

# Managerial hubristic-behavioral strategy: how to cope with chaotic and uncertain contexts

Managerial  
hubristic-  
behavioral  
strategy

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – How can a manager lead an organization or a team in a particularly turbulent time? How can management cope with chaos and uncertainty? Drawing on behavioral strategy theory, this study aims at investigating how hubristic managers can enable organizations to thrive, even over small time periods, in chaotic and uncertain contexts and settings.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This study uses a qualitative methodology to explore the possible positive effects of hubris in a behavioral strategy. In particular, 45 interviews with leaders and followers of particularly high-performing secondary schools have been administered to try to fully understand the origin, process and performance evolution of organizations led by hubristic managers.

**Findings** – The results showed that, in chaotic and uncertain times, hubris can prove to be a trump card for managers in dealing with the pitfalls and uncertainties of the context in which the organization operates. Three major attributes were identified – overconfidence and over-persistence, recklessness and contempt for critical feedback – defining the positive behavioral strategies implemented by hubristic managers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Originality/value** – To the best of the authors' knowledge, this study is the first to highlight, by means of qualitative methodologies, the positive managerial hubristic-behavioral strategy during turbulent times in the school sector.

**Keywords** Behavioral strategy, Hubris, Positive hubris, Qualitative study, COVID-19, Secondary school, Organizational behavior

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

How do you steer a ship through a storm? For centuries, scholars have been concerned with answering questions like this, particularly focusing in recent decades on the business context. How can a manager lead an organization or a team in a particularly turbulent time? How can management cope with chaos and uncertainty? Some scholars have therefore begun to talk about behavioral strategy. Behavioral strategy refers to the application of insights from psychology and behavioral economics to strategic management research and



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practice (Powell *et al.*, 2011). It is an approach to the study of traditional strategic management problems that aims at drawing on evidence rather than making assumptions about human behavior (Gavetti, 2012; Levinthal, 2011; Lovo and Sibony, 2010).

Behavioral strategy is an approach that considers the psychological attributes of the manager to understand the logic pursued within decision-making and strategic processes (Powell *et al.*, 2011). By enriching the management background with insights from cognitive and social psychology studies, behavioral strategy is an approach to fundamental issues in strategic management (e.g. top management behavior, entry decisions, competitive interaction, firm heterogeneity) that is microfoundational (Felin *et al.*, 2015); namely, it uses a psychology-based understanding of individuals' actions and interactions to explain strategy phenomena.

According to behavioral strategy, the diversity of the manager's personal attributes is an antecedent variable that should be considered when trying to predict organizational performance (Picone *et al.*, 2021a). On this thread, our study follows a reductionist approach in behavioral strategy studies, which considers the psychological attributes of managers/leaders to understand the logics pursued within strategic decision-making processes (Powell *et al.*, 2011). Specifically, drawing on Picone *et al.* (2021a, 2021b), we focus on managerial hubris – that is, a personality trait considered among the most influential in management decision-making (Abatecola and Cristofaro, 2019, 2020; Hayward and Hambrick, 1997; Roll, 1986; Zeitoun *et al.*, 2019); the focus on hubris helps us understand why firms formulate and implement a given strategy that is ambitious and outside the norm compared to what is postulated by strategy studies. We focus on hubris because it represents a widespread psychological trait among managers (Hiller and Hambrick, 2005) and is often considered a necessity for holding top positions (Goel and Thakor, 2008).

Studies on hubris have mainly explored its negative effects on organizational performance (Sadler-Smith and Cojuharenco, 2021); nevertheless, recently, some studies have defined a good side of hubris in contrast to the dark side (Haynes *et al.*, 2015; Picone *et al.*, 2014, 2021a; Zeitoun *et al.*, 2019). For example, hubris generates a persevering approach to formulating and implementing business strategy, as managers remain focused on their goals and tenaciously committed to the actions to be taken despite technological and competitive challenges that may cast doubt on the effectiveness of the strategy (Picone *et al.*, 2021a). Driven by arrogance, the hubristic manager overlooks alternative scenarios, ignoring the decision tree and the consequences of each scenario (Shipman and Mumford, 2011); however, rapid, centralized decision-making is positively correlated with sales growth and profitability, especially in contexts characterized by temporary (Dagnino *et al.*, 2021) or high-speed competitive advantages. Moreover, hubristic managers may view the possibility of formulating and implementing a diversification strategy more favorable than rational managers (Picone, 2021). By overestimating the excess resource base, hubristic managers, given equal managerial discretion, will enter several businesses, even unrelated ones, believing that their skills and charisma will lead to success in each business (Andreou *et al.*, 2019). The hubristic manager is therefore more likely to undertake innovative initiatives (Arena *et al.*, 2018).

Drawing on behavioral strategy theory (Powell *et al.*, 2011) and responding to calls in the literature (Foss, 2020; Picone *et al.*, 2014, 2021a), this study aims at investigating how hubristic managers can enable organizations to thrive, even over small time periods, in chaotic situations and contexts. Indeed, the literature on managerial hubris needs further contributions with reference to behavioral strategy (Picone *et al.*, 2021a) to highlight its impact on the organization (Picone *et al.*, 2014; Sundermeier *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, it is not only important to understand which sociodemographic traits (e.g. hubris) may be predictive of organizational outcomes, but also, in a reverse perspective, which environmental/institutional characteristics may favor the appointment of managers with specific

sociodemographic traits (Abatecola and Cristofaro, 2020). The effectiveness of decision-making and of hubris may be affected by the context in which the manager operates, and the literature needs further contributions on this topic (Cristofaro, 2019; Zeitoun *et al.*, 2019).

This study investigates the possible positive outcome of hubris in a behavioral strategy, in a context of high chaos and uncertainty such as the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, the study focuses on the school sector as learning organizations that have had to change their structural and organizational characteristics and strategy to ensure the provision of training (Simó-Pinatella *et al.*, 2021). It uses a qualitative methodology, as qualitative approaches are needed to fully understand the origin, process and performance evolution of organizations led by hubristic managers (Picone *et al.*, 2021a). In particular, both leaders (i.e. school managers) and followers (i.e. teachers and secretarial employees) were interviewed to try to outline the phenomenon in its entirety so as to ensure direct observation of managers' behaviors in the real work context (Cristofaro and Giardino, 2020). Implications for theory and practice are discussed.

### Theoretical framework

Behavioral strategy takes its cue from the upper echelons theory (UET) framework (Hambrick and Mason, 1984), according to which organizations mirror their top managers. In practice, management makes decisions based on the perception of the strategic environment, and this process stems from top managers' cognition, experience, behaviors and personality (Abatecola and Cristofaro, 2019). According to Hambrick and Mason (1984), there are certain variables that affect the way decisions are made, such as sociodemographic traits, board dynamics and contextual variables. Although the original theory envisioned studying the characteristics of all major players in the decision-making process, the study of manager characteristics has gradually emerged as a parallel line of research to UET (Abatecola and Cristofaro, 2019). Thus, behavioral strategy represents the next step after UET for the study of the antecedents behind behavior and strategy (Abatecola and Cristofaro, 2020).

A definition of behavioral strategy has been proposed by Powell *et al.* (2011, p. 1371):

Behavioral strategy merges cognitive and social psychology with strategic management theory and practice. Behavioral strategy aims to bring realistic assumptions about human cognition, emotions, and social behavior to the strategic management of organizations and, thereby, to enrich strategic theory, empirical research, and real-world practice.

Within the behavioral theory of strategy, some studies have investigated affective states that determine the goodness of management decisions (Cristofaro, 2020a), as well as criteria and processes in decision-making that are not based solely on rationality (Cristofaro, 2019) and the personality traits that affect managers' actions (Abatecola and Cristofaro, 2019). Specifically, the concept of hubris has recently gained attention (Picone *et al.*, 2021a). In the original Greek, hubris literally means "haughtiness," "excess," "pride" or "prevarication." According to mythology, the gods severely punished overconfident and arrogant individuals. In business and management disciplines, the term hubris was first used in the financial sector, after which it was extended to other subareas such as strategic management and leadership (Sadler-Smith and Tourish, 2021).

Managerial hubris is the result of a combination of overconfidence and excessive pride (Judge *et al.*, 2009; Picone *et al.*, 2014). Overconfidence directly affects decision-making processes (Schumacher *et al.*, 2020) and can be categorized into three specific components: overconfidence in one's abilities and likelihood of success; overconfidence in defining one's beliefs; and evaluating one's performance as superior to others (Moore and Healy, 2008). Excessive pride, on the other hand, relates to an unconditionally positive view of oneself in relation to others (Williams and DeSteno, 2008). Hubris is a facet that is based on individual dispositions and external cues (Abatecola and Cristofaro, 2019, 2020; Picone *et al.*, 2014).

In the corporate world, hubris has been defined as comprising extreme self-confidence, an inflated sense of self and disregard for the advice and criticism of others (Claxton *et al.*, 2015). The absence of humility and a sense of being intoxicated with power are two traits that are related to hubris in general (Asad and Sadler-Smith, 2020). Additionally, hubris differs conceptually from other notions like self-esteem, intrinsic self-evaluation and narcissism (Hiller and Hambrick, 2005). Although self-esteem overlaps with hubris in terms of self-admiration, it excludes the critical elements of arrogance and entitlement (Chatterjee and Hambrick, 2007). Likewise, core self-evaluation appears similar to hubris because it encompasses the concept of self-esteem, but Hiller and Hambrick (2005) state that hubris only becomes part of the core self-evaluation when self-evaluation reaches the “hyper” level. Meanwhile, narcissism is a powerful personality feature, whereas hubris is a psychological condition that emerges from a confluence of confidence-inducing inputs and cognitive predispositions (Tang *et al.*, 2018).

There are several sources of hubris among chief executive officers (CEOs) and top management executives. Notably, four sources of executive hubris were identified by Hayward and Hambrick (1997). One of these pertains to the recent history of organizational achievement (Picone *et al.*, 2021b). Arrogance may develop when CEOs take all the merits for company successes, when in fact other reasons may be at play. Moreover, when a CEO is well-known in the media, such popularity produces a romanticized and heroic aura of invincibility that CEOs may begin to believe (Yang and Wu, 2021). The myth of an infallible intuition is often a part of this mystique. Moreover, executives are usually depicted as “in control,” incredibly effective and able to manage from the gut, which can lead to managers being “excessively self-assured” and thus susceptible to hubris (Akstinaite *et al.*, 2021). Also, executives have systemically distorted perceptions of their abilities and talents, owing to inflated ego and self-importance rather than proven achievements (to the point of delusions of grandeur). Finally, a lack of board oversight is often traced to several factors, including the presence of a hubristic CEO as chair, a high percentage of “insiders” on the board and minimal stock ownership by independent board members (Claxton *et al.*, 2015).

The hubristic manager is genuinely interested in improving the organization’s well-being while simultaneously enhancing its status (Zeitoun *et al.*, 2019). This attitude reveals why the hubristic manager has a natural propensity and desire to embark on ambitious, massive and even risky strategic projects, regardless of the risk of failure (Witkower *et al.*, 2021). Some scholars (Akstinaite *et al.*, 2021) have delved into the hubristic communication style of managers who display extreme pleasure in their actions and believe that the company’s success is entirely due to their remarkable abilities to lead the organization and astute strategic acumen. Such self-assurance and belief in one’s uniqueness can lead to almost messianic language and conduct, such as speaking about oneself in the third person (Akstinaite *et al.*, 2021). Moreover, hubristic managers believe they have complete control over all internal and external aspects of their approaches: by centralizing decisions, these leaders tend to preclude people from strategy formulation, as they do not study circumstances that differ from their perspective (Picone *et al.*, 2014). Similarly, according to Tourish (2020), they have several aspects in common: overconfidence and over-persistence, recklessness, self-interested behaviors and isolation from reality, contempt for critical feedback and regulators and abusive behavior. These symptoms and behaviors take their cue from the study by Owen and Davidson (2009) who found in hubristic managers a perception of their own interests as identical to those of the nation or organization; a tendency to speak in the third person or use the royal “we”; a strong belief that they will eventually be vindicated by, for example, history or God; a sense of restlessness,

recklessness and impulsiveness; and a tendency to underestimate the practicality, cost or outcome of their decisions.

This study focuses on the bright side of hubris for behavioral strategy (Picone *et al.*, 2021a) in the case of a particular historical period such as COVID-19. More specifically, this research focuses on how hubris can help influence managerial decisions during crises (Claxton *et al.*, 2015). To support the relevance of this topic, Moore and Schatz (2017) posit that managers who are overconfident about their abilities to find the best answer in some cases may be successful in doing so. It is indeed possible that hubristic managers may succeed in some circumstances in adopting the best solution to follow (Gavetti, 2012), thanks in part to the fact that they underestimate the consequences of their own actions and use more resources than they actually have available (Lin *et al.*, 2022). Hubris can sometimes be seen as a necessary quality of individuals, differentiating them from others (Picone *et al.*, 2021a), so it is possible to imagine that it generates an advantage in some situations. In fact, hubristic managers are never satisfied with what they have (Sundermeier *et al.*, 2020), so it is possible for them to implement ambitious strategies to respond quickly to the surrounding environment (Picone *et al.*, 2014). When managers are hubristic, they can potentially generate exceptional performance due to their openness to uncertainty and inability to accurately perceive risks. In light of this possibility, this study can add to the literature by increasing our understanding of the positive behavioral strategies of hubristic managers in chaotic and uncertain situations.

## Method

### *Study context*

This study was conducted in Italian secondary schools. In Italy, secondary schools are the second level of the education cycle and have a duration of five years. Each course of study includes a final exam to obtain a diploma and gain admission to a university. The concept of behavioral strategy is not new in the school context, although contributions focused exclusively on the topic are scarce. Some authors have delved into the role of teachers (Paisey *et al.*, 2007), while others have focused on school leadership (Chitpin, 2021). Specifically, behavioral strategy in the school sector is geared at the microlevel to motivate students and enhance the educational experience (Rena, 2011) and at the macro level to support teachers and manage the school organization (Furgeson *et al.*, 2012). Through behavior intervention plans (De Nobile *et al.*, 2017), it is indeed possible to generate positive learning environments and increase schools' efficiency.

The study was conducted in early 2021, at the end of the first period of reorganization and consolidation of new working practices for the educational sector due to the coronavirus epidemic (Simó-Pinatella *et al.*, 2021). Since early 2020, Italy has been affected extensively by the COVID-19 outbreak, and it had to activate and enforce a lockdown policy in March and April 2020. The pandemic event that began in 2020 had an immediate detrimental impact on workplaces. To limit the spread of the disease, virtually all countries implemented a lockdown policy that affected every aspect of routine functioning, including people's social lives. Distance learning initiatives were promoted and the use of smart working encouraged at an unprecedented scale, though these efforts were met with some resistance and skepticism and faced some difficulties (Nadotti, 2020). This sudden and substantial reorganization was done to guarantee high-quality education and work performance despite the pandemic situation. Specifically, the goal was to address the quality challenge (Jamaa, 2010) and to foster an improvement in teaching and learning (Pourrajab *et al.*, 2011), as well as to enhance organizational performance, enable a competitive advantage and encourage innovation and continuous improvement (Porter, 1985). Italy was the first European target

of the virus and therefore the most vulnerable, most likely due to a geographical, logistical and climatic situation particularly compatible with the contagion (Murgante *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, Italy had little time to prepare for the consequences of the pandemic, and this situation certainly augmented the organizational and managerial problems that followed. The lockdown imposed in Italy represents a natural experiment; in that, it helps us analyze the issues during the current pandemic.

In this, study, as in others in the literature, the leader–follower dichotomy takes the form of school manager–teacher. Since the 2000s, in Italy the figure of the school manager has received increasingly broad powers, assuming an important role not only in education but in all areas of school management as responsible for the management of financial and instrumental resources and the results of the school service. The school manager in Italy is characterized by a high level of autonomy and centralization of decisions; he/she can design and implement the educational offer of the school, through a managerial and organizational discretion that are of primary importance. In particular, in identifying the indicators for the evaluation of the school manager, account is taken not only of the contribution of the manager to the improvement of school service but also of managerial and organizational skills in relation to the objectives assigned in the three-year assignment, the enhancement of professional merit of the staff of the institution, the appreciation of his/her work within the professional and social community and the unitary direction of the school (Law no. 107/2015). Furthermore, in Italy, the school manager not only coordinates and provides direction but also serves as an expert, a referee and, not least, an example to the organization, with the result that leadership is also closely related to the manager’s personal characteristics, which include trustworthiness and accountability (Maglione, 2020). Moreover, school leaders are characterized by a professional rather than managerial background, so they think more individually and tend to identify more with the values of the self than with the values of the organization (Grace, 2005). Thus, the sample may represent an example of hubristic behavior by managers in turbulent times. All of the sample schools were in southern Italy (i.e. in the Campania region).

#### *Data collection*

To answer our research question, we used a qualitative approach based on different sources to gain a broader view of the phenomenon under investigation. Qualitative research requires the adoption of multiple sources of information to reduce the impact of potential biases that may exist when consulting a single source (Bowen, 2009). In line with this approach, formal documents, as well as schools’ websites and open-source documents, gave the research team an overview of the organizational and work situation of the sample schools. Furthermore, the research team also retrospectively analyzed the changes in the structure of the schools since 2000 (e.g. organization chart, division of offices and areas of competence) to develop an in-depth understanding of the functioning and organizational configuration adopted in recent years.

The primary data for the study consisted of qualitative interviews in nine secondary schools, conducted either in person or remotely. Schools were selected based on a series of questionnaires and statistics on school performance during the pandemic period. Schools that responded best to uncertainty in terms of student and parent satisfaction were contacted. Data saturation (i.e. repetition of the same themes) was used to assess the size of the final sample. In line with Sundermeier *et al.* (2020), both leaders and followers were interviewed to try to understand the phenomenon of managerial hubris from both perspectives. For each institution, the interviews involved the school manager, two volunteer teachers and two secretarial employees. After completing the interview with the

manager, through a snowball sampling technique, he or she was asked to suggest other interview candidates. Therefore, the sample was composed of 45 people (9 school managers, 18 teachers and 18 secretarial employees).

The study's approach was based on the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954) to collect examples of incidents, stories and sense-making related to managerial hubris during a period of particular chaos and uncertainty such as the COVID-19 pandemic. It consists of a series of procedures to collect direct observations of human behavior to formulate new theoretical assumptions. The study's approach depended on a series of semi-structured interviews partly inspired by studies of Owen and Davidson (2009) and Tourish (2020), derived from the American Psychiatric Association's (2000) manual, for identifying hubris. Accordingly, during the interviews, we talked in general to the interviewees to direct the flow of the discussion in the desired direction, i.e. identifying hubristic behaviors of managers, but we did so without mentioning the concept of managerial hubris to avoid influencing the sample. In doing so, the researchers and participants together formed an understanding of the participants' experiences. Thus, interviews were conducted as informal conversations within which it was possible to cover all the topics related to the positive behavioral strategy associated with hubristic school managers. Interviews were conducted by two independent researchers, lasted about 45 min and were recorded and transcribed so the data could be analyzed.

#### *Coding and analyzing*

Generally, we used thematic data analysis technique to make sense of the data obtained during the interviews. As indicated Saunders *et al.* (2019), thematic analysis involves four key steps:

- (1) familiarizing oneself with the data collected;
- (2) coding the data; identifying themes and their relationships;
- (3) modifying the themes; and
- (4) testing propositions.

Familiarizing with the data collected was a critical step in the entire step because it enabled the researchers to internalize the data and summarize the key points that were essential in the analysis of data. The coding of data followed the Gioia method (Gioia *et al.*, 2013), which comprised of three phases. The first phase focused on finding recurring themes in the interviews based on the respondents' answers. The notes from the interviews were uploaded into online software for qualitative data analysis (Dedoose). Next, the data were analyzed independently by two researchers, which allowed for exploratory data analysis (Saldaña, 2021); the two researchers independently coded all the transcribed interviews and subsequently compared personal codes by engaging in a discussion when disagreements emerged. We used Cohen's  $\kappa$  coefficient to estimate the level of agreement between the coders. We followed an iterative approach and continuously iterated between the data and the emerging conceptualizations. By comparing codes and engaging in a discussion when disagreements occurred, the final consensus reached the value of  $\kappa = 0.88$ , indicating excellent agreement among the raters.

In the second phase, we discerned patterns in the data with the aim of identifying concepts and relationships and formulating them in theoretically relevant terms. More specifically, we made our research process as "abductive," by considering in tandem data and existing theory (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007). At this stage, we proceeded with a selective thematic analysis, according to which Owen and Davidson's (2009) and Tourish's

(2020) categories were used as themes and as the basis for grouping insights into validated theoretical constructs according to hubris symptoms and the research question.

After all the relevant first-order codes and the second-order concepts emerged, in the third phase, we assembled them into a data structure (Figure 1).

**Results**

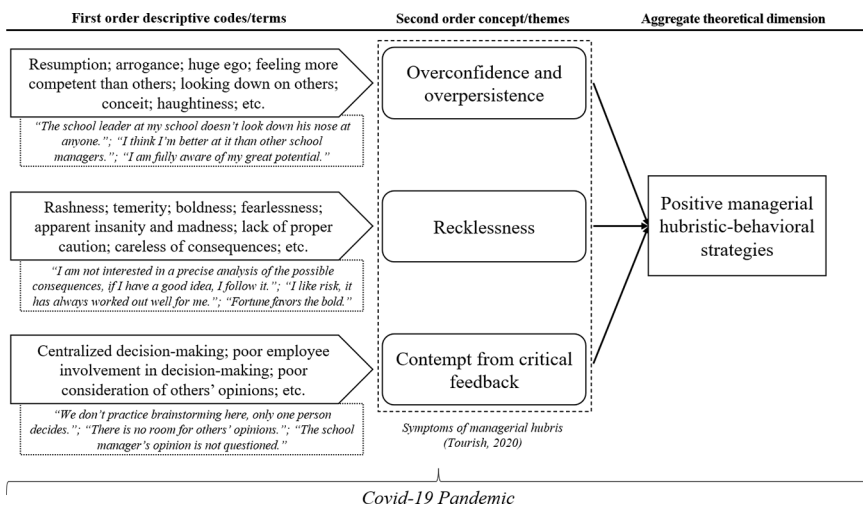
Interestingly, in all of the schools in the sample, selected on the basis of their excellent performance during the pandemic period, certain features emerged that refer to managerial hubris. In particular, based on the thematic analysis of data (Gioia et al., 2013; Saunders et al., 2019), the results refer to some of the categories proposed by Tourish (2020), so they are re-proposed according to the classification suggested by the author. As shown in Figure 2, three major themes were identified – overconfidence and over-persistence, recklessness and contempt for critical feedback – defining the positive behavioral strategies implemented by hubristic managers during a chaotic and uncertain period and their related organizational impact.

*Overconfidence and over-persistence*

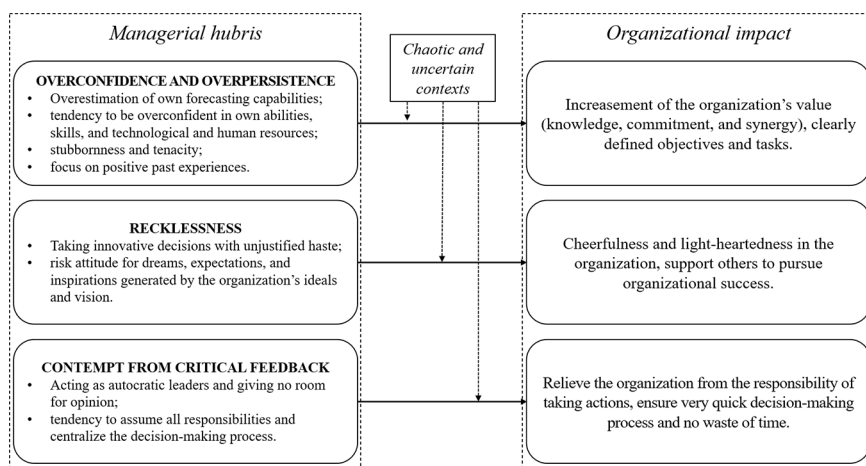
Overconfidence occurs when one overestimates one’s own forecasting capabilities and believes one is in control, despite the reality of factors beyond one’s control. This trait affects corporate finance and investment decisions.

Respondents of the study stated that the tendency to be overconfident in their own abilities and skills caused managers to behave in the best way possible in chaotic and uncertain settings. The following excerpt provides an example:

The school leader at my school doesn’t look down his nose at anyone. If he has decided that a direction must be followed, he will not be satisfied until he has reached it. [...] During the Covid-19 pandemic, he demonstrated stubbornness and over-persistence. He was convinced that it was necessary to adopt a slightly different style of distance learning – a flipped classroom. This is a methodological approach that overturns the traditional learning cycle, consisting of a traditional lesson, individual study at home and classroom tests. Every day, he sent us newspaper articles and videos in support of his thesis. We were honestly a bit skeptical about the outcome of this



**Figure 1.**  
Data structure and representative supporting data



**Figure 2.**  
Managerial hubristic-  
behavioral strategy in  
chaotic and uncertain  
contexts

change – would we have the skills to do it? Would the students? But he was insistent that we would succeed in this turnaround. After implementing this change, I have to admit that the students and teachers really appreciated this revolution (teacher).

Thus, through overconfidence in the technological and human resources available, this school manager has promoted a change that has generated positive results in a context of great uncertainty. In response to the chaos and uncertainty, the school manager then implemented a new winning strategy with dogged perseverance.

Another example can be found in the following excerpt:

I think I'm better at it than other school managers: it may be that I put my heart and soul into what I do, but I don't think I have any rivals in what I do. In February 2020, I was the first to propose distance learning before the State mandated it, and it's a teaching modality that we were already using in the past in the case of weather conditions that prevented people from reaching school. I foresaw that Covid-19 would generate an epochal change, and already at the beginning of March I made a big financial investment to buy tablets and laptops for my teachers to allow them to work at a distance (school manager).

In this case, the illusion of knowledge made the school manager believe they had sufficient information to make the best decisions, leading them to make risky choices with unpredictable outcomes, such as disbursing substantial financial resources without knowing exactly what scenarios the situation would bring.

The interviews show that overconfidence is an important attitude for management because it guides them and keeps them moving forward to achieve goals under conditions of uncertainty, although some potential risks are underestimated. Sometimes a positive past experience gives greater security and "the illusion of having everything under control," as reported by an interviewee, and "this can lead to leaving aside strategy and technique"; however, as reported by the same interviewee, thanks to this behavioral strategy, "the manager was able to face the emergency of the pandemic" (teacher). It is easy to observe that the phenomenon of overconfidence can be very advantageous for an individual who is trying to increase his or her self-esteem and who wants to reach the desired goal. For this reason, "believing in oneself and in one's own abilities turned out to be a very important factor in getting all of us members of the offices to reach a higher level of willpower that

allowed us to achieve results that otherwise would never have been reached with our efforts alone” (secretarial employee).

From the interviews, it emerges managers who are overconfident and over-persistent in situations of uncertainty show excessive confidence in their own abilities and capacities. This allows them to overcome the problem of free-riding by other members of the group and at the same time to increase the value of the organization, because it also encourages other individuals to do their best. Overconfidence thus increases the value of the organization, because managers who show great belief in themselves and confidence in their own abilities are driven to continuously increase their knowledge and improve. This positive effect is also reflected in the increased commitment of other individuals, resulting in an increase in the level of organizational synergy. The value of the company thus increases, because individuals work together to mix knowledge, opinions and information, enabling the behavioral strategy to succeed in the market.

### *Recklessness*

A second recurring aspect in interviews with leaders and followers concerns hubristic manager recklessness in dealing with a turbulent environment. An example is given in the following excerpt:

There is a fine line between genius and insanity. Our school manager, in the midst of the pandemic, decided to have us take a series of online classes on ‘backpack-free schooling’, an alternative teaching model based on the adoption of a lightweight clipboard instead of a backpack, in a space divided into work areas instead of a traditional classroom with desks, using tactile material tools instead of textbooks, and motivational assessments instead of grades. [...] While other schools were living day to day, thinking (and rightly so!) about solving current problems, our school manager was already projected into the post-pandemic period. This recklessness of his, however, meant that we were already ready with innovative programs for the next school year (teacher).

Another example is characterized by the following excerpt:

Our school manager has one characteristic: he is completely reckless! He makes some decisions with unjustified haste; whatever comes to his mind becomes a top priority. However, this characteristic of his has been our salvation during the worst phases of the pandemic. [...] He insisted that we purchase a set of technological equipment to monitor air quality. He created a plan for staggering student admissions. He dreamed up new ways of organizing the school non-stop and with a totally imprudent approach, especially with regard to the resources used for these changes, but he was actually right (secretarial employee).

In the responses of the interviewees, managers who have been successful during chaotic and uncertain situations are considered either insane or geniuses, and the line between these terms is quite blurred, as hubristic managers in both cases behave similarly; that is, they seem to be able to clearly see something that is not there or that others do not see. This is the attitude of a hubristic manager who reports his experience of recklessness:

Fortune favors the bold! We’ve always had positive experiences with risk in the past, so we’ll continue to take risks. And, even if one day something goes wrong, the balance would still be positive [...] We take risks to follow our dreams, so we can never go wrong (school manager).

As the above quote illustrates, hubristic managers – in this case, talking of the self in third person – who build successful businesses often behave recklessly because they are guided by the dreams, expectations and inspirations generated by having espoused and embraced the organization’s ideals over time.

Recklessness emerges from the interviews conducted with all types of respondents as a key element capable of determining management success. This characteristic is able to bring a dose of cheerfulness and light-heartedness into the organization and to justify self-praise by its outspoken nature, which is also revealed by the direct language adopted by managers. Recklessness is revealed to be inherent in hubristic managers, who are able to pursue and motivate others to pursue success for the organization, especially in situations of high chaos and uncertainty.

### *Contempt for critical feedback*

The last theme reported by the interviewees regarding the positive aspects of managerial hubris during turbulent periods can be described as contempt for critical feedback.

Through considerable involvement, the school managers tend to assume all responsibilities and functions and to concentrate decision-making power on themselves. Respondents often stated that they are in situations where they are not allowed to express opinions or actively participate without restrictions; however, this is not always perceived as a problem, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

I once heard about brainstorming, the ability to speak one's mind in decision making without being judged. Here, this freedom does not exist; our school manager tends to centralize decisions and not want to hear any opposing views. [...] However, during Covid-19, this is a saving grace! All of us are afraid to make decisions that affect people's health and the risk of getting sick, so the centralization of decision-making has relieved us of the responsibility for the actions taken (secretarial employee).

Thus, hubristic managers, by acting as autocratic leaders and giving no room for opinion, tend to take responsibility for the choices they make because they believe they are the only ones with the expertise to resolve a critical situation. Hubristic managers believe that subordinates are not capable of making important decisions, so they take any action that allows them to take control and establish a relationship of dependence and obedience to ensure the proper functioning of the organization.

Another example of a lack of inclination toward the opinions of others is given in the following excerpt:

Our school leader is not very inclined to listen to us teachers, even though very often we know the reality of the school more than he does. [...] However, his attitude was successful during the Covid-19 pandemic. I have colleagues in other schools who used to meet every day in very long and useless meetings to try to choose the best strategy to ensure a good teaching performance, while we generally met only when the decisions had already been made (by him alone). I must admit that this was effective and ideal in the situation we were experiencing, because there was no waste of time and decisions were made very quickly (teacher).

Finally, another example of positive hubris is given in the following excerpt:

We generally don't have meetings to deliberate on the most important things, because otherwise there would be a considerable waste of time. [...] Not everyone has the skills to discuss everything. Many times in the past, I organized meetings that ended without solving any problem. [...] This approach was successful in the recent period of chaos: everyone knew they had to perform the tasks entrusted to them without being able to interpret them, with clearly defined objectives, so I focused only on the outputs of the processes I had designed, and there was no room for error (school manager).

The observed hubristic managers tended not to listen to others due to their excessive self-confidence, and this attitude allowed them to place themselves in a position of superiority

over others. They addressed others in a direct way, expecting their orders to be carried out without question. This approach generated positive results in the observed contexts, especially when it came to “working in this way for a short period of time” (teacher) and “resolving a situation that, if everyone had had their say, would have been unsolvable” (secretarial employee).

### Discussion and concluding remarks

In this study, we examined the positive managerial hubristic-behavioral strategy during turbulent times in some particularly high-performing Italian secondary schools. Behavioral strategy needs to be deepened in contexts (Cristofaro, 2019; Zeitoun *et al.*, 2019) and periods, such as the one in question – the COVID-19 pandemic crisis (Foss, 2020), also to understand which circumstances require managers with certain sociodemographic traits (Abatecola and Cristofaro, 2020). Moreover, scholars call for studies that highlight the positive role of managerial hubris for behavioral strategy (Picone *et al.*, 2014, 2021a; Sundermeier *et al.*, 2020). Cognitive and affective factors associated with hubris have been underestimated in the literature (Claxton *et al.*, 2015), but it is these elements that provide insight into how managers make decisions that are not based on rationality (Cristofaro, 2020a, 2020b). By answering the call for studies on business situations in which rationality must give way to affective states (Cristofaro, 2019), this study suggests that hubris may be a critical trait allowing managers to respond to the needs of a chaotic and uncertain context.

How hubristic top executives hold top positions has long been a source of fascination for management scholars. Roll originally introduced the “hubris hypothesis” in the corporate realm in 1986 in an examination of mergers and acquisitions. According to Roll’s analysis, the “overbearing presumption” that acquiring managers’ assessments is correct leads them to overpay for their targets, and hubristic acquiring managers were indeed found to make mistakes when valuing target companies (Sadler-Smith and Tourish, 2021). Similarly, Sadler-Smith (2021) proposes the concept of “hubris hazard,” arguing that hubris involves a failure of practical wisdom and should be treated as an important source of risk to be managed and mitigated through humility. In contrast, this study suggests turning the perspective around and advises the new concept of “hubristic-behavioral strategy,” proposing that managerial hubris can be a winning behavioral strategy in certain situations, enabling organizations them to overcome difficulties and to achieve success. This study showed that, in a turbulent situation, a leader is able to implement hubristic-behavioral strategies to drive change, determine the general direction, set bold goals and motivate people to work. Hubris may grant a charisma to the manager, who is consequently able to motivate others and counteract resistance to change. It also enables the manager to make decisions during crisis periods on the basis of elements that do not lend themselves to scientific elaboration but, rather, require assessments for which visionary skills and a propensity to take risks are needed.

Our work offers several contributions to theory and research. First, we address the call from Sundermeier *et al.* (2020) to provide new insights into the bright side of managerial hubris – which has previously been studied mainly from a negative perspective – and identify some managerial attitudes that represent critical variables in relation to positive hubris in uncertain times.

In line with a number of studies analyzing the symptoms and behaviors of hubristic managers (specifically, Tourish, 2020) as well as followers’ perceptions of the leader (Picone *et al.*, 2021a), we have identified the attributes of overconfidence, over-persistence and recklessness and the attitude of contempt for critical feedback as some key themes when discussing positive hubris. In particular, overconfidence and over-persistence appeared to

allow the hubristic manager to overestimate the available resources and to undertake actions in a fast and efficient way, and this represented an added value for educational institutions in chaotic and uncertain settings. The illusion of knowledge has made the manager believe they had sufficient information to make the best decisions, leading them to make risky choices with advantageous outcomes. In this way, overconfidence contributed to increase the value of the organization, because self-confident managers are driven to continuously increase their knowledge and improve. This positive effect is also reflected in the increased commitment of other individuals, resulting in an increase in the level of organizational synergy. This allows them to overcome the problem of free-riding by other members of the group and at the same time to increase the value of the organization, because it also encourages other individuals to do their best. The value of the company thus increases, because individuals work together to mix knowledge, opinions and information, enabling the behavioral strategy to succeed in the market.

This is in line with the literature's assertion that managers tend to overestimate their own evaluations, capabilities and performance and, in general, tend to reduce their focus on the problems of strategy formulation, sustainability and performance – an approach that can also lead to positive results in some situations (Picone *et al.*, 2014). Similarly, in line with literature (Hiller and Hambrick, 2005), reckless managers appeared both risk-prone and less sensitive to perceiving risk, as they relied solely on their own intuition based on past successes, which led them to develop rapid decision-making processes. The managers, thanks to their hubristic attitude, can grasp hidden aspects – critical for the achievement of success especially in situations of high uncertainty. This characteristic is able to bring a dose of cheerfulness into the organization and to motivate others to pursue success without focusing on the risks. Finally, hubristic managers tended not to pay attention to other points of view and to ignore some sources of information, especially those that conflicted with their own beliefs. Even though this attitude is contrary to organizational best practices that consider openness to other experiences as a key element in problem-solving, contempt for critical feedback allowed hubristic managers to avoid wasting time and to streamline decision-making processes to respond more quickly to the needs of a changing environment. Through considerable involvement, the managers tended to assume all responsibilities and functions and to concentrate decision-making power on themselves, by acting as autocratic leaders to ensure the proper functioning of the organization.

This study also responds to calls for studies exploring the experiences of school organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic (Simó-Pinatella *et al.*, 2021). Indeed, the behavioral strategies implemented during this particular historical period were characterized by an urgency to understand the needs of students and their families, completely overhauling the way educational offer was organized. During the COVID-19 pandemic, most managers and national leaders were compelled to make key strategic decisions that defined the future of their organizations (Saad-Filho, 2021), and certainly the school sector has been one the most affected from a structural and organizational standpoint.

In practical terms, this study highlights the importance of training for managers to teach them to apply behaviors in line with the needs of the organization in a particular historical period or market. Managers, in fact, are not just a member of the work team, but a key figure in management, that is, the guidance and direction of resources toward the aims and objectives of the organization. Management training is a critical lever for all companies that want to successfully meet the challenges of the competitive landscape, and this study suggests that initiatives aimed at increasing managerial hubris should be implemented. In particular, it would be useful to initiate training interventions that can stimulate overconfidence, over-persistence and recklessness, also encouraging the ability and aptitude

to make decisions in certain critical situations. The objective is to ensure that managers are ready to support the ever-new challenges posed by the economic and social context as well as capable of projecting themselves into the future toward innovations in both product and process, responding quickly to any crises and moments of difficulty.

In addition, another practical consequence of this study concerns the new idea of skills required for management. Before COVID-19, the evaluation of managers was mainly based on technical and soft skills – many of which were related to the ability to manage and motivate teams (Villanueva and Sapienza, 2021). However, following the succession of chaotic and uncertain settings, new capabilities have appeared that must be taken into account, such as being able to react to unforeseen events quickly and effectively and to cope with sudden changes in plans without always considering the opinions of all employees. For instance, reacting quickly to sudden changes has been a vital tool to survive the periods of total or partial closure. Another strength of hubristic managers identified by our study is the ability to be flexible and adaptive. Hubristic managers who were not unprepared in March 2020 found themselves one step ahead of the rest in the recovery period.

This paper has some limitations, such as the choice to focus on a single geographical area and a specific sector. These findings need to be explored in a wide range of geographical areas, as well as production or service sectors. Besides, it is imperative to note that the study was conducted at a time the world was experiencing one of the worst global pandemics in the recent history. Notably, the majority of the respondents had never experienced a crisis of this magnitude – in terms of both severity and time period. Therefore, the feedback given by the respondents could be biased based on the situation at hand. Accordingly, this study suggests the need for post-COVID-19 qualitative studies on the issue to rule out the possibility that the positive aspects of hubris materialize in such very rare circumstances. Preliminary results shed light on the positive effect of hubristic management on other individuals, resulting in an increase in the level of organizational value and synergy. In such a direction, it could be interesting to further investigate how hubristic management can impact the collective level within the organization. In addition, although this study responds to a call for more qualitative studies in this area (Picone *et al.*, 2021a), and despite the methodological rigor with which this study was conducted, a limitation exists in the inevitable subjectivity of the data due to respondents' perceptions. Future research could use these results to test similar and other hypotheses in a broader sample through surveys or longitudinal quantitative studies. As said, interestingly, of the five categories identified by Tourish (2020), self-interested behaviors, isolation from reality and abusive behavior did not emerge in this study. This may indicate that only some components of hubris are able to generate a positive outcome for the organization, especially in turbulent periods or periods characterized by excessive uncertainty. Other studies in the literature could investigate what aspects distinguish positive from negative hubris.

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