

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

August 15, 2007

Humility and Leadership: No Laughing Matter

by Dr. Mike Armour

During the 1960s Mary Lawrence headed one of the most successful advertising firms in New York. Her company produced dozens of now-legendary commercials and tag-lines. Above the entrance to their headquarters, engraved in stone, were the words, "If we were humble, we would be perfect."

It was a modern twist on an old adage, usually traced to Benjamin Franklin, that humility is the one virtue that's impossible to attain. Once you achieve it, you celebrate by saying, "I'm finally gained humility!", at which point you are no longer humble!

As these examples illustrate, humility is more likely to be a subject of jokes than a topic for serious consideration, especially in discussions of leadership. One notable exception is the attention Jim Collins calls to humility in his book *Good to Great*.

The Humble Leader

Examining the common denominators among CEOs who took companies from solid performers to enduring pace-setters, Collins cites the pivotal role of humility in their style of leadership. The widespread popularity of Collins' book has thus sparked countless follow-on discussions of humility in leadership.

Still, with all the interest that Collins has aroused, the topic of humility finds little place in management and leadership literature. To demonstrate this deficiency, simply perform a web search on a phrase like "leadership and humility." The vast majority of the first 100 hits will come from one of two sources.

They will either be reviews of Collins' book. Or they will be articles which apply what Jesus taught about humility to the subject of leadership. Moreover, most of the applications in this second category center on religious and spiritual leadership, not leadership roles in business or institutional life.

From Dust to Dust

The word "humility" itself comes from the Latin word *humus*, which means "dirt" or "earth." Behind the concept of humility is the realization that life inevitably ends with a return to the earth, "from dust to dust," as the expression goes. Since this inglorious end awaits all of us, it hardly behooves us to be boastful or full of ourselves. Ultimately we all turn into dust.

True humility never lets us lose sight of our human mortality with all of its limitations. Humility keeps us attuned to our frailty, our inadequacy, and our vulnerability. It therefore

keeps ego in balance. Humility is the "golden mean" (to borrow from Aristotle) between arrogance and conceit on one side and an anemic existence with no strength of ego on the other.

The root meaning of humility makes its way into phrases such as "an humble village" or someone's "humble beginnings." Here the word "humble" clearly conveys the sense of being unpretentious. Humility is primarily an unpretentious attitude toward life and our relationships with others. We are not puffed up with our own self-importance. We don't act like the world revolves around us. We don't react defensively when caught in a miscue.

We hear a call for being unpretentious when people say that they want leaders who are "truly authentic." Stripped of all of its nuances, "being authentic" basically boils down to having no pretense. This very lack of pretense helps people feel more comfortable in being open, candid, and truthful with their leader. It also accelerates the pace at which they build trust in those who lead them.

The Payback for the Humble Leader

For the leader who wants to enjoy high trust, personal humility returns exceptional dividends.

- Humility lets us dismiss concerns about being the center of attention, so that we can step aside and let others shine. People don't tend to trust people who insist on taking all the credit or hogging the spotlight.
- Humility leaves us open to what others can teach us, no matter what their station in life. As a result we learn and develop wisdom more quickly, because we let everyone be our mentor.
- Humility lets us treat even difficult people with such respect that we help them feel worthwhile. People do not typically invest their trust in someone who makes them feel invisible or insignificant.
- Humility preserves a spirit of gratitude. A spirit of gratitude does more than perhaps any other character trait to keep our outlook on life positive and healthy. Sensing this, people are unlikely to put great trust in a leader who is ungrateful, for (unconsciously, at least) they realize that ingratitude is a sign of other character flaws.
- Humility allows us to confront our own failings and take valuable lessons from them. Nothing is more harmful to trust than a leader who lives in denial or who never learns from things done poorly.
- Humility allows us to be more patient with those who are still learning and thus prone to mistakes. We see in them a reflection of our own need to learn and improve. Appropriate patience is critical in building trust, for impatience breeds anxiety and even fear among those we lead, the very antithesis of trust.
- Humility makes us approachable and receptive to being held accountable. Leaders who hold others accountable must be open and willing to be held accountable themselves. Otherwise, a double standard is at work that is inimical to trust.

- Humility keeps our curiosity alive. Aware of how much we don't know, recognizing that we have our own pattern of blind spots, we are eager to explore and learn. After all, people don't normally trust "know-it-alls."

As you review this list of ways in which humility contributes to trust-building, you will notice that many of them relate to learning. Learning from others. Learning from mistakes. Learning from being held accountable. Learning by keeping curiosity high.

It's this distinct relationship between humility and learning that makes humility so critical for leaders who would propel an organization to sustained peak performance. The faster we learn as leaders, the quicker we can take our organization to the top.

© 2007, MCA Professional Services Group, LLC

This article may be posted to a web site so long as all copyright notices are preserved, along with an associated link to www.leaderperfect.com. You are also free to circulate this document in hard-copy form so long as the copyright statement and this notice remain attached.