

Hubristic Leadership

Person and Process Perspectives

Eugene Sadler-Smith and Tim Wray

Surrey Business School

University of Surrey

e.sadler-smith@surrey.ac.uk

Hubristic Leadership

Person

Perspective

**Servant
leadership**

**Authentic
leadership**

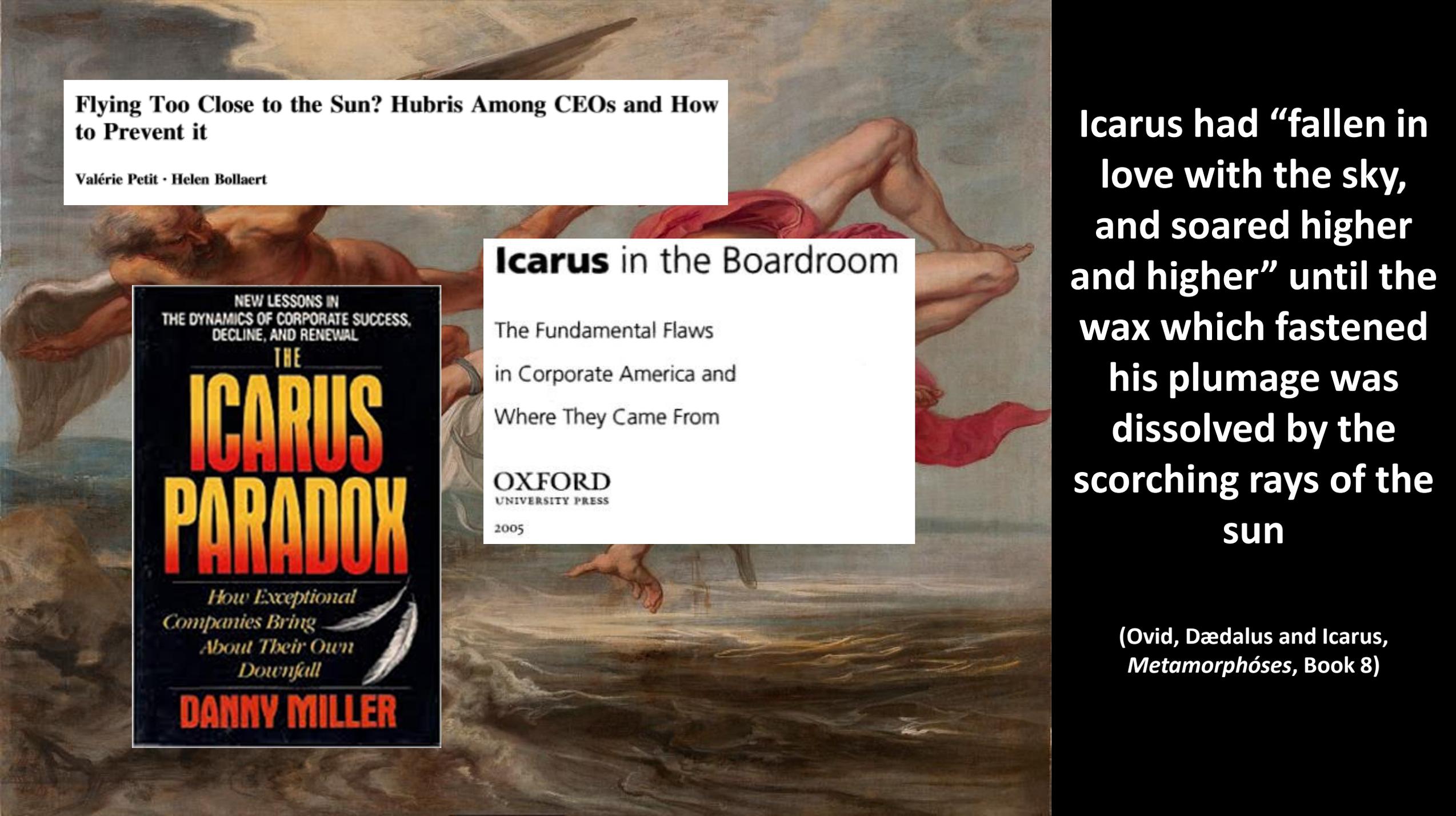
**BRIGHT-SIDE
LEADERSHIPS**

**Transformational
leadership**

**Charismatic
leadership**

**DARK-SIDE
LEADERSHIPS
(e.g. hubristic)**





Flying Too Close to the Sun? Hubris Among CEOs and How to Prevent it

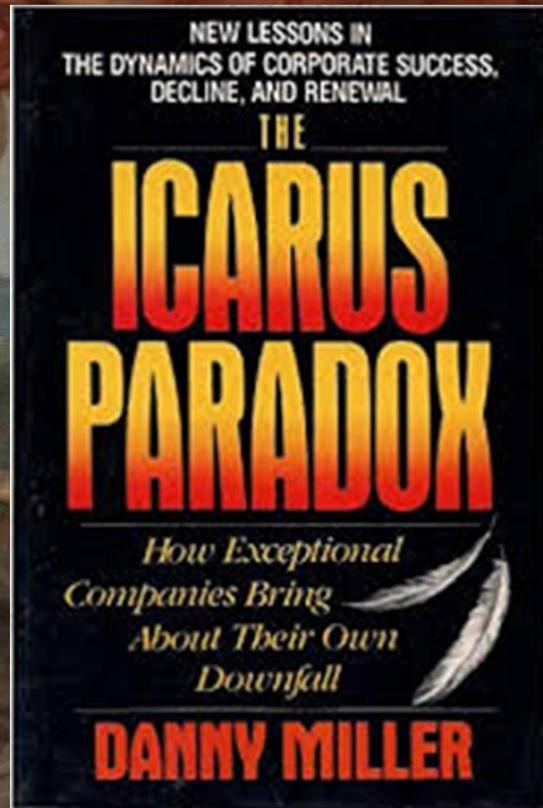
Valérie Petit · Helen Bollaert

Icarus in the Boardroom

The Fundamental Flaws
in Corporate America and
Where They Came From

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2005



Icarus had “fallen in love with the sky, and soared higher and higher” until the wax which fastened his plumage was dissolved by the scorching rays of the sun

(Ovid, Dædalus and Icarus, *Metamorphoses*, Book 8)

Hallmarks of Hubris

intoxicated by power, success and praise

prone to over-confidence, over-ambition

contemptuous of advice and criticism

leads to recklessness

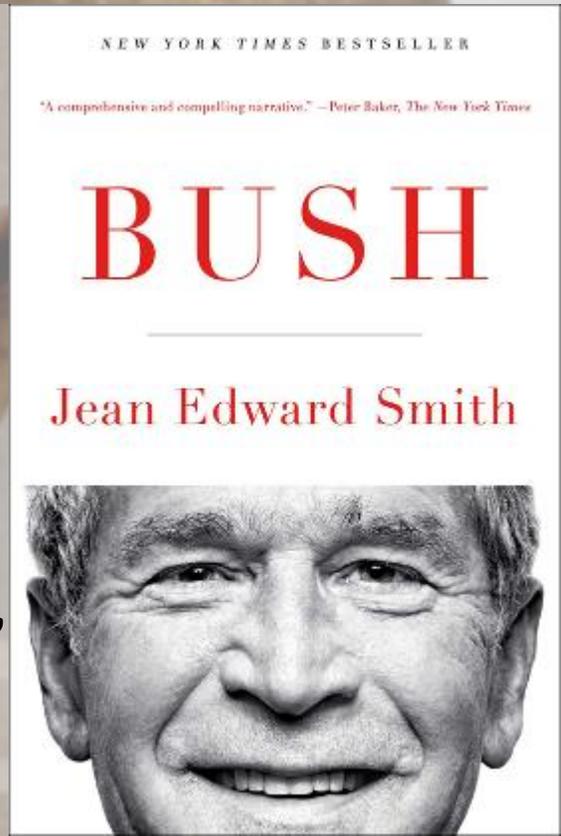
amplified by lack of restraint

associated with 'nasty surprises'



“Whether George W Bush was the worst president in American history will be long debated, but his decision to invade Iraq is easily the worst foreign policy decision ever made by an American president”

(Smith, 2016, p.660)





BP Organizational / Technical Hubris
1600m water depth / 5600m drill depth
“BP’s engineering feats rival those of going to the moon” (Lord John Browne, BP’s CEO)
Cost of 2010 Deepwater Horizon explosion & oil spill \$61.6 billion

Hubris – Is thy name Richard Fuld?

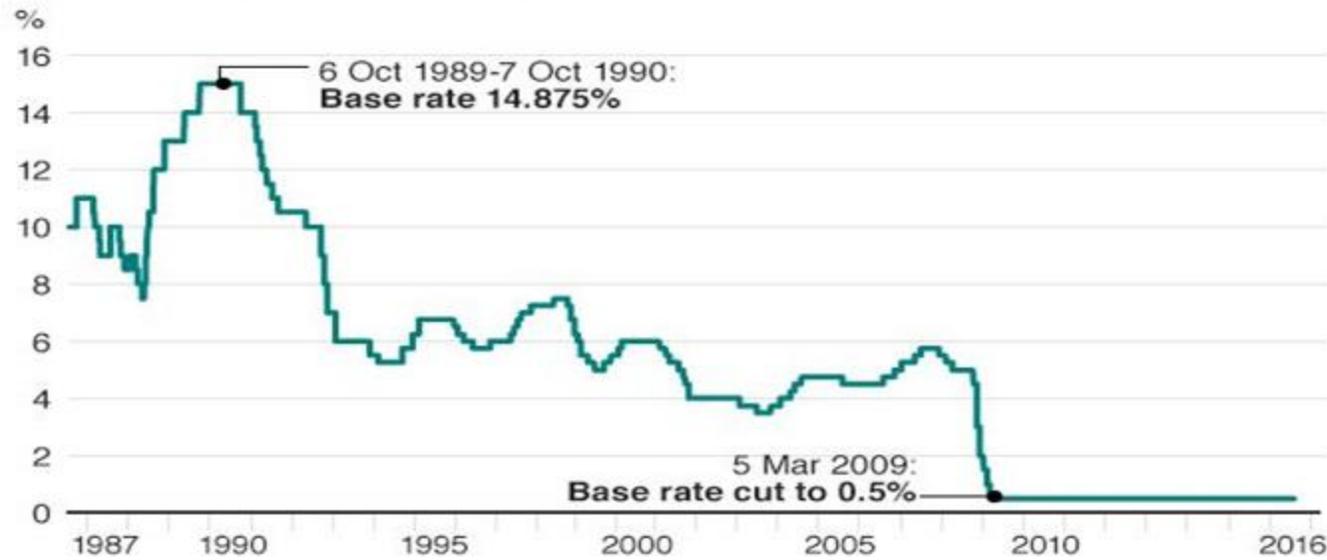
FINANCIAL TIMES September 14th 2008



Is it just coincidence that both Lehman Brothers and Bear Stearns were led by entrenched men who lost touch with their employees, businesses and mission? Did hubris cause the collapse of these two venerable banks? As 158-year-old Lehman disintegrates, and potential buyers sniff the carcass, it is worth asking whether blame for the fall of both Lehman and Bear might be attributed, not only to a failure of risk management, but to a failure of character.



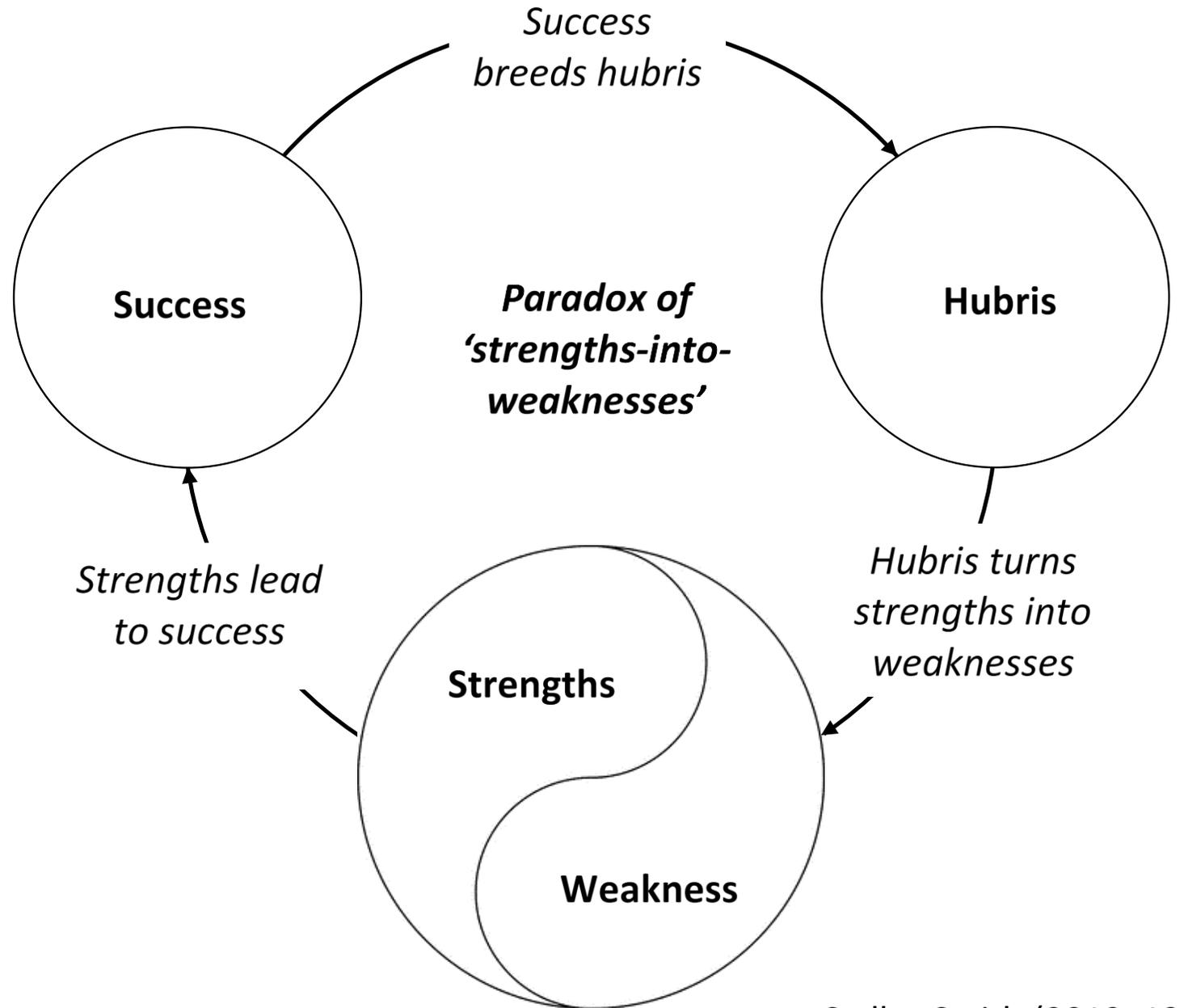
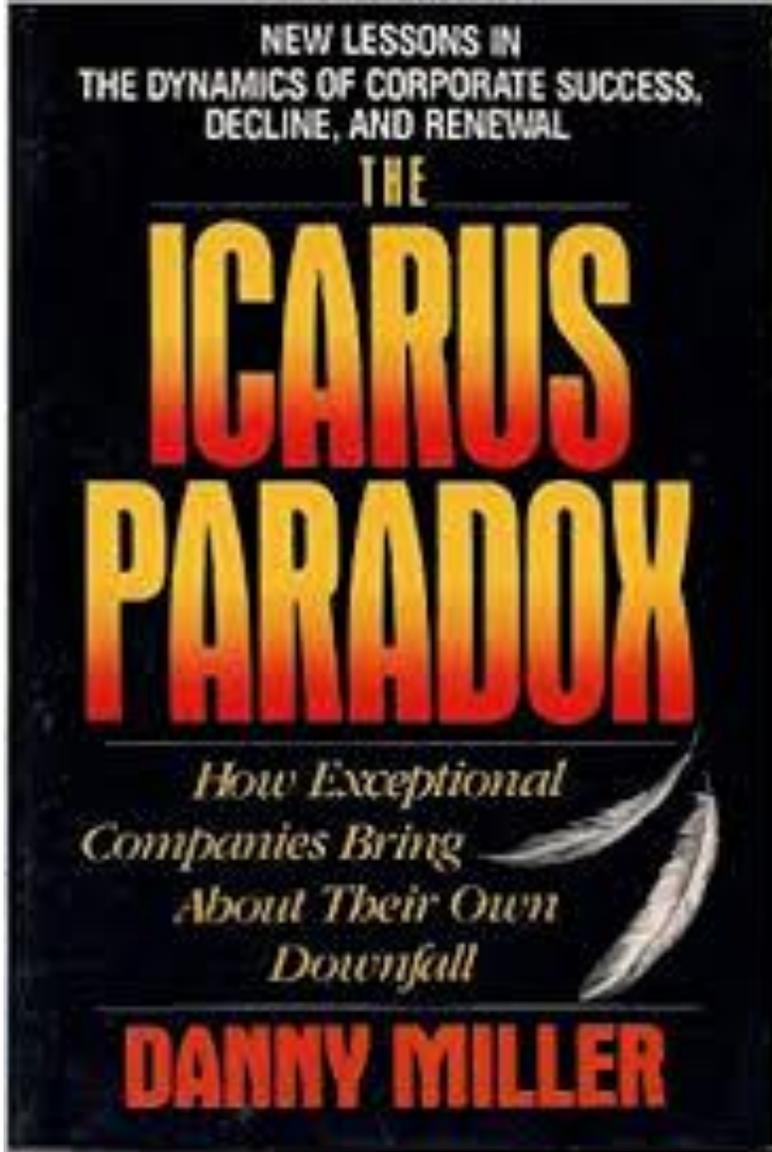
Bank of England base rate 1986-2016



Source: Bloomberg/Bank of England

BBC

Hubris creates
conditions for
**negative unintended
consequences**
(‘nasty surprises’)
to arise



Paradox of Hubris

Positive
Alignment

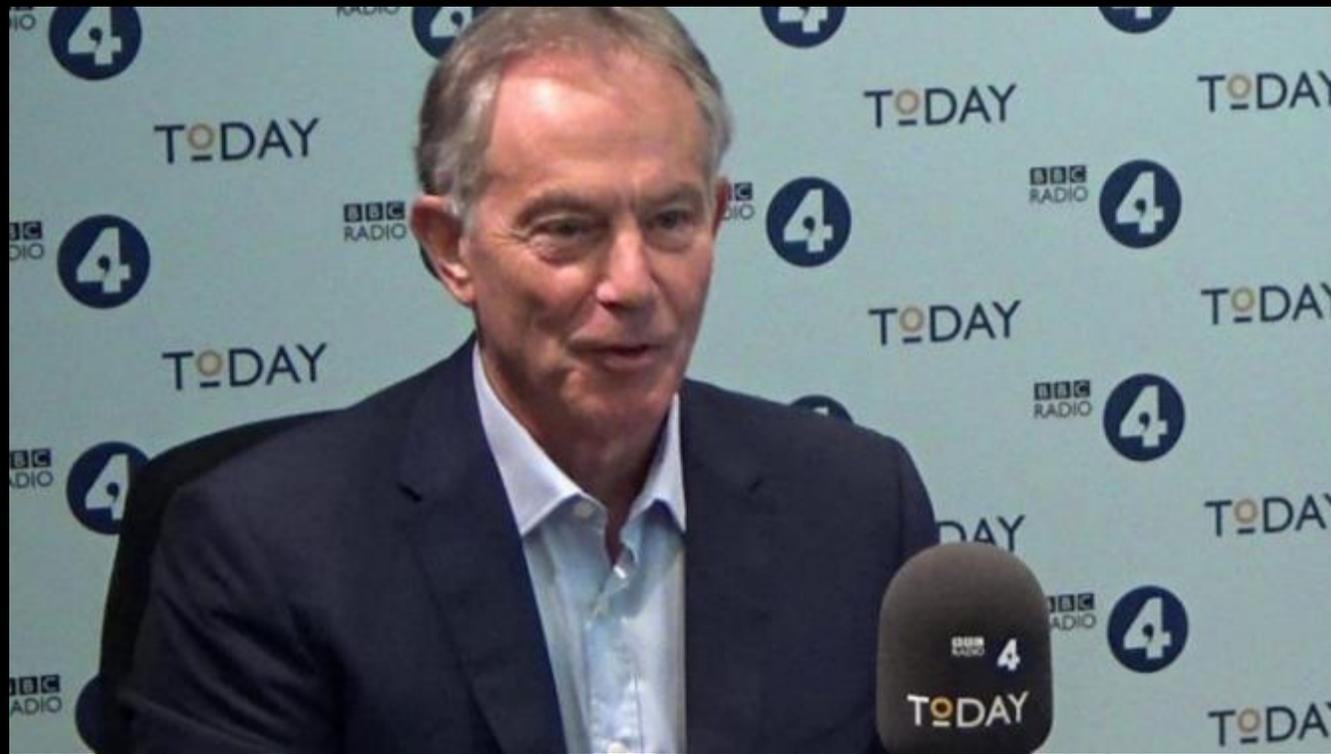
becomes over-identification with the organization (**Steve Jobs was Apple**)

Good
Judgement

becomes excessive / unwarranted self-confidence (**'my instincts' GW Bush**)

Appropriate
Ambition

becomes exaggerated self-belief (**'If you can dream it you can do it'**)



**“The flip side of someone’s strength
is their weakness”**

**Tony Blair commenting on Theresa May’s leadership
(BBC R4 *Today*, 14/12/18)**



Deficiency

Vice

Mean

Virtue

Excess

Vice

Leader Character Strengths and Hubris

Deficiency	Mean	Excess
Cowardice	Bravery	Recklessness
Inauthenticity	Integrity	Righteousness
Socially awkward	Socially intelligent	Manipulative
Over-cautious	Prudent	Rash
Hopelessness	Hopefulness	Foolishness
Self-deprecation	Humility	Boastfulness



“The mean is to be commended...one should incline sometimes towards excess and sometimes towards deficiency, because in this way we shall most easily hit upon the mean, that is, the right course” (p.49)



“...in seeking the best course of action, leaders sometimes need to incline towards excess at the right time, for the right motive, and in the right amount.”

(Sadler-Smith, 2019: 173)



Warren Buffett (b. 1930)

American business magnate, investor, speaker and philanthropist; Chairman / CEO of Berkshire Hathaway; Net worth \$86.9 billion

‘Good results come from a properly calibrated balance of **hubris** and **humility**’ (Miller, 2016: 170)

Miller, J. C. 2016. *Ground rules: Words of wisdom from the partnership letters of the world's greatest investor*. New York: HarperCollins.