

Humility – Why it is so Critical

By Robert T. Whipple MBA CPLP

Humility is a key characteristic for everyone to embrace. True humility is rarely seen in the ranks of leaders. Ego, rather than humility, seems to be the more common trait in management circles. Let's examine why this is and suggest some ideas to modify the pattern.

Anyone who has reached a leadership position has a tale to tell. He or she got there through a series of steps and events, some of them deserved and some of them just being in the right place at the right time or knowing the right people. We can believe in synchronicity or nepotism, but still it usually takes a lot of energy and talent to get ahead. People in the organization may look at a newly appointed leader and remark how he “lucked into it,” but, as Earl Nightingale said in *Lead The Field*, “Luck is what happens when preparedness meets opportunity.”¹ There should be some level of personal satisfaction for a leader when he or she emerges from the pack and is elevated. It is a kind of milestone that should be celebrated.

Upon reaching a higher level, the leader quickly becomes aware of an increase in power and influence. I once got a big promotion, and a Dilbert-like IT employee in the new organization started calling me “thou” and “thee” until I put an end to it. It is very easy to let the trappings or perks of a higher level inflate one's ego. There is nothing wrong with appreciating one's self worth if it is kept in proper perspective and the person also appreciates and publicly acknowledges the worth of others.

Unfortunately, many leaders do lose perspective and start acting like jerks. Scott Adams, inventor of the Dilbert Cartoon Series would have needed to make a living in some other field if it were not for hubris on the part of leaders. The role of humility in creating and maintaining trust in organizations was well documented by Jim Collins in *Good to Great*.² Collins identified passion and humility as two common traits of the most effective leaders – he called them “level 5 leaders.”

It is easy to see the impact of a conceited leader on the organization. If the leader is so brilliant, then nobody else needs to look out for the rocks under the surface. People lose heart and will to help the cause. This forces the leader to be more all knowing and perfect because real support is not there.

Warren Bennis put it this way, “One motive for turning a deaf ear to what others have to say seems to be sheer hubris: leaders often believe they are wiser than all those around them. The literature on executive narcissism tells us that the self-confidence top executives need can easily blur into a blind spot, an

unwillingness to turn to others for advice.”³ Leaders who are convinced they are so macho and smart have a difficult time hearing what people are really saying. I love James O’Toole’s observation, “...it is often the presence of excessive amounts of testosterone that leads to a loss of hearing.”

It would be easy to say “don’t be too full of yourself” and show the benefits of humility. Unfortunately for the narcissist leader, changing the thought patterns and behaviors is extremely difficult. The problem is the blind spots that Bennis refers to. Goleman also noticed the same tendency when he identified that leaders with low Emotional Intelligence have the most significant blind spots.⁴ The issue of leader hubris is perhaps the most common schism that exists between the senior levels and the workers. If it is so important, what can we do about it? Is there a kind of anti-hubris powder we can sneak into the orange juice of over inflated executives? Oh, if it were only that easy.

What we are talking about here is reeducating the boss with influence from below. We want to let him know that his own attitude is getting in the way of trust. Reeducating the boss is always tricky. It reminds me of the adage, “Never wrestle a pig...you get all muddy and the pig loves it.”⁵ What do the sailors do if they are facing a Captain Bligh every day? Mutiny is one option, but it can get pretty bloody.⁶

The road to enlightenment is through education. One suggestion is to form a kind of support network with the employees and leaders on the topic of leadership. Book clubs where employees along with their leaders take a lunch hour once a week to study the topic can begin a constructive dialog. You can’t just march into the boss’s office and say, “You are a total narcissist, knock it off and get down from your pedestal.” You need to use a water drop treatment with lots of Socratic Questions. Shaping the thought patterns of a superior in the organization is a slow process, like changing the face of the planet in Arizona. Drop by drop and particle by particle, the sand and soil have been moved to reveal the Grand Canyon. Changing a leader’s approach might not take eons, but the slow shaping process is the same, only in human years.

Some leaders will remain clueless regardless. I know one leader who will go to her grave totally blind when it comes to her attitude about her own capability and superiority. If she was reading this passage, she would be nodding her head affirmative and be 100% convinced that I was referring to somebody else, not her. Perhaps the only hope for a leader like this is some form of radical shock treatment in the form of a series of pink slips.

If you are a leader, try this little test. If you are inclined to think you don’t have any hubris and are a humble servant leader all the time, chances are you have some serious blind spots. Go and get it checked out! If your mental picture is one of an imperfect person trying to learn more about how to lead, then you are probably okay.

*The preceding information was adapted from the book **Leading with Trust is like Sailing Downwind**, by Robert Whipple. It is available on www.leadergrow.com.*

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