

Humility



When the UF Training and Organizational Development team members were first conducting interviews and focus groups to identify the competencies (skills, qualities, abilities) needed for great leadership at UF, humility was not initially on the shortlist of UF leadership competencies! That changed, however, as we sifted through our notes from those interviews and focus groups. Consistently, leaders described behaviors related to humility (shares credit, puts team success before personal success, admits mistakes). Humility as a leadership competency at UF surprised us...though it really shouldn't have. Our experience was similar to the research experience described by Jim Collins in his classic book *Good to Great*. Collins wanted to write about organizations that made a leap from good to great; he did *not* want to write a book about leaders. As Collins notes, though, his research team kept coming to him and telling him that there was something different about the leaders of the organizations that jumped from "good to great." Collins relented and let them dig into it more. What did they find? His research team discovered a "paradoxical" combination of fierce resolve and personal humility. Contrary perhaps to popular opinion, humility doesn't undercut strong leadership, it fosters it. Some might even argue that personal humility is a key ingredient for great leadership.

Why it matters:

In our discussions with leaders, the following are the most cited reasons for why humility matters in leadership:

- *A leader with personal humility fosters trust, which is at the heart of successful leadership. When we know that a leader is motivated by the success of the team or the work more than his or her own success, we are more likely to trust that leader.*
- *A leader who lacks humility tends to take things personally and become defensive. Instead of rising above unhelpful personality dynamics and managing them effectively, he or she is more likely to get drawn into the unhelpful dynamic.*
- *Leaders who lack humility begin to shut down communication. People who lack humility don't listen well. When a leader doesn't really listen, the people on the team stop telling her or him what they think.*

What is it?

So, what does humility in leadership look like? The very association of humility with leadership can be challenging for some people—many of us think of leaders as strong, decisive, ambitious, and assertive. Wouldn't a humble leader lack those qualities? Humble leaders can be all these things. Strength and humility aren't opposed. In fact, one might argue that Collins only got it partially right: that fierce resolve and humility go together, but they aren't "paradoxical" or even distinct qualities. Instead, it's probably more accurate to say that fierce resolve lies at the heart of genuine humility in leadership.

We can understand this dynamic at the heart of humility better if we start with what humility is *not*. When a leader lacks humility, they are self-centered and often closed off to the ideas and perspectives of others. Self-centered and closed off to others—that's not humble. So, if humility in leadership is *not* self-centered, what lies at the "center" for a humble leader? From our experience, what lies at the center for the humble leader is the work itself—in particular, the success of the team and the purpose for the work (why our work matters and makes a difference) as well as the principles (or values) on which that work stands. In fact, these elements are the fuel of fierce resolve in humble leaders. Because humble leaders don't put themselves at the center, there's space for the work itself and the principles on which it stands. Two quotes illustrate this dynamic nicely:

- "In the end, it is my responsibility to ensure that the right decisions happen—even if I don't have sole power to make those decisions, and even if those decisions could not win a popular vote. The only way I can achieve that is if people know that I'm motivated first and always for the greatness of our work, not myself." quoted in *Good to Great for the Social Sector*
- "Being humble does not mean being weak, reticent, or self-effacing. It means recognizing principle and putting it ahead of self. It means standing firmly for principle, even in the face of opposition. Humble people can negotiate intensely...They can express themselves firmly and clearly in intense situations in close personal relationships. But they do not get caught up in arrogance, bravado, manipulation, or win-lose power plays." Steven M.R. Covey, *Speed of Trust*

Within the heart of humility itself is a dynamic interplay between, on the one hand, fierce resolve fueled by the success of the team, the purpose and "greatness of the work," the principles upon which the work stands and, on the other hand, a genuine openness to others. The humble leader is genuinely open to the ideas, perspectives, and value of others. Again, a quote illustrates this aspect of openness nicely:

"What a glorious revelation humility is of the human spirit...True humility is one of the most life-enhancing of all virtues. It does not mean undervaluing or

underestimating yourself. It means valuing other people. It signals an openness to life's grandeur and the willingness to be surprised, uplifted, by goodness wherever one finds it." Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

Genuine openness to—and valuing of—others is the vital accompaniment to fierce resolve. These are the complementary characteristics at the heart of leadership humility.

Humility in Action

So, what does humility look like in action for a leader? Here are some brief suggestions to consider for cultivating your own non-self-centered fierce resolve and genuine openness to others.

To cultivate fierce resolve:

- Revisit your team's purpose (mission) frequently and assess your work considering that purpose. Is your/our work and behavior in line with our purpose?
- Similarly, what are your values/principles (or your team's values)? Are my actions reflective of who I am at my best (my values as a leader) or who we are as an organization at our best (that is, our values)?
- When a situation is challenging you, ask yourself, "What result do I want?" This question can help clarify the end in mind as well as shift the focus from yourself (especially helpful if you're feeling defensive). This simple question is helpful because often the result you want is bigger (and more interesting) than defending your ego.

Note: Please also review our job aid on "Resolve: What It Takes to Be a Determined Leader" for additional suggestions on cultivating resolve in leadership.

To cultivate openness:

- As Steven Covey describes in the *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, "Seek first to understand, then to be understood." When others disagree or have a different perspective, try to cultivate the habit of truly understanding their perspective (whether you agree with it or not) before you advocate for your own.
- Ask questions. Along with the above point, take an inquiring approach to situations where you might disagree with others or may be feeling defensive.
- Ask yourself, what result does the other person (or group) want and in what ways can I help them? This is a great question to help you see from the other's perspective.

Humility: fierce resolve fueled by the greatness of the work (its purpose and principles) and genuine openness to others. Humility in leadership isn't a weakness to be overcome, but rather a strength to cultivate.

References:

Barker, Carolyn and Coy, Robyn. (eds.) 2003. *The 7 Heavenly Virtues of Leadership*. McGraw-Hill, London.

Collins, James C. 2005. *Good to Great and the Social Sectors: Why Business Thinking is Not the Answer*. Boulder, CO: J. Collins.

Collins, James C. 2001. *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap--and Others Don't*. New York, NY: HarperBusiness.

Covey, Stephen M. R. and Merrill Rebecca R. 2006. *The Speed of Trust: The One Thing That Changes Everything*. New York, NY: Free Press.

Covey, Stephen R. 1990. *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. New York, NY: Fireside.