

# 'Success' – a leadership trap

Success can be a curse rather than a blessing for leaders if they become complacent about their performance, say **Pierre Casse** and **Eoin Banahan**

**A** careful examination of successful leaders reveals that they are able to adjust their behaviour to the requirements of the time.

If success is to be sustainable, the leader must be able to adjust his behaviour according to the demands of each situation to which he is exposed. It is critical to be able to anticipate when a situation calls for new attitudes, new assumptions and related behaviours and to have the courage to change despite the fact that such risks

will inevitably require swimming against the tide.

There are some highly visible examples. Look at Michael Dell, who had the courage to recognise that success in today's personal computer market is not about mass production but mass customisation. He recognises the importance of adjusting behaviour to focus on building a relationship with the individual customer.

Similarly, Richard Branson, at the Virgin Group, recognises that power has shifted from the producer to the consumer and leadership behaviour must reflect that.

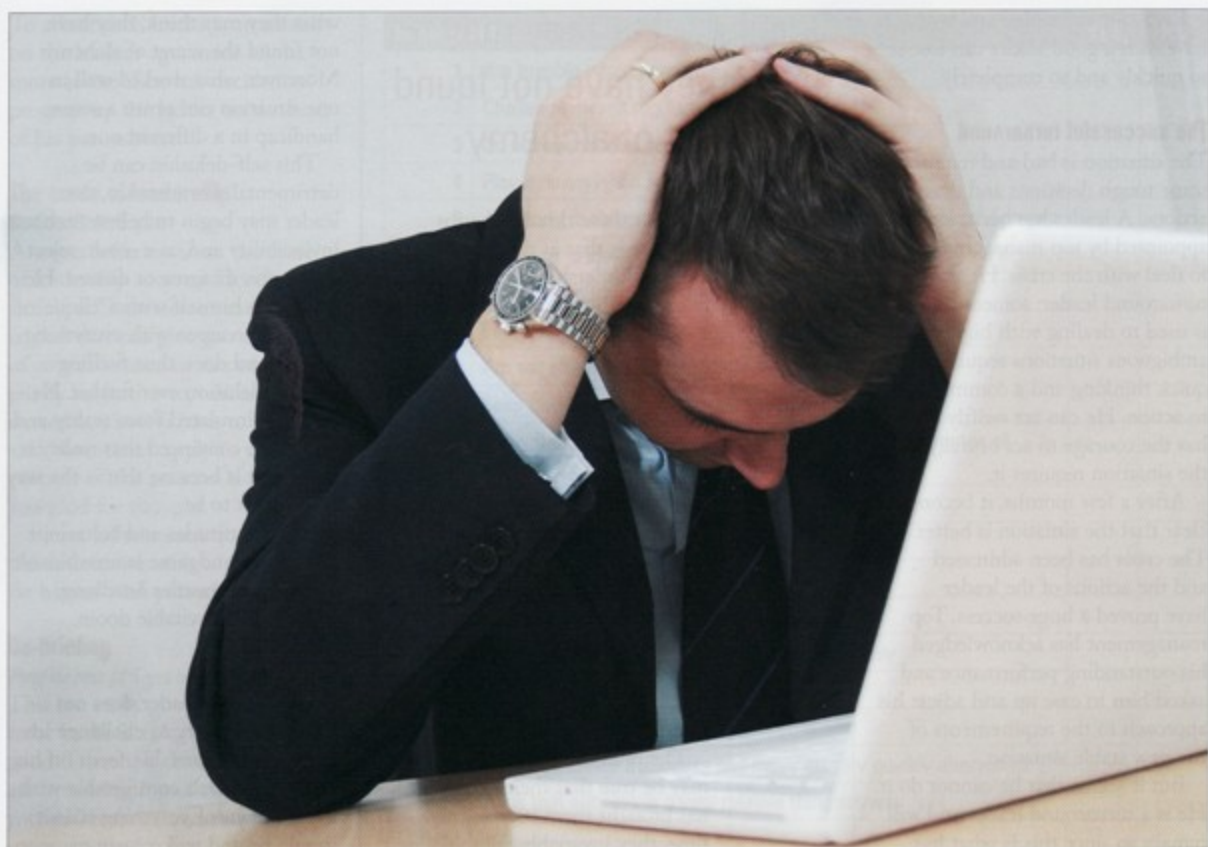
Leaders like Dell, Branson and Steve Jobs at Apple are successful now because they are responding to the requirements of the time. So long as they continue to do so, they increase their chances of success.

Indeed many leaders are able to do so at least once in their career. They catch the wave and revel in the glory that success brings. But then, almost inevitably, they fall into the trap: the sweet taste of success dulls their senses and they begin to believe they are somehow invincible. They remain in a leadership mode that proves inappropriate, unsuccessful and ultimately destructive, leading eventually to their own demise.

Let's consider the typical process through which many leaders progress. Although simple, it's extremely subtle and destructive. It involves these three critical steps:

- 1 The leader faces a challenging situation and recognises the need for different attitudes and behaviours that will effectively address the requirements in order to turn the situation around
- 2 As a result of the leader's actions, the challenge is successfully addressed and the situation is transformed. Crisis is averted and the leader is praised for his acumen and initiative





3 Many leaders forget that the situation has now been transformed by their actions and, as a result, new attitudes and behaviours are now necessary if they are to build on their success for the longer term. Instead, they persist with outdated behaviours, erroneously believing that what has proved successful in the past will continue to be so. They are struck down by the curse of leadership success.

Let's consider three all-too-common illustrations of the curse of leadership success in action.

#### **The coaching that went too well**

A leader has invested time and energy in coaching a team member. The leader recognised the team member's potential, had faith in his abilities but identified deficiencies in his level of competency.

The support and help provided proved such a success that the team

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member has grown; he is now ready to stand on his own two feet and move forward alone.

However, the leader can't let go and persists in playing the coaching role. It has proved so successful thus far; why change now? He is overdoing it and, as a result, the team member is upset because he feels he doesn't trust him enough to let him fly solo.

In such a case, the team member has two choices: either he confronts the leader and highlights the fact that now his behaviour is inappropriate given the new

situation or, for the sake of peace and tranquillity, he accepts his persistent behaviour and resigns himself to being over-coached.

#### **The leader who has lost it**

A leader has proved very effective in managing his business unit and team. He took over a few months earlier and everybody at the top of the company has been impressed by how quickly he has settled in and come to terms with the demands of his new position. Senior management is impressed with his success and is considering him as a potential high flyer.

However, lately it seems that something has gone wrong. Suddenly he seems unstable. The confidence with which he has made decisions seems to have evaporated. His management reports are late and his team members are complaining that he is not giving enough time and attention to their issues and concerns.



Everyone is puzzled and wonders how such a good leader can lose it so quickly and so completely.

### The successful turnaround

The situation is bad and requires some tough decisions and drastic actions. A leader has been appointed by top management to deal with the crisis. He is a turnaround leader: someone who is used to dealing with highly ambiguous situations requiring quick thinking and a commitment to action. He can act swiftly and has the courage to act brutally, if the situation requires it.

After a few months, it becomes clear that the situation is better. The crisis has been addressed and the actions of the leader have proved a huge success. Top management has acknowledged his outstanding performance and asked him to ease up and adjust his approach to the requirements of the new stable situation.

But it seems that he cannot do it. He is a turnaround leader and will remain so since this is what has brought him success thus far. He cannot see why he should change what has been a winning approach.

## Despite what they may think, they have not found the secret of alchemy

What these three scenarios illustrate is that at the heart of the curse of leadership success lies the following three critical maladies:

- Self-delusion
- Complacency
- Ego trip.

### Self-delusion

Leaders perceive success as a confirmation of their wisdom and know-how. It is proof positive that they have what it takes. They float high on a cloud of hype and hyperbole. They revel in the glory of their own making. They have made it and there is no question that they deserve the recognition that success brings them.

The problem is that, although it may be true that their behaviour has brought them success this time, they invariably fail to realise that success today is no guarantee of success tomorrow. Despite

what they may think, they have not found the secret of alchemy. Moreover, what worked well in one situation can prove a severe handicap in a different one.

This self-delusion can be detrimental. For instance, the leader may begin to believe in his invincibility and, as a result, reject those who disagree or dissent. He surrounds himself with a 'clique' of people who agree with everything he says and does, thus fuelling the self-delusion ever further. He becomes insulated from reality and ever more convinced that reality is the way it is because that is the way he wants it to be.

If such attitudes and behaviour persist, the endgame is unavoidable as the leader hurtles headlong towards his inevitable doom.

### Complacency

The successful leader does not think it necessary to challenge his basic assumptions. He feeds on his success and feels comfortable with the *status quo*. Everything is as it should be and will remain so, or so he thinks.

Such complacency can lead to some major disasters, particularly if the successful leader has been rewarded with more power. To challenge him is difficult, risky and, in many cases, useless. He is the only one who really knows and it's his way, or the highway.

### Ego trip

It is often the case that deep down inside, and sometimes it is not so deep inside, the leader knows he should change. He is clever enough to be aware of the new balance in the situation and the need to re-invent himself but that requires actions that can be very difficult for the leader who has been the origin of a big success.

- He will have to admit that:
- What worked in the past is no longer valid
  - He is lost and does not have the new answers
  - He needs help.





To admit such truths is an assault on the leader's ego, made all the more severe if he has decided to progress up the ladder on the basis of his past success.

### The curse of leadership success and you

Are you suffering from the curse of leadership success? Here is a simple self-assessment exercise (right) that can give you an idea of your tolerance to success. It's purely subjective so, whatever the outcome, you will have to decide if, and how, it may apply to you. The purpose of the exercise is to give you food for thought.

Please answer each question in the table above with a 'yes' or 'no'. Be honest with yourself.

### De-briefing

*Profile one (15 yes or more):*

This is a really good position to be in. In fact, it may be too good. There is a chance that you are overdoing it and challenging yourself, and others, in such a systematic and constant way that it has become counter-productive. The environment that you create is highly ambiguous and unstable. A minimum of stability is always required in any leadership situation – the art of leadership is to decide what to change and what *not* to change.

*Profile two (eight to 14 yes):*

This could imply that you are able to question your own behaviour and change it even when the situation looks good. The risk of such an attitude could be that you are perceived by those around you as hesitant and undecided. It is critical, then, that you ensure your partners and associates understand why you are doing what you are doing, including 'fixing it when it is not broken'.

*Profile three (one to seven yes):*

Either you have never been successful (and therefore have never experienced the success trap) or you have a natural aversion to

In general I...	YES	NO
1 Am humble when winning a contest		
2 Challenge myself regularly and systematically		
3 Do not overwhelm people with my success stories		
4 Play it down when achieving my objectives		
5 Am ready to share the recognition that goes with a successful project		
6 Am open to ideas that are different to mine		
7 Like to learn from a good action		
8 Enjoy re-inventing myself		
9 Am not afraid of facing the unknown		
10 Keep inviting people to disagree with me		
11 Know that a good accomplishment today is not a guarantee of success for tomorrow		
12 Realise that success can be source of complacency		
13 Do not believe that winning once is good enough		
14 Have no major problem with bad news		
15 Realise that success does not last (for ever)		
16 Feel uncomfortable when things go too smoothly		
17 Can face my mistakes openly and candidly		
18 Am not afraid of losing face		
19 Like to celebrate a success and move on very quickly afterwards		
20 Think that success is a very relative thing anyway		
<b>Total</b>		

adjusting your behaviour to new requirements. You believe that what's good today will always be good. Be careful – a reluctance to question your assumptions could cost you dearly.

### Managing success

Success is not bad in itself. It's the way it is perceived and built upon by the leader that counts. Leaders who have been successful over time develop a set of practical ways to cope with success:

- They recognise that it is not an end in itself but a by-product of something much more important, namely the contribution they, and others, make to creating a better world
- They understand that it is a collaborative achievement. Although the right ideas may have originated from them, others were involved in their development and execution, and deserve credit too

- They take the praise and adulation with a grain of salt and recognise their good fortune and privilege for what it is
- They are flexible and open to question and suggestion. They are the leaders of a fast-changing world. Their motto is 'success is just another challenge'.

In conclusion, although experience shows that there is an inherent danger in success of which leaders should be aware, they should welcome it as an opportunity to reassess their attitudes and behaviours, and use it as a springboard for new ways of thinking and behaving. ■

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