



WHY POWERFUL PEOPLE THINK JUST FOR THEMSELVES

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What's in the mind of powerful people? We may be asking that - and pretty frequently - when their behaviours appear contradictory, hard to understand, or too much arrogant to the point they become hard to bear. A recent study published in *Atlantic* invites us to ask ourselves this question in more radical terms: what's happening *to the brain* of powerful people?

LESS AWARE OF THE RISKS. The *Atlantic* quotes a couple of authoritative opinions. According to Dacher Keltner, professor of psychology at the University of Berkeley, two decades of research and experiments on the field converge on one evidence: the subjects on a powerful position act as they had received a head trauma. They become more impulsive, less aware of the risks and, above all, less capable of evaluating the facts taking other people's point of view.

Regarding of head traumas and personality changes, do you recall the case of Phineas Gage? Well, maybe you're not completely wrong.

THE PARADOX OF POWER. Sukhinver Obhi is a neuroscientist at the University of Ontario. He doesn't study the behaviours, but the brain. When he puts some students in a powerful condition, he discovers that this situation influences on a specific neural process: the capacity to reflect themselves into somebody else, one of the fundamental components in order to experience empathy.

And here we are on the possible cause that Keltner defines the *paradox of power*. When people acquire power, they lose (or rather, *their brain loses*) some fundamental capacities. These people become less empathic, i.e. less receptive. Less ready to understand others. And, probably, less interested or disposed to do it.

TRAPPED BY THE ROLE. Furthermore, often powerful people are rounded by a court of subordinated who seek to reflect what their boss says in order to currying favour with him, by the way, this acting doesn't help maintain a healthy relationship with the reality.

And still: it's the role itself to ask powerful people to decide fast (even if they don't have either enough items to do it or time to think about it), and be assertive (even when they pretty much don't know what to assert. Or when it would be better to pay attention to the details) and confident up to the limit of insolence.

THE CHICKEN SYNDROME. *The multinational's top managers travel frantically around the world as beheaded chickens: they take decisions driven by anxiety, without thinking, without understanding, without seeing and confronting with their peers.* I've heard that in a meeting reserved for a partner of a very notorious international consultancy company, from the eldest and authoritative relator. I would have expected some shaking heads and instead, I saw approval nodding.

I've got the suspect that the chicken syndrome could belong not only to who rules companies but also to who rules institutions and nations.

The thing is that powerful people "must" move forward their way, not caring about what surrounds them. This behaviour can help them reach their goals (that's very beneficial in the short term) but it damages decisional abilities, interaction, and communication, which are strategically in the long term.

HUBRIS AND FAILURE. *Power wears who doesn't have it,* Andreotti used to say, a guy who knew something about it, quoting Maurice de Talleyrand. But the quote contains a consistent dose of stubbornness.

There is a very ancient Greek word that describes well it all: *hybris*. It indicates the presumptuous hubris of who has reached such an eminent and overvalued position. It's

remarkable that in the Greek term there's an implicit fatality of a subsequent punishment, divine or terrestrial: the failure, the fall.

It is estimated that the 47 percent of manager would fail, writes Adrian Furnham, professor of psychology at the University College of London. It's a very high percentage. One of the main failure reasons is the narcissism: a poor cocktail of arrogance, emotional coldness, and hypocrisy.

THE HUBRIS SYNDROME. Actually, a hubris syndrome has been effectively recorded and described in clinical terms, as a personality pathology related to the possession of power. The study contains several tables that examine in psychiatric terms the behaviour of American presidents and that of British leaders (the study is of 2008 and no, there is not the name that just came to your mind).

The hubris syndrome is typical of dictators. It can afflict politics, manager, soldiers, academics. The fourteen symptoms that distinguish it comprehend narcissism, sociopathy, and histrionics. The interesting thing is that the syndrome has been studied extensively by David Owen, neurologist, psychiatrist, and politic man of very long experience and career. In short, one who knows pretty well who he's dealing with.

DO WE KNOW HOW TO DISTINGUISH BETWEEN CHARISMA AND NARCISSISM?

There's a paradox: it's easy to admire and respect charismatic and confident people. But, it isn't that easy to distinguish charisma from narcissism, its dark side in many ways. Do we really know how to define the limit between assertiveness and bullying? Security from obstinacy? Charm from manipulation? Pragmatism from cynicism?

There is a further paradox: bullying, obstinacy, manipulation, and cynicism can even result in being useful in the battles for the conquer of power, which is often wearing, unfair and fierce. But, once one has gained power, to maintain it one would need an open and balanced vision that – we've seen this before – the same role seems to make it very hard to get and to maintain. Power is the supreme aphrodisiac, Henry Kissinger used to say.

MAINTAIN THE CONSENSUS. But "very hard" doesn't mean "impossible". On the other hand, at least in the western democracies and in the modern companies, power can be kept just through consensus, and the capacity to maintain consensus is directly proportional to the capacity of communicating, to listen, and to compare.

Hey, it can be done! Powerful people equipped with charisma without narcissism do exist. Over forty years, I have even met some of them, between politics and enterprise, but I can count them on the fingers of one hand. We would need many more of them.