

# Why great success can bring out the worst parts of our personalities

[Psychology](#), [Success](#)



By any measure, Elon Musk is exceptionally successful. Having cofounded and sold PayPal, he quickly moved on to launching a range of ventures with world-changing aspirations for how we generate energy, transport ourselves and our goods, interface with machines, and explore our solar system. These ventures are unified in their vision — really more of an obsessive quest — for a more sustainable and resilient future for humanity, executed through a mixture of brilliant engineering and out-of-the-box thinking. To be sure, the ultimate success of these endeavors remains an open question, but so far they have defied expectations and inspired people around the world.

There is no questioning the fact that Musk's talent for entrepreneurship, defined as the ability to translate original and useful ideas into practical innovations, is truly outstanding. And yet there is also an evident other side to Musk, which has recently manifested — rather often — in his combative engagement with investors, the media, employees, and social media and in his seeming difficulty with accepting criticism. This pattern of behavior, which stands in stark contrast to the humanistic nature of his vision for positive change, undermines his leadership qualities and has led one New York Times opinion columnist to describe Musk as the “Donald Trump of Silicon Valley.”

Of course, there is a long history of successful entrepreneurs, industrialists, and self-made billionaires who stood out equally for their talents and achievements and their eccentric, difficult, or volatile personalities. Howard Hughes spent most of his later life in complete isolation rather than have to engage with the public and the resulting exposure to the germs he so feared.

John Paul Getty installed a coin-operated pay phone in his villa to avoid subsidizing his guests' phone calls; at the time, he was the richest man in the world. Tim Armstrong, during his tenure as the CEO of AOL, fired an executive on a live conference call after the exec snapped a photo of him for the internal website. Steve Jobs was known for berating employees and suppliers in unprintable language.

The successful-entrepreneur-as-difficult-person stereotype is so entrenched that many people assume these difficult traits are what cause entrepreneurial success. In fact, it's far more likely that exceptionally talented people like Musk, Hughes, Jobs, Getty, and Armstrong succeed despite these traits. For most of us (who aren't as brilliant as they are), letting these difficult traits have free rein would lead to dire consequences for our careers and personal lives.

While these "dark side" behaviors don't cause success, success can definitely exacerbate them. Success often strengthens the undesirable side of people's personalities, perhaps because power lowers their motivation to positively manage their reputation. The more power and influence you have, the less interested you will be in pleasing other people and in keeping your dark side in check.

Silicon Valley, with its myth of the lone innovator who disrupts the status quo, is particularly susceptible to these dynamics. To be sure, an entrepreneur's air of supreme confidence can inspire and energize followers, and research indicates that a little bit of egomania is not just common

among high-performing leaders but also beneficial. But there are two problems with this: First, these benefits disappear during difficult and complex times. Second, a large number of leaders display much more than a small amount of narcissism once they meet with great success. What is initially a strength — thinking differently and being ready to defy social convention — can become a weakness once all checks on one's behavior are removed. Soon, such behavior becomes self-defeating. In particular, four psychological factors pose a risk to derailing entrepreneurs once they finally achieve the long-awaited success:

**Overconfidence.** Exceptional success can lead to deluded self-perception. No matter how much people achieve, there can be a point where their self-views surpass their achievements, making them unaware of their limitations and unjustifiably pleased with themselves. This leads to overconfidence in one's abilities, or what the ancient Greeks referred to as hubris: pride that offended the gods, and invited a godly punishment in the form of a humbling.

### **Narcissism**

Success creates a flattering image of oneself, which can often be magnified in the media — leading to minor or, in the case of people like Jobs and Musk, major celebrity status. This can frequently lead to enhanced narcissism, as successful individuals try to protect their flattering image in the face of inevitable tailwinds and drawbacks. When questioned or challenged, narcissists typically react aggressively and double down by introducing even stronger claims. It should also be noted that narcissism often coexists with

charisma and charm, which led Sigmund Freud to suggest that we are somehow wired to admire people who admire themselves: We often display overt love and admiration for our leaders and role models as a substitute for expressing self-love. However, recent research indicates that the more contact we have with narcissistic leaders — the more we actually get to know them — the less positively we evaluate them.

### **Isolation**

It is hard to speak truth to power, especially when faced with impressive and charismatic individuals whose approval leads to both tangible and intangible benefits for others. Success creates a scarcity of negative feedback and news, and increased flattery and servility. The more status and power you have, the more you will intimidate others and the more you will surround yourself with people who flatter you — turning your inflated self-views into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Executives who react badly to negative news and who consider themselves superior will have little incentive to establish a strong and independent team that can provide much-needed critical and brutally honest feedback. All of this is exacerbated by increased loneliness and isolation, which can eclipse an individual's ability to get an accurate picture of what's going on.

### **Reduced self-control**

One of the attractions of success is increased insulation from the consequences of failure. Such freedom and independence allow one, at best, to become more relaxed and authentic. However, such behaviors can shade into eccentricity and antisocial rants when left unchecked. A reduced need

for self-control in turn leads to lower productivity and lower quality of interpersonal relationships. Lashing out against critics in situations where one is better off remaining silent can often be best understood as a failure of self-control.

Many of us would like to be wildly successful, but at some point being wildly successful means you will have to face up to these four psychological challenges. The good news is that, compared with the kinds of business, engineering, or geopolitical problems that successful leaders have to face, managing your “ Mr. Hyde” side is a relatively straightforward problem. But it does require a minimum of self-awareness, emotional reckoning, and work that likely goes against the grain. There are three specific things leaders in this situation can focus on:

### **Fostering humility**

Difficult things are difficult — and there should be no shame in admitting it. For example, venture investing is a difficult activity. That’s why Bessemer Venture Partners, the oldest venture capital firm in the U. S., keeps an anti-portfolio, a list of investments it could and should have made but did not. Indeed, USC professor Philip Tetlock’s research indicates that better prediction comes from adequate humility and tracking one’s performance and errors.

### **Welcoming checks and balances**

Perhaps the most counterintuitive piece of our advice — welcoming some limitations on our own power, and assuming that those limitations are imposed through the good judgment of competent people — creates the

right conditions for one to be challenged. Designing for conflict and limiting our own power is a tool that recreates the capacity for self-control and the stability it brings.

### **Being truly coachable**

Many individuals claim they actively solicit negative feedback. But in reality, their resistance to such feedback is subtle but noticeable, fueled as much by personal emotions as by the very real need to project confidence as a leader. Therefore, the first step toward being coachable is to establish private space and trust with a set of individuals whose feedback one respects. These individuals should have both the knowledge and the day-to-day experience on the matters where you need feedback. Having a trusted executive team is the best way to achieve this.

### **Exceptional success comes at a cost**

What at first seems like an indulgence and reward can become its own trap, isolating people in an increasingly small universe of their own making. No great thing can be achieved from such a small launching pad.

Perhaps the simplest solution is to remember that we didn't get where we are alone. When we glorify the archetype of an exceptional individual who builds reality out of a dream, it can create the conditions for making career success a dangerous catalyst of disturbing behaviors. Instead, we should remember the C. S. Lewis saying: "Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it's thinking of yourself less".