; each was willing to capitalize politically on the humanitarian catastrophe, using the crisis to further divide their respective societies. Ironically, perhaps poetically, each of them became infected with the virus itself, making them the only leaders of any major economic power to contract the virus during the first months of the pandemic. Of course, these men were not solely responsible for their countries’ unfortunate outcomes. They each had subordinates willing to enable their positions; they had governmental authority and party apparatuses at their disposal. They also encouraged and counted on the like-minded lower levels of society to participate in the rejection of counter views and counter measures.

Of course, they each exhibited differences in their responses, too. Boris Johnson and his government reluctantly reversed their course, perhaps influenced by the illness of the prime minister (who was gravely ill and intubated to a respirator). So, after an initial dalliance with the idea of “herd immunity” and their reluctance to ban mass gatherings and other social restrictions (which allegedly cost tens of thousands of lives), they retreated to a more measured position. However, this has not been the case in Brazil and in the United States. Jair Bolsonaro, despite the staggering death toll he presided over, continued to politicize the pandemic by flaunting and mocking recommendations from health experts regarding mask wearing and social distancing. Sending a clear message to his followers, he continued addressing large crowds with no regard to safety precautions.

Donald Trump is perhaps the most visible example of a leader who has squandered the potential of his leadership position to help minimize the effects of this pandemic. According to the world’s leading scientific journal *Nature*, during the first 8 months of the pandemic, Trump (and his administration) (1) lied about the dangers posed by the coronavirus and undermined efforts to contain it; (2) purposely misrepresented facts early on; (3) belittled social-distancing requirements and wearing masks; (4) encouraged people to protest against lockdown rules aimed at stopping disease transmission; and (5) suppressed and censored government scientists working to study the virus

and reduce its harm. *Nature* also charged that he and his administration tried to make political tools out of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), ordering the agencies to distribute inaccurate information and to tout unproven and potentially harmful treatments (Tollefson, 2020, p. 190).

Trump also bullied opponents and erstwhile colleagues alike. He threatened state governors, both Democrat and Republican, who dared to put some restrictions in place. He encouraged supporters who were discovered to have hatched a plot to kidnap and assassinate Michigan's Democratic governor, Gretchen Whitmer, who had the temerity to try to curb the spread of the virus in her state. He mocked a member of *his* own "White House Coronavirus Task Force," Dr. Anthony Fauci, Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. For the first time in 36 years advising presidents, Dr. Fauci had to be given security detail due to the death threats he started receiving after dissenting with Mr. Trump. With great pride, arrogance, and lack of humility, Trump has attempted to bludgeon the virus out of existence.

A virus, of course, has no political allegiance and no inclination to bend to the will or imagination of leaders determined to mock it into submission. The consequences have been catastrophic. What underlies these disastrous leader responses? There is no one simple answer, but we see traces in these examples of a classic tragic leader flaw: that of hubris.

Hubris: character, causes, and consequences

Hubris, defined in the Merriam-Webster dictionary as an individual's "exaggerated pride or self-confidence," is observable in many notable instances in literature and in history. The term evolved from the Greek "hybris" which originally referred to an individual's use of violence to humiliate or degrade (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/hubris>). Eventually, in Greek mythology it came to mean a kind of arrogance or lack of humility that induced an individual to defy the norms of the society, the limits set upon humans by the divine gods. These defiant actions most often led to the downfall of the individual her/himself but might also result in the destruction of the people for whom this individual was responsible. The expression that "pride comes before a fall" captures the expected consequences of developing this arrogance or lack of humility.

A famous example in Greek mythology appears in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* (Sophocles, 426–430 B.C.). Responsible for having earlier saved the city from destruction by solving the riddle of the Sphinx, Oedipus is faced once again with Thebes' being devastated by a horrible pestilence. The citizens of Thebes believe in and trust Oedipus to intervene with the gods and to save them.

Confident, even arrogant, Oedipus ignores the words of the gods' blind prophet Tiresias who warns that Oedipus himself is the source of the plague placed on Thebes by the gods. Oedipus mocks and degrades the gods' messenger, a venerated and humble man whom Oedipus himself has summoned. Disquieted, the people marvel at Oedipus' profane words. As more details of events are revealed, it becomes increasingly clear that Oedipus indeed is guilty and that his pride and arrogance have been the cause of his failing to "see" the truth. Oedipus puts out his own eyes and leaves the throne in disgrace and humiliation.

From a managerial and societal perspective, there are several points worth noting in this story. First, the arrogance and disregard that Oedipus developed were based at least in part on the many significant accomplishments of his earlier life; thus, to some extent his self-pride and confidence are not wholly unwarranted. Second, these accomplishments put him in the spotlight, raising him to a position of prominence, and inducing the people to follow him and to ignore signs that he was leading poorly. In other words, the people themselves enabled and contributed to his arrogance and lack of humility. Third, a theme that shows up in this story and in many later literary examples is that contrarian voices (i.e., those who challenge the leader) are ignored or belittled. It may be inferred that they are often ignored because they hold a less-respected position or status in the society. In *Oedipus Rex*, for example, Tiresias is mocked and ignored perhaps because of his blindness and his age; further, a humble shepherd who corroborates the damning details of Tiresias's story is similarly dismissed and mocked by Oedipus. For, who is this poor shepherd in comparison with the wise and powerful King?

This theme of disregard for "marginal" or "less-respected" individuals appears in many stories across time. Cassandra, a prophetess who is able to foresee impending disasters, is cursed with the circumstance that no one will believe what she tells them. Sexism, thus, is not a new phenomenon. In Hans Christian Andersen's *The Emperor's New Clothes* (Andersen, 1995 [1837]), it is a child who sees and shouts out what no one else dare say (i.e., that the emperor is parading down the street entirely naked); only then is the hubristic "spell" of the emperor broken. In Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Feathertop* (Hawthorne, 2003 [1852]) a witch has brought to life a scarecrow made of sticks, rags, and a pumpkin head. This scarecrow has been sent out to enthrall the town and the pretty Polly whom he woos. The witch's spell endows Feathertop with a majestic gait and all the trappings of wealth and elegance. Feathertop is an instant celebrity whose very stroll down Main Street induces exclamations of praise and admiration. None of the villagers, nor Polly herself, see through the facade except for a child and a mangy dog. The interesting point here again is that the populace is complicit in the charade, imagining and projecting feats of extraordinary skill and wisdom to a man because of his celebrity; only those *outside* the mainstream or power structure can see or

are willing to speak up to expose the blustery arrogance and exaggerated confidence of the scarecrow.

A couple of historical examples of leader hubris are worth citing to reinforce the idea that the leader and her or his people are complicit in the phenomenon. Some 2,500 years ago, Xerxes, depicted in Aeschylus's play *The Persians* (Aeschylus, 472 B.C.), became enraged that the Hellespont sea dared to destroy a bridge that he had (perhaps foolishly) ordered his men to build over a treacherous and wind-tossed sea. Despite misgivings, the men, of course, complied. When the sea did indeed wreck and swallow up this costly structure, Xerxes ordered that the builders should be beheaded for *their* failing. He further ordered soldiers to beat the sea with heavy sticks and to throw tons of chains into it to "bind" the sea against further offense. A powerful leader, a god among men such as Xerxes, may easily be seduced into testing the limits of his powers at the great cost of time, money, and others' lives. Another example is that of cavalry commander General George Armstrong Custer. Custer was so arrogantly confident of victory over what he thought of as unprepared and ignorant savages that he led his deplorably small set of troops into a disastrous engagement at Little Big Horn in 1876 (Welch & Stekler, 2007). Custer had earlier experienced great successes in the American Civil War and in campaigns against woefully underequipped and outnumbered forces of Native Americans. These victories no doubt contributed to his lack of humility and overconfidence. Unfortunately, his troops were also foolish enough to follow him.

Top leader hubris in business organization research

Consistent with colloquial understandings and with its depictions in Greek mythology, the managerial literature has tended to portray hubris as overweening or exaggerated self-confidence. As such, it has been proposed as a dispositional or situational flaw that may explain otherwise puzzlingly poor choices by leadership. Theoretical and empirical examinations are limited but promising. Corporate governance literature has focused on the question of whether hubris may play a role in the generally poor performance results in corporate acquisitions. The entrepreneurship literature has used "hubris" or overconfidence as an explanation for why and when some people start ill-advised new ventures or persist with them when they are clearly failing.

Hayward and Hambrick (1997) trace business researchers' interest in hubris to Roll (1986) who proposed exaggerated self-confidence as the explanation for some top executives' tendency to "overpay" in making corporate acquisitions (i.e., overpayment is the amount of purchase price paid *above* the pre-takeover price). In this framing, corporate managers are posited to pay significant amounts

more than expected because they overestimate their ability to manage and correct the flaws in acquisition targets. To test this idea, Hayward and Hambrick (1997) predicted and tested whether overpayment would be greater when conditions inducing hubris (i.e., exaggerated self-confidence) were present: when the acquiring organization had strong recent performance, when it had received great media attention, and when the top manager had a sense of great self-importance (indicated by high relative compensation). Their results supported these predictions. Furthermore, they found the results were even more extreme when curbs on top management action were low or missing (e.g., when the CEO was also Chair of the Board, when there were more insiders on the board, etc.). In short, leadership takes rash and self-defeating action when it has come to believe too strongly in its own talents and abilities. They suggested that hubris was in part an enduring trait of some individuals and in part a temporary or conditional phenomenon.

Despite the increased interest of researchers, the concept of hubris has varying definitions in the literature and is often confounded with adjacent constructs such as narcissism (Asad & Sadler-Smith, 2020; Zeitoun et al., 2019). Hiller and Hambrick (2005) argue that combined *very high* levels of four personality dimensions (i.e., core self-evaluations: self-esteem, self-efficacy, locus of control, and emotional stability) may correspond to what is commonly referred to as hubris. They hold that those with these conditions may be prone to make decisions that lead to extremes (i.e., to big wins or big losses). Such individuals are prone to impulsive action and big gambles with few constraints. They also suggest that, thus conceived, hubris is also related to narcissism (excessive self-love) and overconfidence. The entrepreneurship literature has focused most strongly on the overconfidence dimension of hubris. Some claim it is a common trait of entrepreneurs, one that explains their (sometimes rash) decision making.

Hayward et al. (2006) developed a "hubris theory of entrepreneurship" which proposed the conditions that would lead entrepreneurs to "overconfidence" (which they define as an overestimation of the personal wealth that their new venture will generate). They also theorized how overconfidence would affect the venture's prospects for success or failure. They argued that uncertainty (greater environmental complexity and dynamism) would increase the likelihood of unwarranted confidence. In addition, they theorized that past success in startup would increasingly lead to overconfidence the greater the competitive differences between the past situation and the current one. They also predicted devastating effects of hubris on the way the venture would be managed: they predicted that overconfidence would cause entrepreneurs to underestimate resource needs, to overcommit to perceived opportunities, and to take ill-advised chances with venture liquidity—all leading to more rapid and more severe failure. Lowe and Ziedonis' (2006) results provide partial support for these ideas: they

found that entrepreneurs' level of *optimism* was not a predictor of the decision to start a firm, but it was positively related to decisions to persist with continuing unsuccessful development for longer periods of time. Hmieleski and Baron (2009) noted that research shows entrepreneurs to be very high in dispositional optimism, with a tendency to expect positive outcomes even when such expectations are not rationally justified (a form of hubris). Consistent with Hayward et al. (2006), they found this optimism to be negatively related to venture performance, especially in dynamic environments and when they had prior startup success.

Hubris lessons and opportunities for studies and practice

This brief review suggests that organizational leaders are most likely to be "infected" with hubris when they have experienced recent or dramatic success, when they or their organizations have been elevated to celebrity status by media or other attention, or when times or circumstances are very uncertain. Furthermore, some individuals may be *dispositionally* prone to hubris as a character trait. The consequences of hubris include bold or rash actions that may defy logic and fiduciary responsibility and may lead to organizational failure. Many productive new lines of inquiry might be pursued in business studies.

Four elements from our reviews of history and literature stand out to us as worthy of examination: mechanisms to curb the influence of leader's hubris, leader-follower dynamics, the role of outsiders or "outsiderness" in these phenomena, and *inaction* as a potentially disastrous consequence of hubris.

We first reflected on the limited tools that pre-20th-century societies had for detecting and coordinating responses to disasters. We then implied that societies should be better able to cope with disasters in the modern era, especially when leaders effectively use the improved knowledge of natural phenomena, and a better capacity to coordinate and communicate within and across domains. People today still experience dismay, confusion, denial, and other forms of coping, but the tools available to modern leaders confer a great capacity to aid in successful collective responses. Used appropriately, this capacity can do much good. However, in the hands of an overconfident or narcissistic leader, the results could be disastrous. What are some structural mechanisms that could be put in place to curb or diminish the influence of leaders' hubris? We do not believe that hubris is absent in the leaders of some of the societies that successfully dealt with the Covid-19 crisis (for example China, who initially tried to cover up the facts), but structural factors, such as political or social systems do not allow for the individual traits of leaders, such as hubris, to have such an inordinate effect on the response in some places.

People crave leadership—an idea suggested aptly in Paul Simon's lyrics "Where have you gone Joe DiMaggio?"

Our nation turns its lonely eyes to you." People create heroes and elevate them to an unrealistic status; they endow these celebrities with hero-like capacities and traits that give them great power to lead and influence, for good or bad. Thus, hubris itself resides in the leader but is enabled by followers. A first significant area of study for managerial scholars, then, includes leader-follower dynamics and their effects on the development and consequences of hubris. To what extent can followers influence the level of hubris in leaders? The literature has typically focused on how leaders influence and change their followers' traits and behavior (effective leadership), and this is no exception for the hubris literature. It could be fruitful to also study how followers can influence leaders' traits and behavior.

Another intriguing element in the literary works we cited was their implicit warning that society's (or an organization's) refusal to hear or listen to counter-voices allows the errors of overconfidence to lead to failure to see the truth and to thence make disastrous decisions. It is notable in the tales we recounted how often it was that "lower status" people were able to escape the groupthink that blinded the organization or leader. Thus, we echo recent calls for diversity and distributed decision making. A second key area of investigation might be to fully explore the value for effective decision making of "voices" outside the mainstream. The governance literature itself acknowledges that a mechanism for protection against leader malfeasance includes such measures as appointing outside board members and splitting the CEO and board of director roles (Walsh & Seward, 1990). But what kind of "outsiders" are most appropriate? When are they most needed? How may they be empowered to act? Is there a role for "restorative" justice?

Finally, our examination of the Covid-19 crisis reveals that oftentimes it is not only hubristic action but also hubristic *inaction* (or obstruction) that result in disastrous consequences. Unexpected disasters may cause conditions that undermine the existing power structure. Leaders who arrogantly believe that preserving their power is more important than addressing the problem can attempt to thwart response by denying the problem, dismissing individuals who disagree with them, or promoting false "counter-realities" through social media and the like. Thus, a third key area to investigate may be to identify the early warning signs of inaction or obstruction.

Many powerful images have accompanied the evolution of the Covid-19 response, though much of the death and destruction has been oddly absent from media reports, videos, and photographs. Some scenes, however, are indelible and suggestive. The images of Anthony Fauci (wearing a mask) standing by a mocking and maskless President Trump remind us of Tiresias facing Oedipus's attacks as the chorus of Thebes looks on.

The walled castle and the flimsy masks of Prospero's revelers provided no protection against the Red Death. The mocking, arrogant Prospero discovered too late that

gathering like-minded followers and ignoring a crisis does not cause it to go away.

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ORCID iD

Jaume Villanueva  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1906-0877>

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