

Humility in Action



Is “humble leader” an oxymoron?

Leaders have inspired us through trying times by managing uncertainty, exhibiting strength of character and keen judgment. Those who lead are self-confident, courageous, bold, assertive . . . humble. Yes, you read correctly: humble.

If humility is not one of the first qualities that come to mind when you’re considering the attributes of an admired leader, you’re not alone. Most of us don’t start visualizing the image of a successful leader with humility as a principal characteristic. Yet, leaders who embrace and exhibit humility are not only recognized for that trait but are likely to excel at many of the other qualities of effective leadership precisely because of their underlying humility. By knowing themselves and connecting with others in ways that strengthen relationships, humble leaders engage and inspire.

The University of Florida’s Leadership Competency Model encompasses many skills and abilities that are considered essential to leadership excellence at our institution. Often, several of these competencies overlap so that improved proficiency in one enhances the understanding and mastery of others and humility is one of those. Humility is key to the foundational leadership model quadrant of building trust and potentiates the effective practice of many (perhaps most) other competencies.

Why it matters:

Ego is good. It is an important part of leadership. It helps bring confidence, is assertive in getting results, helps marketing efforts, and drives change. Excess ego is bad. Arrogance, omniscience, and constant verbal reminders of one’s omniscience usually do not inspire followers or develop trust.

How can humility make me a better leader?

Let's consider how humility can ground and improve many important leadership skills and abilities.

Emotional Intelligence

Knowing yourself, your strengths and your weaknesses, your triggers and your motivators can only truly happen if you are humble. This humility, coupled with courage, will help you introspect and assess your ego, self-confidence and self-esteem. Yes, humble people can have all three! In fact, because true humility takes courage, the more you keep your ego in check and master your sense of self, the more you can grow in your self-confidence--and continue to courageously practice humility.

Courageous self-assessment is the first step to developing emotional intelligence. Seeking and accepting feedback from others; listening to and observing their responses to your actions; and adjusting accordingly, will further strengthen your self-understanding as well as your relationships. Humbly self-reflecting and bravely seeking (and accepting) feedback can be difficult--you might not always like what you see in the mirror. However, only by opening your eyes and looking can you get an accurate reflection to then decide what, if anything, you want to change.

Decision-making

"Hubris is exaggerated pride or self-confidence that often results in a comeuppance." (Chip and Dan Heath). Duke University researchers recently conducted an experiment: at the start, some people accepted that they were not always right and would change their views if they were given new evidence. These individuals were considered "intellectually humble." Those who stated that they were rarely wrong and, therefore, seldom had a need to change their minds, were classified as "intellectually arrogant." During the experiment, all subjects completed three tasks: 1) reading a list of 40 statements on controversial topics; 2) taking a survey on how familiar they were with a list of topics unrelated to the statements (a third of the topics were fictitious) and 3) determining, from a longer list now containing 60 statements, which were on the first list, and which were new. They then had to report their confidence in each decision.

The intellectually humble took longer to read the first controversial statements; this was especially true when the information challenged their personal beliefs. At the end of the experiment, they were more successful at identifying new statements and recognized warning signals when they were wrong.

The intellectually arrogant, on the other hand, glanced over the reading. They did not identify new statements as accurately and showed confidence in their answers even when these were incorrect. Most surprisingly, they were more vulnerable to the fictitious news items. Their mistake could be summarized by Mark Twain's quote: "It ain't what you don't know that gets you into trouble. It's what you know for sure that just ain't so."

Decision-making is at the core of leadership. Effective leaders must have the humility to recognize self-limitations and vulnerabilities and the foresight to create conditions for constantly challenging their knowledge and assumptions and recognizing when those are incomplete or incorrect.

Navigating Change

Without humility, adaptability is very difficult. Recognizing that a previous statement or decision needs to be redressed is difficult; admitting that we may have not anticipated or considered an element that is interfering with a proposed plan will inevitably challenge our self-image. As Kathryn Schultz, a self-proclaimed "wrongologist" notes: "As a culture, we haven't... mastered the basic skill of saying 'I was wrong.' This is a startling deficiency, given the simplicity of the phrase, the ubiquity of error, and the tremendous public service that acknowledging it could provide." Grabbing on to a plan may seem like the safe alternative but humbly reevaluating the need for change may be the necessary and wiser alternative.

Leadership Development

It may sound incongruous, but it is when our egos are in check that we are better able to reach newer heights.

Researchers Owens and Hekman note: "Our findings suggest that humility appears to embolden individuals to aspire to their highest potential and enables them to make the incremental improvements necessary to progress toward that potential." Growth and development are only possible in humility.

Additionally, leaders must model humility to foster growth in those they lead. Those who seek to confirm their views or refuse to apologize or weigh differences of opinion model ego-protection and selfishness. When leaders truly value their own development, they humbly admit and learn from their mistakes, inspiring their followers to use setbacks not as failures but as opportunities for learning.

Trust

If none of the previous reasons have compelled you to recognize the value of humble leadership, consider how humility is fundamental to establishing the core of any relationship: trust. A humble leader knows that his/her success is not totally independent of that of his/her followers. Followers who know their contributions and opinions matter are engaged and committed; because their mistakes are lessons, they are willing to take risks; because they are heard, they speak. Rank and title have seldom moved anyone to followership; it is the trust and connection that individuals feel with someone that has made that person their leader.

How do humble leaders behave?

Now that we've thought about some of the competencies and skills that can be enhanced by humility, let's look at behaviors that will strengthen your humble muscle:

1. Communicate to understand

- Start by asking questions to understand someone else's outlook, opinions, motivations and goal; resist the initial urge to assume intent or advocate for your point of view.
- Check-in with yourself when you feel the urge to show that you are right.
- Accept challenges to your perspective not as an affront but an opportunity to reframe.

2. Acknowledge ambiguity in situations

- Not every situation will have clearly defined parameters or predictable outcomes.
- Be familiar with how you react to and address risk and change.

3. Empower others to lead you

- Remain willing to learn from others, including your peers and subordinates.

4. Seek feedback

- Ask for feedback and put down your defenses as you receive it. Failing to immediately disprove something that might not be accurate does not mean that you agree with it. Be willing to hear what others have to say about your leadership; thank them for their observation and reflect on it to decide what, if anything, you want to change.
- When evaluating the merits of a decision, disconfirming information can be a challenge to accept but may make the difference between success and failure.

Seek diverse ideas and don't reject them when they create discomfort by challenging your own.

5. Practice empathy

- There is no faster road to humility than the practice of empathy; trying to understand how things look from another person's perspective will allow you to reexamine your assumptions and provide you with information that you may not have considered.
- Connecting with others shows that we are authentic in recognizing our own propensity for failure and our shared humanity.

This job aid would not be complete without mention of Jim Collins' Level 5 leaders: those who, in addition to exhibiting the first four levels of individual capability, team skills, managerial competence and leadership as traditionally conceived, also have an extra dimension—a paradoxical blend of personal humility ("I never stopped trying to become qualified for the job") and professional will ("sell the mills"). In Collins' words: "They are somewhat self-effacing individuals who deflect adulation, yet who have an almost stoic resolve to do absolutely whatever it takes to make the company great, channeling their ego needs away from themselves and into the larger goal of building a great company. It's not that Level 5 leaders have no ego or self-interest. Indeed, they are incredibly ambitious—but *their ambition is first and foremost for the institution and its greatness, not for themselves.*"

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