

Arrogance: A Formula for Leadership Failure

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Arrogance has run amok lately. The news and business periodicals are peppered with stories of executives flying in private jets to ask for government handouts, taking large bonuses from employers who took billions in bailout money, and instigating organization-wide pay cuts and benefit rollbacks while keeping themselves immune from such changes. Indeed, it has been said that we are currently in an “age of arrogance” (Gibbs, 2009).

The age of arrogance is clearly illustrated by one former leader at American International Group (AIG), Joe Cassano. Cassano was the president of AIG’s financial products unit and is credited by some as single-handedly bringing about the downfall of AIG (Ahrens, 2008). Many accounts describe Cassano as a quintessential arrogant leader. Former coworkers report that in stark contrast to his predecessors, Cassano had penchants for yelling, cursing, bad-mouthing others, and belittling colleagues, as well as little tolerance for opposing viewpoints. He has also been described as having had an obsession with profits, particularly as they related to the lucrative credit-default swap contracts that eventually brought the entire company down (Dennis, 2010; Taibbi, 2009). In the absence of Cassano’s persistent arrogant behavior (and unwillingness to tolerate dissent regarding his management practices), it is possible that AIG’s crisis would have been considerably less severe or altogether avoided. However, despite the fact that it was the practices he sanctioned that led AIG to be regarded as one of the most notable examples of excess associated with Wall Street, Cassano remains unapologetic about his role and blames others for the crisis (Nasiripour, 2010).

Anecdotal evidence suggests that interactions with arrogant individuals can be uncomfortable and that this effect is amplified when the arrogant individuals occupy positions of authority in organizations. Many jobs require continuous interaction between employees and their supervisors, effectively limiting the ability to avoid abuse by an arrogant boss. Managers typically have power over work assignments, promotion opportunities, and performance reviews. This can place subordinates of arrogant managers between a proverbial rock and hard place. The employee who says nothing is subjected to criticism and unrealistic demands, but the employee

who does speak up is likely to experience backlash (and the manager's behavior still may not change or perhaps will worsen).

The effects of arrogance are not limited to the victims of such behaviors. Rather, arrogance can cause problems for the arrogant leader as well. Executives are often hired based on experience but fired based on personality, and behaving arrogantly is one such factor that precipitates executive failure (Leslie & Van Velsor, 1996). Given the popularity of 360° performance management systems (Edwards & Ewen, 1996), it is increasingly likely that arrogant managers will be paid in kind by poor performance evaluations from peers and subordinates.

Based on the coverage in the popular press, it appears that arrogance is related to numerous undesirable organizational outcomes. However, despite considerable anecdotal evidence of arrogance negatively affecting the workplace, and wide acknowledgement of the importance of personality for work outcomes (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Day & Silverman, 1989), few studies have addressed individual and organizational consequences of arrogance. This paper clarifies current theoretical conceptualizations of arrogance, reviews recent research investigating arrogance in the workplace, and provides practical recommendations for dealing with arrogant employees.

What Is Arrogance?

Arrogance is engaging in behaviors intended to exaggerate a person's sense of superiority by disparaging others (Johnson et al., 2010). The persona arrogant individuals attempt to project is one of omnipotence and invincibility. Through actions associated with this inflated sense of entitlement and superiority, arrogant employees often impede effective organizational functioning (Johnson et al., 2010). For example, having an exaggerated sense of superiority reduces feedback-seeking behaviors and causes arrogant managers to discount diagnostic information in their work environment. Arrogant managers are therefore more likely to pursue failing courses of action that could otherwise have been prevented. Arrogant behavior can be an especially challenging problem to deal with due to the fact that arrogant individuals consider their own behavior acceptable and thus do not monitor their own actions when interacting with others.

Although arrogance is conceptually related to personality characteristics like narcissism, hubris, and confidence, there are important distinctions that set arrogance apart from these other traits. Narcissism (or self-love) involves fantasies of self-grandeur and excessive self-admiration that can occur in the absence of others. Arrogance, on the other hand, is manifested in interpersonal contexts by disparaging others. Similarly, hubris is also self-focused and lacks the interpersonal nature of arrogance. Hubris is the result of false confidence, leading to excessive pride about one's own abilities, attributes, or successes, but without contempt towards others. The distinction between arrogance and confidence is twofold. It first boils down to whether the opinion the individual claims to hold is based in reality and second to how well espoused beliefs represent actual beliefs. Confidence is simply a factual and reality-driven belief about ability or standing,

whereas arrogance is inflation of an individual's self-importance intended to make others feel inferior. Despite the apparent confidence of those engaging in arrogant behavior, research suggests that it is actually a defensive display occurring partially in response to low self-confidence (Johnson et al., 2010). Thus, performance claims by confident individuals are based in reality, but those of arrogant individuals are not. Beyond this, confident individuals are expressing genuine beliefs, whereas arrogant individuals may be attempting to hide insecurity and poor performance by exaggerating their own competence and importance (Bauer, Cho, Johnson, & Silverman, 2008).

In sum, arrogance can be thought of as a cluster of behaviors that communicate one's superiority and importance relative to others (Johnson et al., 2010; Leary, Bednarski, Hammon, & Duncan, 1997). These behaviors include disrespecting colleagues and their ideas, purporting to be more knowledgeable than others, avoiding blame and/or pinning blame on others, and discounting feedback. As will be discussed, it is noteworthy that arrogant behavior is typically not associated with actual superior performance or knowledge. Rather, it seems to be defensive compensation for shortcomings (Bauer et al., 2008; Johnson et al., 2010). In the following section we will elaborate on the development and validation of the Workplace Arrogance Scales (WARS), a measure that has allowed for more efficient and reliable examination of arrogance in the workplace. Thanks in part to this measure, empirical evidence regarding the effects of workplace arrogance has begun to emerge. As will be discussed, recent studies utilizing this measure indicate that workplace arrogance predicts important organizational outcomes.

Research on Arrogance

Russ Johnson, Stan Silverman, and colleagues dedicated 4 years of research to answering important questions about the nature and consequences of arrogant behavior in the workplace (Bauer et al., 2008; Johnson et al., 2010; Shyamsunder & Silverman, 2006; Silverman, Shyamsunder, & Johnson, 2007). The product of this research program was the Workplace Arrogance Scale (WARS), as well as considerable increases in our understanding of the effects of workplace arrogance. As an initial step prior to developing a workplace arrogance scale, multiple focus group sessions were conducted with employees from a variety of companies (Shyamsunder & Silverman, 2006). During these sessions, employees were asked to think about someone at work who behaved arrogantly and to describe the behaviors of that person. Using the specific behavioral examples garnered from these queries, items reflecting arrogant behaviors were written. The item pool was then refined via an iterative process whereby subject-matter experts reviewed and edited the items until their meaning was clear and wording was satisfactory. After this, the survey was administered to a new group of employees in order to examine the validity and refine the scale (Johnson et al., 2010; Silverman et al., 2007).

The final WARS scale ($\alpha = 0.93$) comprises 26 self-report items, scored on a five-point Likert scale. The measure holds its factor structure across part- and full-time employees, across subordinates and managers, and across self- and other ratings. Importantly, responses on the

measure are not strongly related to social desirability (Bauer et al., 2008; Johnson et al., 2010). When included in a 360° performance management system of mid-level managers, the WARS scale showed good interrater agreement, particularly among non self-raters (supervisors, peers, and direct reports). Although lower rates of agreement have been noted between supervisor and direct report ratings of arrogance, this is likely due to impression management on the part of the arrogant individual (e.g., directing fewer displays of arrogant behavior at superiors than at subordinates; Johnson et al., 2010).

As expected, high scores on the WARS are associated with high social dominance and trait anger, as well as with several narcissistic tendencies (e.g., entitlement, superiority). Conversely, high levels of arrogance are associated with low humility and Agreeableness. Of most interest, though, are relationships of arrogance with work-related outcomes. To date, three job performance criteria have been examined: in-role task performance (i.e., fulfillment of required job tasks and duties), and extra-role citizenship behaviors that help other people (e.g., helping coworkers with a difficult assignment and mentoring junior colleagues) and those that help the company as a whole (e.g., conserving office supplies and volunteering at company functions). Based on survey data collected from employees across various organizational levels, results consistently revealed that arrogance is significantly and negatively related to task performance and citizenship behaviors (Bauer et al., 2008; Johnson et al., 2010). The negative relationship of arrogance with task performance was observed regardless of who (self, supervisor, peer, or direct report) rated the arrogance and performance of the target employee in the 360° assessment. Not only do arrogant employees have poor task performance, but they also do not engage in citizenship behaviors that cultivate positive social climates at work. Instead, arrogant behaviors likely cultivate poisonous social climates.

These results highlight an interesting paradox: Employees who act superior in actuality have inferior performance. What might account for this effect? As it turns out, empirical research has found that arrogance is negatively related to cognitive ability and self-esteem (Bauer et al., 2008; Johnson et al., 2010). Thus, it appears that engaging in socially demeaning and dominating behaviors may be defensive compensation for (potentially accurate) perceptions of personal inadequacies, as arrogant employees tend to make unfavorable evaluations of their ability. Interestingly, arrogance is also negatively associated with having a learning orientation (Bauer et al., 2008), which is consistent with the idea that arrogant employees pay little attention to diagnostic information in their environment. Instead, arrogant individuals adopt a performance orientation, as they are more interested in how their skills and performance levels stack up against others rather than on improving their skills. Consistent with this idea is the finding that arrogant employees have strong individual identities (Bauer et al., 2008), which reflects the tendency to view oneself as separate from—and typically better than—others (Johnson, Selenta, & Lord, 2006). When employees have a strong individual identity, it is much easier to act in a harmful and hostile manner towards others because actors are less sensitive to the well-being of other people (Johnson & Saboe, 2011).

These findings highlight the detrimental effects of arrogance to both individuals and organizations. This research indicates that although arrogant individuals tout their superiority, they are unable to substantiate their claims with regard to actual job performance. High levels of arrogance are associated with low self-esteem, low general intelligence, poor job performance, and low organizational citizenship behaviors. This suggests that arrogant individuals are not (and do not believe themselves to be) actually superior, but rather use arrogance as a way to mask inadequacies. The likely result is a vicious cycle, with fears of inadequacy driving arrogant behavior, which elicits negative responses from others, which in turn lowers self-esteem further. Given the negative outcomes associated with arrogant behavior, organizations could improve leader effectiveness and ultimately organizational effectiveness by curtailing arrogance early in a leader's career.

Assessing and Addressing Workplace Arrogance

As we have detailed, arrogant behavior is associated with an array of individual and organizational problems. Individuals who are arrogant at work make interpersonal interactions difficult, create an uncomfortable and potentially stressful work environment for others, and have poor performance ratings. This could ultimately influence feelings of customer satisfaction and loyalty, relationships among members of a work team or a leader and subordinate, and the organization's bottom line. In light of the implications of arrogance in the workplace, it is important for leaders and organizations to be aware of such behaviors and take steps to reduce them. We posit that curtailing arrogant behavior and instilling humility can provide organizations with a competitive advantage.

Humility is the "personal orientation founded on a willingness to see the self accurately and a propensity to put oneself in perspective" (Morris, Brotheridge, & Urbanski, 2005, p. 1331). Individuals with humility are open to new ideas and to engagement in accurate self-appraisal (of both strengths and weaknesses). They are willing to accept the idea of something greater than the self. Although some believe that humility displayed by a leader projects weakness, researchers have argued for the utility of humility in leadership (Nielsen, Marrone, & Slay, 2010). Humility prevents excessive self-focus, allowing leaders to develop perspective in relationships with employees. When employees attribute humility to their leaders, they also perceive the leader as more honest, trustworthy, competent, and confident. Accordingly, the employees of a humble leader should be more committed to the leader's vision and more trusting and receptive of the leader's expectations and ideas (Nielsen et al., 2010). Existing literature argues that leaders who possess a combination of personal humility and professional will ("Level 5 Leaders") have been extremely successful in transforming good companies into great companies (Collins, 2001). In conjunction with leader humility literature, empirical findings about the pitfalls of arrogant behavior at work suggest that arrogant behavior at work is detrimental and that replacing arrogance with humility will benefit leaders and their organizations.

Fortunately arrogance is a cluster of changeable behaviors, driven by relatively malleable beliefs. Measuring arrogant behavior at work could be valuable for leaders and organizations, as awareness of such behavior is necessary before developmental interventions may be designed. As such, the incorporation of a measure such as the WARS into a performance management system would allow organizations to diagnose when workplace problems are a function of arrogant behaviors. This would permit the creation of development plans aimed at replacing arrogance with more appropriate behavior. Because arrogance is typified in part by low self-confidence and actual poor performance, one developmental intervention likely to be of particular use for arrogant managers is training interventions aimed at improving core (or otherwise deficient) leadership skills. Other interventions might target social interaction skills (e.g., Skarlicki & Latham, 1996), for example, training aimed at increasing interpersonal awareness and giving voice to others, so as to make arrogant individuals understand how their behavior affects others. In short, the WARS measure of arrogance is potentially beneficial for use as a developmental tool for leaders.

Organizational interventions might also target the weak learning orientation of arrogant leaders (Bauer et al., 2008), which leads them to disregard potentially helpful feedback. A weak learning orientation also causes people to identify others to blame when setbacks or failures are experienced, instead of revising performance strategies or uncovering why problems occurred. Companies can combat these consequences by cultivating an environment where feedback and other diagnostic information are accessible to employees and where mistakes are treated as learning experiences rather than markers of personal inadequacies (e.g., Keith & Frese, 2008).

Ideally, arrogant behaviors should be addressed early in an individual's career. Doing so will result in more efficient professional development, allowing the employee to become a better leader over a shorter period of time. This could ultimately lead to more effective organizations in terms of both productivity as well as social cohesion. Although it is true that some arrogant leaders have experienced considerable success, we argue that these individuals may have been even more effective sans the arrogant behavior. Interactions with others in the organization may have been more successful, more effective communication could have taken place, and performance could have been even more impressive if arrogance had been curtailed early on.

Conclusion

Workplace arrogance can be a serious problem. Arrogant employees are poor performers who negatively impact social exchange in the workplace. They make little effort to engage in citizenship behaviors and discount feedback that would otherwise help improve their performance. Recent research has led to the development of the WARS, an easily administered and highly valid measure of workplace arrogance. This research recommends incorporating an assessment of arrogance into performance management systems. Doing so will allow arrogant behavior to be identified and the actor's behavior to be addressed before harm is done to other employees and organizational effectiveness. It is clearly in the best interest of an organization to

redirect arrogant behavior in its leaders. This can be accomplished by organizational encouragement of (a) continuing leadership development intended to ensure adequate efficacy for job-related skills, (b) healthy levels of employee humility, and (c) instilling a learning-oriented climate. In taking steps to reduce arrogance in the workplace, an organization provides itself with the competitive advantages associated with effective leadership and productive social interaction of employees.

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