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feature

Leadership Requires Humility

VITAL TRAIT FOR TODAY'S LEADERS

The popular press often elevate business leaders to celebrity status akin to professional athletes or rock stars. The modern ideal of a leader evokes descriptors such as charismatic, powerful, maverick, visionary and larger-than-life. However, one of the most crucial aspects of strong leadership rarely makes this list. Ironically, the reason may be related to the concept itself, that of humility.

Mentioning "humility" and "strong leadership" in the same sentence may be perceived as somewhat of an unlikely combination, like oil and water. However, a persuasive case can be made for humility as one of the most important traits for leaders in the new economy.



What is humility? In a forthcoming article to be published in the Academy of Management Journal, SUNY Buffalo Professor Bradley Owens discusses the results of an ambitious study that focused on defining humility through an examination of its associated behaviours. Using intensive, in-depth interviews with employees from various organizations in diverse sectors, he was able to precisely categorize humility in leadership.

First and foremost, his research demonstrated that humble leaders acknowledge their personal limits and faults, while simultaneously taking responsibility for their mistakes. They routinely ask for support from their team to manage their weaknesses, thus building trust within their groups. It is important to acknowledge that this does not mean these individuals are not aware of their strengths, but rather they are equally accepting and forthright about their own personal and professional challenges.

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Another key aspect of leadership humility is a tendency to highlight their team members' strengths and contributions. Indeed, rather than being threatened by peak performance, humble leaders celebrate these accomplishments and reinforce the team member's value to the team. People feel appreciated and as a result, are not afraid to "shine." They are motivated to maximize their engagement and performance without fear of being rebuked or admonished for taking the spotlight away from their leader. Not surprisingly, humble leaders were found to be committed to studying and understanding their employees' strengths, possessing an intimate awareness of how best to position their employees for success.

Finally and arguably most important is the fact that humble leaders are exemplars of learning. They are receptive to new ideas and devote significant time and energy to listening rather than speaking. They are also very open to feedback and encourage its expression within their teams. Since humble individuals are much less likely to feel they 'know it all', they tend to consider alternative points of view, which can be extremely advantageous from a decision-making perspective. The eagerness to explore alternatives also helps drive innovation, a hallmark for 21st century business.

Why focus on humility?

Based on societal norms and media portrayals of leadership, it would seem humility is unrelated to the bottom line. In fact, some people claim that humility in leaders is detrimental to profitability. The evidence paints an entirely different picture. The following discusses numerous areas in which humility, or a lack thereof, can impact our organizations:

1. Decision-making

One of the key ways in which an organization can be affected by the absence of humility is through its decision-making. Dr. Paul Nutt spent over twenty years engaging with hundreds of companies and thousands of individuals studying the factors influencing whether a business decision turned out to be a success or a failure. He concluded that personal ego is the primary culprit in over one-third of all failed business decisions. Indeed, recent groundbreaking research suggests that over half of all businesspeople estimate that personal egos cost their company between 6 and 15 percent of their annual revenues.

2. Employee Engagement

Recently, our office undertook a research project designed to examine the degree to which supervisor humility affected employee well-being. Almost 300 people participated in this study and the results were truly fascinating. Supervisors with higher levels of humility had team members who felt significantly happier, more committed and more successful at the workplace. These employees also reported significantly higher levels of productivity and job satisfaction. Additionally, more humble supervisors received significantly higher satisfaction scores with their leadership style from their employees than their less humble counterparts. Finally, supervisors who exhibited more humility generally had employees who reported being significantly more satisfied with their organizations.

3. Improves the Bottom Line

Despite the above, some people may question whether reported changes in the feelings and attitudes of employees actually contribute to financial gains for the organization. Jim Collins makes an extremely compelling argument for this case in his book 'Good to Great.' In this groundbreaking work, Collins searched for the factors that differentiated the top companies from mediocre ones in terms of corporate stock performance. To do so, he looked at ten years of financial data from the New York Stock Exchange and isolated only eleven companies who consistently and significantly outperformed the overall stock market. When searching for distinguishing features, the only real difference Collins and his team found was in the style and approach of the CEO. He noted that the leaders of these eleven companies exemplified an intense personal will combined with a high degree of humility.

Although "humility" and "strong leadership" may at first seem like an unlikely combination, further examination reveals a striking partnership. Indeed, the characteristics of a humble leader are valued and respected by both colleagues and clients alike. In the wake of the recent financial crisis which has forced a widespread re-thinking of how we do business, it is more important than ever to ensure that humility is incorporated into our leadership style. Based on the above research, it is certainly possible as well as financially beneficial to view humility and strong leadership less like oil and water and more like peanut butter and jelly, with one enhancing the other and leading to an end result that everyone can enjoy.