How to Be a "Humbitious" Leader

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Empirical evidence connects humility and ambition with high performance.

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Humility is making a comeback as one of the most sought-after professional virtues organizations look for in candidates. *The Wall Street Journal* reported that humility is becoming the "flavor du jour" among executives in large companies, as boards are increasingly looking for humble leaders.

When Krispy Kreme Doughnuts was looking for a CEO a few years ago, the main traits it identified as important for the leadership role were that of humility and servant leadership. Similarly, humility is what Google has been looking for in its new hires. "Without humility, you are unable to learn," Lazlo Bock, senior vice president, people operations, Google, told *Harvard Business Review*. A recent article in the *Journal of Business Ethics* agreed that, "the humble leader is precisely the person who is best qualified to transform his firm into a profitable, successful and respected organization."

What does humble leadership actually mean? The book *Executive Ethics: Ethical Dilemmas and Challenges for the C-Suite* identifies the five foundations of humility related to leaders as authenticity, teachability, transparency, humaneness and interdependency.

Humble, authentic leaders confess to their followers that they make mistakes and ask for their patience in correcting them. They demonstrate their teachability by acknowledging openly when they are wrong and asking for forgiveness when mishaps happen. They are transparent and admit when they don't know something, and they constantly ask their team members for their ideas. They show their humaneness by accepting that they can't do everything and that they need all their followers' talents to achieve their goals. And finally, they exhibit interdependency by stressing that they are there for a larger purpose and not for themselves. Humility is not, as some people believe, weakness, low self-esteem, lack of assertiveness or absence of ambition. On the contrary, humble leaders are ambitious, strong, self-confident and fiercely determined. They are also highly effective.

The Case for Humility

The introduction of humility into leadership studies can be credited to Jim Collins and his management book *Good to Great* (Harper Collins, 2001). Collins and his team identified companies that made the transition from good to great financial performance over time and concluded that they were all headed by "level 5 leaders" who are humble and fiercely ambitious. Collins and his team were surprised to discover the type of leadership required for turning a good company into a great one. He notes: "Compared to high-profile leaders with big personalities, who make headlines and become celebrities, the good-to-great leaders seem to have come from Mars."

These findings provided empirical evidence to what many had suspected for a long time: humility and ambition, or "humbition," are related to high performance. However, what wasn't clear from Collins' analyses is how humility and positive outcomes are actually connected, and recent research is starting to clarify that connection.

One way leader humility can affect performance is through employee engagement and satisfaction. A study of a large health services organization asked employees to rate the humility of their immediate supervisors. The employees were also asked to assess their own job engagement and satisfaction. The results were published in 2013 in the journal *Organization Science*. Participants who viewed their leaders as more humble were more likely to report being happy at work and less likely to voluntarily leave the organization.

"In contrast to 'rousing' employees through charismatic, energetic and idealistic leadership approaches [...], our study suggests a 'quieter' leadership approach, with listening, being transparent about limitations, and

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appreciating follower strengths and contributions as effective ways to engage employees," wrote the authors of the study. In the current labor market, where organizations are struggling to attract and retain talent, humility can be a valuable competitive advantage.

Another way leader humility works is by creating a culture of shared unpretentiousness that enables the team to grow and reach its full potential. For example, research published in 2016 in the *Academy of Management Journal* found teams that perceived their leaders as willing to learn, able to admit to not knowing something and likely to compliment others on their strengths had higher collective humility, team growth and performance. These findings provide empirical evidence to support the old adage, "leaders should lead by example." Similarly, humble leaders in private companies were found to empower their top and middle managers to collaborate, share information, make joint decisions and develop a shared vision in an *Administrative Science Quarterly* study, published in 2014.

The results from a study of healthcare organizations published in my book *Intangibles: The Unexpected Traits of High-Performing Healthcare Leaders* suggest that leaders who are approachable not only create an environment where employees feel comfortable, but also foster improved outcomes in the organization. My team received survey responses from 577 employees, supervisors, directors and executives working in nine different hospital and health systems. When asked about the leadership traits that have had a negative influence on their career, 52 percent of the respondents chose arrogance as the top factor, making it the most common negative leadership trait chosen. Many respondents indicated that nothing has been more damaging to their career than having an arrogant boss. Similarly, when asked to describe the one leader that has been the least successful in terms of improving outcomes in the organization and getting things done, 44 percent of respondents described this leader as "self-focused" and 42 percent described the leader as "arrogant."

According to these results, not only do self-focused and arrogant leaders

frustrate their followers and disengage them, they also may drive their organizations into poor performance. Here are some day-to-day techniques and behaviors healthcare leaders can adopt to increase their humility:

How to speak: Use "we" instead of "I"; talk about team accomplishments; greet team members and genuinely listen, understand and reply to them; and use respectful language.

How to be approachable: Have a true open door policy but protect your time when necessary; talk to employees at all levels; turn off electronic devices while listening; avoid cell phone use in the hallways so you are able to greet others as you pass by; and—much like clinicians—do rounds in your units regularly and purposefully.

How to give credit to others: Give credit frequently but only when it is due; acknowledge employees doing something good; say, "You went above and beyond," to employees who exceed expectations; and provide prompt, accurate and sincere feedback to those looking to improve.

How to handle mistakes and failures: Be calm and controlled; identify root causes, not scapegoats; have tough conversations with low-performers; admit mistakes, accept responsibility and move on.

How to respond to success: Brag about and celebrate team and organizational accomplishments; share credit; don't show off with status symbols; build on successes for future improvements.

Effective leaders are admired for their humility and are respected for their ambition. They are *humbitious*. There is an abundance of empirical evidence that strongly suggests that these types of leaders achieve significantly more success in the long run for themselves, their teams and their organizations. ▲

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