

Humility as a Leadership Attribute

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THE VIRTUE OF HUMILITY is often overlooked in leadership discussions. Humility is not brought up when studying some of history's greatest military leaders (such as George S. Patton, Douglas MacArthur, Napoleon Bonaparte and Erwin Rommel). But as the military becomes involved across the spectrum of conflict, this misunderstood leadership trait becomes more important.

Humility, or the quality of genuine modesty and unpretentiousness, is often disregarded when describing traits of good leaders because it seems to suggest a lack of toughness and resolve essential in an effective leader. However, the humble leader lacks arrogance, not aggressiveness. The will to serve others eclipses any drive to promote self. Humility can even carry a certain spiritual tone, as the leader's activities are free of ego and self-aggrandizement—all in the best interest of the success of many versus the prominence of an individual.

US Army Field Manual 22-100, *Army Leadership*, details values, attributes, skills and actions necessary in leaders at all levels. Values and attributes describe leaders of character; skills and actions define competence. But leaders of character and competence are not necessarily compelling.

Self-efficacy, enthusiasm, activity level, rate of talk and extroversion do not appear in US Army leadership doctrine, although they are common leadership terms elsewhere.¹ Many lists of leadership characteristics overlook the essential component or components that meld the leader's attributes with the leader's techniques. One such component is humility.

In *Small Unit Leadership—A Commonsense Approach*, author Mike Malone articulates what humility is and what it looks like. He lists sixteen leadership traits and encourages leaders to:

- Ensure soldiers are rewarded when they perform well.

- Emphasize how significant the soldier is to the unit.

- Describe the unit's performance in terms of "what we did" not "what I did."²

Indeed, the description above could readily apply to many organizations by simply removing the word "soldiers" and replacing it with an appropriate substitute. Interestingly, organizations outside the

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military have begun to value the importance of humility in leaders, being particularly reflective, as we engage the adventures of a new millennium.

Time magazine's millennium edition describes the contributions of three of the world's greatest leaders:

"Roosevelt, Gandhi, Einstein. Three inspiring characters, each representing a different force of history in the past century. They were about as different as any three men are likely to be. Yet each in his own way, both intentionally and not, taught us the century's most important lesson: the value of being both humble and humane. . . . Gandhi was the earthly embodiment of humility. . . he taught us that we should value the civil liberties and individual rights of other human beings, and he lived for (and was killed for) preaching tolerance and pluralism. By exhibiting these virtues, which the century has amply taught us are essential to civilization, we express the humility and humanity that come from

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respecting people who are different from us.”³

“Einstein taught the greatest humility of all: that we are but a speck in an unfathomable large universe. Roosevelt came to empathize with the poor and the underprivileged, with people to whom fate had dealt a difficult hand.”⁴

What does humility look like in a military leader? Humility is not a permanent characteristic. It can be lost or gained since human virtues are imperfect representations of the ideal. An individual may be taught humility by a parent, teacher, coach or mentor. Or one may be humbled following a profound public embarrassment so significant as to be life-changing and value-altering. In another instance, one may acquire humility after being in an important position and realizing the pervasive influences of time and good fortune.

When authentic humility is applied to relationships, mutual trust develops and stirs an abiding sense of loyalty and authentic modesty—creating an environment to achieve great things.

In its purest sense, leading by example means modeling for subordinates the very virtues desired in them. Leaders who direct their attention and effort toward what they give rather than what they will receive enhance group performance. The overarching theme of leadership becomes more clear—unpretentious service to others before self—humility.

Humility is uncommon. The temptation of ego enhancement often entices many young leaders down the road to frustration and compromise. To develop as a leader requires one to learn from mistakes and deal with adversity. To do this re-

quires admitting fallibility, an act of humility. There is little room for arrogance or cynicism in truly great leadership.

Currently, the US military is spread all over the world dealing with a multitude of cultures, many vastly different from western ones. Peacekeeping operations, by their very nature, demand cultural awareness and sensitivity. Working in such environments requires a certain level of humility—service to others before self. Loud, obnoxious, arrogant “mediation” simply will not achieve compromise during a town meeting between Albanians and Serbs.

In contrast to the unique nature and environment of peace operations, one could argue that a lack of humility would be acceptable in high-intensity operations. However, the need for stable leaders with authentic humility remains constant. Indeed, humility transcends context to permeate every action of the leader, renewing credibility and trustworthiness, regardless of the situation, operation or intensity.

Humility must never be viewed as a weakness. Quite the contrary. A leader who can maintain an unpretentious disposition will likely inspire a sense of camaraderie and esprit de corps. A confident leader will demonstrate service in the best interest of the unit by freely accepting accountability for the troops’ actions, being humble enough to admit fallibility when in error. Success is all about “team” and “we,” not “you” and “me.” The humble, effective leader understands that the success is for the unit, not the individual.

Do you need humility to be considered a leader? The short answer is no. But to the extent that character matters in leadership, authentic humility in the leader will assuredly engender trust and collaborative effort within the organization as the group aspires to great achievement. **MR**

NOTES

1. Bernard M. Bass and Ralph M. Stogdill, *Handbook of Leadership* (New York: The Free Press, July 1990), 88.
2. Dandridge “Mike” Malone, *Small Unit Leadership—A Commonsense Approach* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, May 1995).
3. Walter Isaacson, “Who Mattered and Why,” *Time* (December 1999), 60.
4. Doris K Goodwin, “Franklin Delano Roosevelt,” *Time* (December 1999), 99.

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