

Arrogance leads companies down the road to decline
by Rosie Steeves

Let me ask what might seem a silly question. Are you arrogant?

Who would ever admit it? Regardless, I have taken to asking groups and individuals this question. Not surprisingly, aside from those who throw their arms up in jest, no one admits to being arrogant. Yet we know that arrogant leaders abound – and almost certainly, some of you reading this would be described by others as arrogant.

The fact that not a soul will admit to arrogance spotlights a huge problem within the world of leadership development, where leaders will acknowledge what is important in leadership yet can't recognize their own failings. And perhaps this self-denial occurs most glaringly in the realm of arrogance.

What is arrogance? At one level, it's self-confidence gone wrong. It grows when one achieves success and then loses the ability to accept feedback. Arrogant individuals look in the mirror but see a distorted self-image. And left unchallenged, once arrogance takes root, it blossoms and blooms.

Arrogance also emerges in the eyes of those around the individual as their competence rises. For example, I know one leader who is clearly seen as arrogant by his peers and his supervisor. However, the junior staff members see only their competence and confidence. But then, they don't threaten him. The development of arrogance is often aligned to a rise through the ranks. While it's not always clear to see, many senior leaders suffer from "imposter syndrome," a feeling that one is a fraud and in over one's head. I have worked with many leaders, including CEOs of large organizations, who have, at some point in their career, felt like an imposter. And while the literature suggests that those with imposter syndrome adopt self-deprecating behaviour, this is rare in leadership. Indeed, who would support a leader who confessed, "I'm not sure I'm ready for this"?

Instead, in response to self-doubt the walls go up, the focus becomes external and arrogance prevails. Feedback is welcomed only if it supports the ego. Any feedback that threatens the sense of self is firmly rejected – or turned back on those who provided the feedback. I've seen arrogant leaders indignantly attack those who offer it, regardless of how well it's presented. After all, isn't offence the best defence?

Thus a wall of confidence and bluster often masks deep insecurity and self-doubt. Not surprisingly, this concept is quickly rejected by those to whom it applies. It simply isn't within their psyche to admit such failings. Furthermore, many leaders have adopted an arrogant persona for so long that it now defines them. Immersed in their own arrogant selves, they have lost touch with their real selves.

Naturally, an arrogant leader causes dysfunction within an organization. When a leader is reluctant to receive feedback and shows a narcissistic belief in his own ability, information will stop flowing, innovation will cease and conflict will ensue. Those who choose not to challenge this individual may instead choose to leave. I've seen it on many occasions.

As Jim Collins recently told us in his latest book, *How the Mighty Fall: And Why Some Companies Never Give In*, arrogance can also rapidly lead to an organization's decline. Individuals become confident based

on the company's success and helped along by groupthink, the group as a whole becomes arrogant and closed to feedback.

As Collins puts it, "Every institution, no matter how great, is vulnerable to decline. Anyone can fall, and most eventually do. But decline, it turns out, is largely self-inflicted." Arrogance represents the first stage of this decline.

So, are you arrogant? I challenge every one of you to do a reality check and consider the following:

- When did you last receive critical feedback from peers or your supervisor? How did you react? Did you welcome it, or did you turn it on them?
- How often do you talk about your mistakes – or do you only talk about your successes? If something doesn't work out, do you look at external factors before reviewing your own role?
- Can you name your self-doubts and fears – or do you have none?
- Do you rely solely on feedback from those who look up to you?
- How do you feel when you have to share the limelight with someone? How do they feel? How do you know?
- What would a best friend or spouse say if you asked him or her whether you sometimes come across as arrogant? Do it.

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