

What is the Role of Humility in Leadership?

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Becoming a leader is not an easy mountain to climb. But once you get there, one of the first things you realize is how lonely it can be at the top. Whether your span of responsibility is the whole mountain or managing one of the base camps with a smaller range of influence, your dilemma of information flow remains. As you gain altitude, you can't help but notice that life sustaining air becomes thinner; therefore, you need to explore ways to keep vital oxygen flowing to reach your destination. Perspective, like airflow is vital to the decision making and movement centers; in order to optimize your leadership effectiveness, you need to ensure you are doing what you can to both enable and sustain this essential process.

I have been a student of leadership for over 25 years and I can tell you there is no singular "right" way of doing things. Effectiveness is a variable outcome and situationally dependent. Context matters to the style one adopts, but outside of military models dependent upon rigid command and control structures, what I will discuss here has extensive applications for you to consider if you want to improve your effectiveness as a leader.

But wait! You might be thinking, didn't he say being a leader can be lonely? This may at first seem counterintuitive to an observer. After all, you're surrounded by people who bring ideas, energy and an array of motives to the table each day, but the responsibility for decisions - however determined - remains with you. In a fully mature organization, the higher you get, the less routine, more complicated and higher stakes the decisions become (otherwise, someone else would likely have solved them earlier in the chain). As a result, the ability to separate signal from noise becomes a core capability when navigating information and perspectives supplied by others; yet, attention is a frustratingly finite resource, objective sparing partners become scarcer and echo chambers are seductively easy to establish and take great effort to make porous again. Navigation of these and other dynamics requires a healthy supply of confidence and cognitive fortitude. You might therefore conclude that leadership is not for the faint of heart, but is it only the domain of the intrepid? Must leaders be paragons of certainty? Or can an effective leader be both confident *and* humble?

Let's talk about the role of humility in leadership.

Humility can stir a range of images; however, it need not be reduced to meekness when thinking about organizational life. Whether at the boardroom, executive or family table, leaders need to accept that they don't have all the answers and their curiosity can be a durable ballast in good waters and bad. However, for curiosity to enhance leadership capacity, one must be able to balance their sense of direction, while remaining open to adapting it based upon changes to their understanding. Regardless of whether you are leading from the front, side or back of the

room, if you can remain open to new information and develop your inquisitive skills to explore a full range of views to support your decision making, the potential impact of your collaboration increases, the relationship with your teams deepens and the prospect of your organization thriving becomes more tangible. Put simply, in today's world an effective leader must be an effective learner.

So, at first, the core question may seem like a paradox. Can an effective leader be both confident and humble? I will argue yes and will share a couple stories that will illustrate what I mean.

At this point, you may be wondering where this topic came from and why I am so passionate about it. A few unique individuals I encountered in my mid-twenties got me thinking about this idea and one of them was the late W. Galen Weston. Reading the *Globe's* memorial (that later published a version of this recollection) this past spring and seeing a photo of him pushing a shopping cart sparked a memory from what I believe was the very same day I met him. I had recently graduated from Western -our shared alma mater- and was working in a new bank in the lower level of the grocery store he was visiting. He walked into the branch and effortlessly struck up conversation with me, a very young man at the time who was navigating his first job. He quickly put me at ease and engaged me in a conversation ranging from the new bank, which was a joint venture with his grocery store chain, to what I thought of the latest *Insider's Report* and then to the performance of his son. You see, Galen Weston Jr. had recently spent a day in the branch shadowing us and our interactions with customers. I was quite impressed by Galen Jr. and the way he never made the activity seem unworthy of his time and I told his father so. He then pressed me a little on this point and I remember the smiles we shared in admiration of his son's effort to learn elements of the business from the shop floor, as it were. That I stood there, the most junior of bank employees, easily sharing ideas with Galen Sr. left a lasting impression on me that, in reflection, probably provided the foundation of courage I need to do my work today. I've since worked with many well-known and influential leaders, but that first interaction with Galen Sr. gave me the confidence that I could speak to and share ideas with anyone. What felt like fifteen minutes was probably only five, and with the same ease in which he began our conversation, he politely marked his leave with a farewell handshake and a charming wink.

I was inspired by that moment, that a strong leader could engage so freely with others at lower levels in the organization about their ideas. That episode catalyzed an awareness in me for this unusual balance of confident, yet humble. So how does one reconcile the need to have a point of view about the path forward yet avail themselves to the wealth of ideas among their team and organization as a whole?

Intellectual humility begins as a mindset one must adopt. Five or six years after meeting Galen, I was fortunate to work with two people who were at the top of their game, globally. They had Ivy League educations, and each had led top tier professional service practices. These two were paragons of confidence and their clients continue to pay regal sums for their advice. Yet, when I worked with them, I was always struck by their willingness to be wrong, to be respectfully challenged and open to being convinced that their hypothesis was flawed to get the best information on the table. I vividly recall the facial expressions of one team when I put this to the test. The guru fully engaged with me, while the others sat mute and awestruck. It's a dynamic I think of whenever I encounter excessive hubris, pride or noticeable inhibition around the table; tone always comes from the top.

A quote I have encountered twice on my journey to learn from the world's best strategists captures the concept of intellectual humility. Both experts cited F. Scott Fitzgerald's collection of essays called *The Crack Up* and a key quote within it:

“The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.”

If we think about it, we see this model in other high-stakes situations. Science, at its core, requires intellectual humility and a fundamental embrace of this tension. To 'know' something today, while being open to the fact that this understanding may shift tomorrow with new evidence...err, sorry Pluto, your membership as a planet has been revoked! Or as physicist John Archibald Wheeler suggested: “We live on an island surrounded by a sea of ignorance. As our island of knowledge grows, so does the shore of our ignorance.” If advances to humankind require this degree of intellectual humility, can we apply this attitude to the everyday decisions we make as leaders of people? How might this concept come to life in the routines of a leader? How might one develop this stance of confident, yet humble?

The simplest way is to fully embrace and model the practices of the everlasting learner. Your job as leader is to unite the organization around a shared vision, to coordinate and empower others to use their capacity to advance specific aspects of that vision relative to their strengths, and to set the rhythm and rewards of accountability. To do this you must have an internal sense of direction, while remaining open to external input that could lead to better outcomes.

This requires a learner's mindset. All learners must first acknowledge they are seekers. Seekers of information, ideas and inspiration. Yet, despite that necessity, many things can get in the way of this flow. Ego, attitude, listening skills and behaviour can either enhance or inhibit the flow. Strategist Martin Reeves captured it well in a recent podcast where he noted that ideas

evolve when they pass through different minds. To an observer, one might remark that these intangibles - for better or worse - informs the culture of the team locally and the organization more widely. Ultimately, one benefits from defining the parameters of the process, accepting the unknown, embracing our vulnerability and pursuing our curiosity about what others can share to round out our understanding, and then combining the same spirit to answer the question, solve the problem or make the decision.

Think about how we embrace the caricature of the wise old owl. It seems pensive and self-satisfied, yet it is constantly surveying and assessing the landscape. We may see ourselves as experts in our business, our domain, or as a parent with full knowledge of their child, but are you really? Could there be areas you don't fully understand, features you don't fully appreciate, variables not incorporated, relevant dimensions of the person not on display or available to you?

If we are honest with ourselves, there is a great deal we don't know. Our understanding of the world is made up of observations, information and experiences. We assemble these into mental models or predictions of how things work. Yet, like Fitzgerald implied, we must confront the vast expanse of what we don't know and still move forward. This fundamentally means we are vulnerable. We all are. Honestly facing this vulnerability allows us to adopt the stance of the humble leader: one who has a set of mental models that have been calibrated by experience yet remains open to learning as they move forward. It has been said that the wise person knows they know nothing at all. I remember hearing this a couple decades ago, but the gravity of it paradoxically increases every year that I gain more experience after having navigated ever more complicated situations.

Many years ago, when I completed graduate school in business and later an executive education program in governance, it dawned on me that at the tail end of each program that the scope of my ignorance was vast and that the title of "Master" before my degree seemed a misnomer. Instead, I became very aware that I had built a solid base and retained a powerful motivating curiosity, but each time I was just beginning my journey toward the next level of understanding. I had a better sense of the questions I wanted to answer and the patience with which to pursue them.

How might one develop and practice their intellectual humility?

Many small practical gestures, if repeatedly demonstrated, will build an atmosphere where your colleagues will bring their whole selves to the challenges and opportunities in front of you. This is one of those show *and* tell moments. I'll get you started with five concrete areas of

practice that will help you to embrace humility in your role as leader and deploy it to the advantage of all in your charge.

1) Turn off your autopilot.

Wondering where your attention span has gone? I'll give you a hint...put aside that little battery-powered rectangle that seems to beckon at every waking moment. This scarcity of attention is perfectly natural in a busy life, yet we can all take steps to limit the counterproductive effects during your team interactions. Your humility can be first expressed by giving your undivided attention to those in front of you. Put down your device unless it's absolutely necessary and flagged for the people in your space. Otherwise, in the wise words of Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh: "Be here now."

2) Range will reward effort and reduce risk.

If it's not yet clear to you, contemporary expressions of diversity, equity and inclusion are vast sources of knowledge available to us all and we are well-served by actively integrating more voices into our existing streams of collaboration.

To demonstrate your presence and get the most from the full range of voices, try first pausing to make space for their contributions and then practice actively listening. Repeating your understanding of what was said and asking questions for clarification are two ways to do this, and this extension of empathy leads to others feeling heard, but all effectiveness rests on the platform of presence. That begins with remembering that listening is not the same as waiting to speak. Think about that for a moment and try it on for size. You will build endearment each time you put this in practice and show your team that their ideas are valued, and you can learn from all of them.

3) Pull ideas apart, not people.

Try to separate yourself from pride in authorship and find ways to test your ideas to make them as strong as possible. For instance, thought experiments like a pre-mortem can be helpful in testing material choices like a strategy. What would have to be true for this to play out like we expect? This gives everyone an opportunity to pull apart the assumptions without pulling apart the person offering the idea. By you demonstrating this, it sends a signal to your team that you are open to this practice. What is correspondingly important is to not reflexively revert to censure if you aim to create an environment where your ideas are open to being tested. You will need to pay attention to shaping what the tone and style of inquiry might look like to bring

the strongest ideas forward. This modelling is vital to propagating the approach and maximizing its impact. It can also be de-personalized in more common organizational practices like project post-mortems.

4) Own your misses.

Speaking of modelling humility, another gesture that can help is admitting your mistakes. This act can build trust, demonstrate your humanity and show that you can learn and make yourself vulnerable through the process of reflection and taking responsibility. Reflective practitioners are what we should all aspire to, and model for our teams. It can be tempting to display the veneer of the superhero who seems impervious to error, but the occasional demonstration of vulnerability can actually improve your relationship with colleagues where your elevated capacity is grounded by your humanity. This works wonders in families too. (My boys will happily tell you about dad's swear jar)

5) Demonstrate you can change your mind.

Take a beat and reflect: how often do you avail yourself to learning from others? or thought to yourself at the boardroom, management or family table – wow, what a great point...I wish I had thought of that? Curiosity about others can be illustrative, revealing, and yes, humbling, but ultimately it makes us stronger. The contradictions and limits to our understanding are the seedbed of possibility. As you might imagine, I'm not the only one exploring these ideas in practice. Prolific psychological researcher and author, Adam Grant, recently met with another favourite researcher of mine, Scott Barry Kaufman to discuss Grant's new book. At the end of the podcast, Grant asked Kaufman: "What have you changed your mind about recently?" Which, to my mind, is a deceptively simple question to gauge how effectively you put this stance into action.

Leaders are responsible for getting the right people to the table, ensuring motivation and alignment with the core purpose; but ultimately, we must acknowledge that it is not about us. Nobody alone can do it all, know it all, be all things. We must engage with others to assemble the knowledge needed to have a more robust understanding of our challenges and opportunities. As we reach the summit and consider the view, we benefit from pausing, taking a deep breath, and humbly appreciating all the elements in our field of vision.

So, tell me what do you think? I love feedback and a good discussion so drop me a line if you want to share your views. I can be reached at david@smith-advisory.com