Hubris syndrome in the relationship between School-Heads and Board-Chairs in private commercial secondary schools in Botswana: Implications for school leadership

Byron A. Brown[a,b,*]

[a] Head of School of Business and Leisure, University of Derby in Botswana & Botswana Accountancy College, Botswana
[b] Head of Learning and Teaching, Namibia University of Science and Technology, Namibia

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ABSTRACT

This paper explored two issues as follows: (a) whether hubris syndromes have manifested in the leadership behaviour and working relationships of the school heads and board chairs in private commercial secondary schools; and (b) the implications of these findings for school leadership. The participants of the study were the school-heads and board-chairs working in 10 commercial private secondary schools located in the urban and peri-urban areas of Gaborone, Botswana. These schools were selected conveniently, based on the willingness of the school-head/board-chair to participate, the ownership structure, and the duration of the school-head/board-chair joint working relationship. Documents such as reports and newsletters were the main data sources. These were analyzed using content analysis and frequency counts. The findings revealed elements of hubris in the leaders' correspondences. Among the board-chairs, the symptoms of hubris included excessive confidence whereas, among the school-heads, the symptoms of hubris included an identification with the organisation. One factor that may account for these finding is the ownership arrangement of the private schools. Many had the board chair as the owners. Various implications for school leadership have been discussed.

1. Introduction

Commercial private secondary schools exist side by side with public secondary schools in many countries across the globe. Commercial private schools however operate for profit. Nevertheless, these type of schools exist to provide education to students. The environment in which the education is provided needs to be formal, structured and conducive to learning if students are to benefit fully. At the upper echelon of commercial private schools (Bush and Glover, 2016), school leaders occupy different positions at the apex of the school's organisational structure. Typically, there is a school board which is led by a chair who represents shareholders, while there is a school head who represents the school management (McCrone et al., 2011). While the school head and the board chair function in different capacities as leaders, they both lead to achieve a 'common good' for the school. The school-head and board-chair provide educational leadership that impacts the lives of many individuals. According to Edwards (2015), the board-chair and school-head's leadership is vital to education because their leadership behaviour sets the tone for learning. According to Bush and Glover (2016), to an extent, their leadership behaviour is like glue: It holds the school together, and encapsulates the broad direction being

taken by, and the atmosphere that prevails at, the institution. Together, the leaders plays the important role of harmonizing and overseeing the appropriate implementation of the formal school curriculum for effectiveness. As a result, Constant (2011:1) asserts, "…everything must be done by both parties to protect and strengthen this key relationship." But in their endeavour to achieve success, the working relationship between these school-leaders, for whatever reasons, often become strained (Davis et al., 2005; Campbell and Ostroff, 2015; Tao et al., 2015) which in turn has a ripple down effect on staff and students performance (Edwards, 2015). This is the case in some commercial private secondary schools in Botswana.

Many private commercial secondary schools in Botswana are owned by the school head or the board chair. In the last 15 to 20 years, a number of school heads and school board chairs in these commercial secondary schools in the country have become like demigods at their school. The leadership behaviour of these leaders have led to many problems such as teacher attrition as teachers view these leaders as autocratic, and as individuals who do not take advise (Portia, 2015). Research has noted how incidence of encroachment and meddling in the other's role have caused tension in, and fractured, the board-chairs/ school-head's working relationship (Edwards, 2015; Xaba, 2011;

Heystek, 2006). Heystek (2006) as well as Brown and Duku (2008) reveal a 'messy' picture of power struggle, dominance, and power-play between school-heads and board chairs in different secondary schools. These have had a knock on effect resulting in some instances in a school climate that teachers find unhealthy. Many attempts have been made to improve the fractured and tenacious working relationship between school heads and their board chairs (Edwards, 2015; Constant, 2011) but there has been little by way of improvement. When school climate proves unhealthy for teachers and when teacher attrition increases, the risks of further problems such as a drop in student performance loom, as Davis et al. (2005) pointed out. This cannot be allowed because as reports of under-resourced and failing government and nonprofit schools continue to circulate, there is an exodus of students toward private commercial school education in Botswana (Kaelo, 2016). Education management researchers have speculated that the root cause of fractured working relationship between school heads and their board chairs may be linked to the personality of these leaders but these researchers have not provided empirical support (Heystek, 2006; Brown and Duku, 2008). Multi-dimensional theories of leadership have indicated that the personal characteristics of leaders' such as their attitudes, personality, and charisma are direct precursors of leadership behaviour that can disturb school-head/board-chair joint tenure working relationship (Davis et al., 2005; Chelladurai, 1980). Hubris is a typical example of a trait that has shown to trigger uncooperative, arrogant behaviour in a leader, resulting in fractured working relationship (Owen, 2009; Owen and Davidson, 2009; Beveridge, 2003). Bollaert and Petit (2010) have appealed for more research into hubris. Since hubris can have a detrimental effect on leadership behaviour and in turn on working relationship and school climate (Garcia et al., 2014), it is a significant corporate issue to investigate in private commercial secondary schools. This study therefore investigates whether hubris syndromes have manifested in the leadership behaviour and working relationships of school heads and board chairs in private secondary schools and the implication of this for school leadership.

2. Purpose of study

The study is guided by the following purpose: (a) to assess whether hubris syndromes have manifested in the leadership behaviour and working relationships of the school heads and board chairs; and (b) to assess and draw out the implications of these findings for school leadership.

3. Hubris, narcissism, and school leadership

Hubris is a relatively new concept in the lexicon of commercial private school leadership. However, the concept is *not* new in the general literature on leadership (Owen and Davidson, 2009; Beveridge, 2003). Hubris describes excessive pride, a cognitive unconscious bias, or more recently over-confidence, in a leader (Scheuer, 2004; Russell, 2011; Owen, 2009). It is associated with arrogance, misuse of power during office, an overweening self-importance, and a complete contempt for the opinion of others (Scheuer, 2004; Owen, 2009). Hubris is *not* a mental illness or a disorder, but rather it is condition acquired from having extensive power (Owen and Davidson, 2009). Hubris is triggered by the singular stimulus of the 'power' which the leader holds. The success or failure of the leader does not trigger hubris (Russell, 2011). Hubris behaviour, if left unrestrained, results in three distinct attitudes: (a) contempt for the input of others, (b) arrogance and (c) leaders' pursuit of policies and tactics out of their own prejudicial conviction and exaggerated self-confidence (Kroll et al., 2000).

3.1. Hubris – as a trait from narcissism

The literature makes reference to pathological and malignant narcissism (Ronfeldt, 1994; Conroy, 2013). The former describes a leader

who is afflicted with a "grandiose self" that yearns for adulation, i.e., pride, self-glorification (Ronfeldt, 1994) whereas the latter reflects – in addition to the above – a more severe hateful aggression (Ronfeldt, 1994). Hubris is comprised of a personality susceptible to narcissistic tendencies (Kroll et al., 2000). Successes that buttress the narcissism reinforce such tendencies. Malignant (destructive) narcissism bears the closest attributes with hubris because it seeks power for self-glorification (Maccoby, 2000; Russell, 2011). Malignant narcissism is linked to 'dark-side' personality traits, as opposed to 'bright-side' personality traits (:1365).

3.2. Hubris – as a form of over-confidence

Board-chair and school-heads function in the upper echelon of the school organisation. A narcissist in the upper echelon of the organisation tends to share the direction of the organisation in a certain way, to reflect his/her super-ego tendencies (Ronfeldt, 1994). The upper echelon theory argues much the same, stating that the strategy and outcomes of an organisation is a reflection of the cognitive biases of the leaders in the upper echelon of the organisation (Hambrick and Mason, 1984). The cognitive biases of narcissist are unconscious, and these biases drive excessive over-confidence, and a perception that one's qualities and abilities are superior to others (Malmendier and Tate 2005; Chatterjee and Hambrick, 2007). Past research treats this kind of thinking as part of narcissist personality, which is an antecedent of hubris (Malmendier and Tate, 2005; Chatterjee and Hambrick, 2007).

3.3. Hubris – as a syndrome

Owen and Davidson (2009:1398) state that hubris manifests as a syndrome, and it is activated by the gaining of power. They identified 14 symptoms of hubris syndrome, which they describe as being leader who: (i) considers the 'world' as a place for self-glorification through the use of power; (ii) has a tendency to take action primarily to enhance personal image; (iii) shows disproportionate concern for image and presentation; (iv) exhibits messianic zeal and exaltation in speech; (v) conflates self with organisation; (vi) uses the royal 'we' in conversation; (vii) shows excessive self-confidence; (viii) manifestly has contempt for others; (ix) shows accountability only to a higher court (history or God); (x) displays unshakeable belief that he/she will be vindicated in that court; (xi) loses contact with reality; (xii) resorts to restlessness, recklessness and impulsive actions; (xiii) allows moral rectitude to obviate consideration of practicality, cost or outcome; and (xiv) displays incompetence with disregard for the nuts and bolts of policy making.

Close scrutiny of the 14 symptoms shows that seven of them are related to narcissism, and five are unique to hubris. The others are linked to antisocial and histrionic personality. According to Owen and Davidson (2009), a person is considered to be suffering from extreme hubris if he/she is diagnosed with three or more of the 14 symptoms. However, one of the three symptoms identified must be any of the five unique to hubris: i.e., any of the following (a) conflating self with his/her organisation; (b) using the royal 'we' in communication; (c) showing an unshakable belief that a higher court (history or God) will provide vindication; (d) exhibiting restlessness, recklessness and impulsiveness; and (e) displaying moral rectitude that overrides practicalities, cost and outcome (Owen & Davidson, 2009:1398).

The symptoms provide a useful mechanism to evaluate the presence/absence of hubris. Collins (1999) as well as Maccoby (2000) have demonstrated that as leaders in the upper echelon of the organisation succumb to hubris, their organisations suffer a decline that is directly proportional to the severity of the hubris state.

3.4. Hubris and school-head/board-chair

Prior research acknowledges the significant power that [private] school board-chair/school-head wield within their work context (Bush