Q &A

A psychologist and executive coach describes the value of humility — and what else it takes to be a Positive Leader.

Interview by Karen Christensen

Great leadership is surprisingly rare. Why is that?
While there are plenty of well-intentioned individuals in leadership roles, they face a few key challenges. The first is time pressure. Research shows that when we're under time pressure, we become anxious and stressed, and our empathy dampens. When leaders get stressed out they can become incredibly self-focused and lose sight of how their behaviour is impacting the people around them.

The second challenge involves the impact of power. We've all heard the expression that 'absolute power corrupts absolutely', and based on the evidence, it's clear that power does impact how we behave. Leaders often have one rule for themselves and another rule for other people; when someone else does something questionable, they see it as unethical and inappropriate; yet when they do it, they rationalize it away.

A third challenge involves the self-serving bias. If you ask someone, 'Are you a positive leader?', the vast majority of people will say 'Yes'. And yet if you look at the research from **Gallup** and other sources, the primary reason people leave organizations is because of poor leadership.

You have developed a framework for 'Positive Leadership' with six pillars. The first pillar is self-awareness. What does this look like and how can it be achieved?
The question at the core of self-awareness is this: Do you have an accurate sense of who you are and how other people perceive you? Self-awareness provides a critical leadership advantage: Research shows that it leads to improved financial performance, higher levels of personal and professional success and greater job fit and organizational success.

Most of us assume that our motivations are clear to the people around us, and that our behaviour is understood accordingly. But that is often not the case. We are all naturally

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biased toward our own opinions and behaviours, which can make self-reflection a challenging undertaking. Therefore, an effective strategy for overcoming our own bias is to seek information outside of ourselves.

I advise leaders to start by saying to their people, 'I want to perform at my best *and* ensure that I'm supporting you in the best way possible so that you can perform at a high level. If I'm not delivering that to you, then I'm letting you down.' Then, open up the doors to feedback through informal conversations, personality assessments, or a 360-degree assessment. There are plenty of tools available that provide insight into whether our intentions are having the desired impacts.

Your second pillar of positive leadership is civility. What are some of the most common forms of incivility displayed by leaders?
There is evidence that incivility in our workplaces is increasing at an alarming rate. People often think about the extreme forms of incivility — throwing a chair, slamming a door or swearing at someone. As a result, more minor forms of incivility are seen as insignificant; but they are not. 'Small actions' can have profound impact. The most common are things like interrupting someone, being condescending or ignoring emails, opinions and voicemail.

Cellphones have also become a key challenge in organizations. People are constantly on their phones in meetings, and this is an incredible form of disruption and disrespect. If I'm speaking and you're looking at your phone, guess how I interpret that? *You're not interested; you're not listening; there is something more important than I am*. And guess what happens when I stop speaking and you start? I do the same thing.

In organizations today, everybody wants to look busy. So if you're on your phone and I'm not, maybe I'm not busy enough; maybe I'm slacking off. You can create a really negative atmosphere where people are constantly on their phones. They're disconnected from what's happening in meetings, which raises a really interesting question: How much value are they providing to that meeting? Also, their behaviour ends up distracting other people around the table. There's so much scattered attention and disrespect that, once again, it creates a highly fragmented workplace.

This is not just happening in meetings: Even when people are speaking with one another face-to-face, they are often texting. These are profound forms of disrespect that impact performance and motivation. Research shows that when we work in an uncivil environment, our performance, our willingness to collaborate, and our ability to be creative decline significantly. There is also evidence that uncivil workplaces affect our physical health. They put us at an elevated risk for coronary heart disease and heart attacks.

Moving on to your third pillar, what does humble leadership look like, and why is it so powerful?
The analogy is that humble leaders play more for the logo on the front of the jersey than for the name on the back. Their behaviour is about larger collective purpose more than it is about positioning them for success. Not surprisingly, this approach drives enhanced engagement.

Research shows that humble leaders make better quality decisions because they don't let their egos get in the way. One of my favourite studies is around sunk costs. Essentially, when we make decisions, people tend to go 'all in'. When the data comes back and looks bad, if I made the decision, I find it really tough to pull the plug, because I feel like I'm going to look incompetent or stupid. There was a terrific study done that looked at problematic bank loans. When they brought in a fresh group of managers to look at those loans, they were significantly more likely to pull the plug and stop the loan than those who had initially arranged for them in the first place — all because of ego.

How can we be humble leaders? One key way is to spotlight other people's strengths and contributions. When you do that, it really empowers people. They don't feel threatened or scared about doing well in the organization, which frees them up to unlock their talent and potential. Furthermore, when people see that it's more about collective purpose and achievement, they are much more inclined to want to follow you as a leader. One thing you can do is, whenever possible, invite key people from your team — or better yet, your entire team — to present results from your area to senior leaders. Even if you can just get permission for them to sit in on the meeting and not say anything, that is a great

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gesture, as they will get to see the impact of their work.

Another thing you can do to display humility is to admit your mistakes. Legendary executive coach **Marshall Goldsmith** taught me that you can't possibly expect people to take responsibility for their actions if you don't take responsibility for yours. In one study, when leaders were asked, 'Do you frequently or always apologize when it's warranted?', 89 per cent said yes. But when employees were asked the same question, only 19 per cent said their leaders 'always' or 'frequently' apologize. Not surprisingly, leaders are afraid to do that because they don't want to look weak or incompetent. This is a huge opportunity for leaders to increase engagement.

In my coaching practice, senior leaders often say to me, 'I wish my team exhibited more accountability; I wish they would self-mange more and take responsibility'. But if you are sidestepping responsibility on a regular basis, guess what the impact is on other people? They learn, 'Oh, I see: To get ahead, I have to deny, deny, deny and deflect, deflect, deflect; if I were to take responsibility, it would be a career killer'.

What is the first step to becoming a positive leader?
The good news is that positive leadership is a skill that can be learned, regardless of age, experience or position. I would advise people to start by focusing on increasing their own self-awareness. Seek out specific and candid feedback from your team, your colleagues, your supervisors and your clients and stakeholders about how you are doing and how you can continue to improve. By asking the people around you for feedback, you are also showing respect, as you are letting them know that you value their opinions and that you are serious about improving, both as a leader and as a person.

Clients I have worked with are often surprised at how good it feels to put these pillars into practice — and how effective they are at improving their relationships and performance. Their teams trust and respect them more as a result of their openness and commitment to improving their leadership approach. In the end, positive leadership is about living the example, and knowing that, in doing good, you will always lead well. *RM*

The Six Pillars of Positive Leadership

1. Self-Awareness: It is only through knowing who we are and how we come across to others that we can capitalize on our strengths, identify our weaknesses, manage our blind spots, and take appropriate action.

2. Civility: No matter where we sit in an organization, we look up to understand how to behave. Civility may be defined as 'politeness and courtesy in behaviour and speech, and it is a necessary ingredient of growth and success.

3. Humility: This means being aware of our strengths while simultaneously recognizing that we do not have all the answers, and that we are willing to ask others for their knowledge and perspective. Although it may seem counterintuitive, humility is the very act that inspires confidence about our capacity to lead.

4. Focus on the Positive: When we are in a positive frame of mind, research suggests we interact with our environment more effectively, as we look for opportunities to 'broaden and build'. In looking toward the future with a positive frame of mind, a company is more likely to be innovative and challenge the status quo.

5. Meaning and Purpose: The most important driver of employee engagement is 'the opportunity to do meaningful work'. Essentially, this means making a contribution to something above and beyond ourselves. If team members feel their work is pointless, they quickly lose enthusiasm—and eventually leave.

6. Empathy: This has been identified by many leading experts as the single most important skill to develop because it generates a level of interpersonal understanding and acceptance that we, as humans, crave. Empathy allows us to step outside of ourselves and not only see situations through another's eyes, but understand things from their point of view.

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