

## LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS: DIVIDENDS OF HUMILITY

Recently we wrote about the interrelationship among humility, curiosity, and leadership ([The Curious Leader](#)). Today I want to focus solely on the important role of humility in effective leadership. In our executive coaching practice, we have found that leaders who are most open to their own personal development and learning are the ones who are most successful in leading organizations. The very act of seeking coaching is an act of humility.

Think about an arrogant leader you have worked with. What descriptors come to mind? Maybe bombastic, arrogant, egocentric, conceited, closed-minded, narcissistic, egotistical, self-important, insecure, condescending . . . Think about a humble leader you have worked with. What descriptors come to mind? Perhaps respectful, open, trustworthy, generous, unassuming, curious, servant-leader, supportive, caring, secure, courageous . . . Which of those two leaders would you rather follow? Never mind *follow*, which of those two do you even want to be around? And, importantly, which of those two do YOU want to be?

*The Washington Post* published a very good summary of scholarly research on the positive impact of humble CEOs on company performance. [Leaders are more powerful when they're humble, new research shows](#). Yes, according to research, humility improves the bottom line. It certainly improves morale.

How can you foster your own humility? Can it be learned or is it inherent? Probably a little bit of both. Try these steps.

1. Genuinely listen to others—with your mind open to the possibility that they may be right. If you are not correct and/or the other person makes a good point, say so. Acknowledge that the other person is right. Acknowledgement of the value of the input of subordinates, along with the leaders' acknowledgement of their own mistakes, sends a very powerful message to subordinates that their viewpoint and work are valued and respected. It also engenders respect for leaders who are seen as confident enough to admit their error.
2. Get some feedback from your stakeholders on how you are perceived vis-à-vis listening, learning, understanding your impact on others, openness to input, trustworthiness, and other factors related to the humility/arrogance continuum. Depending on what you learn, get to work on the development areas that emerge. Marshall Goldsmith says: "If you're going to get better, then that means you probably don't think you're perfect." ([Three Things Successful People Do](#)).
3. Count to ten (at least) before dismissing any input from a colleague and then, sincerely consider input you are given, even if it is about your organization's strategy, your leadership behavior, or anything else. In other words, guard against quickly and automatically dismissing ideas that you believe do not line up with your own.
4. Journal about your experience and progress as you demonstrate and grow in genuine humility, the good, the bad, your actions, and your inactions.
5. Read the articles linked above, plus these two HBR articles: [Six Principles for Developing Humility as a Leader](#), [The Best Leaders are Humble Leaders](#), and anything else you can find on the topic to better

understand the impact of humility on leadership effectiveness and to build your motivation to practice humility.

As pointed out in [How to Boost Your \(and Others'\) Emotional Intelligence](#), these tips and the behaviors of the humble leader are all emblematic of emotional intelligence—being open to others and admitting mistakes.

Remember, you are a role model . . . and the tone is set from the top. Also remember that this is a balancing act. Humility is grace; however too much is a problem. As a leader, you still have to be strong and assertive.

*What kind of leadership do you want to foster in your organization? How do you balance humility and professional confidence?*