

Humility as a Desirable Personality Trait and a Construct of Effective Leadership:

A Review of the Literature

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Abstract

Researchers have been conflicted on the value of humility. While grounded in the Latin term humilis which literally means ‘on the ground,’ humility has been considered both a highly virtuous quality and a sign of weakness. In today’s organizations, it seems that so often it is the aggressive and boisterous that advance to leadership positions. However, these qualities can be signs of narcissism and lead to toxic leader than can hinder rather than advance an organization. Humility, on the other hand, is a beneficial trait that is applicable to many of the modern leadership concepts and a leader who is humble can aid in the formation of relationships based on trust which is the foundation of truly effective leadership. The application to organizations and leadership is explored.

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A Review of the Literature

Humility is a concept that has been both viewed with disdain (Nietzsche, 1974; Northhouse, 1997) and held in high regard (Chelone, 2003; Collins, 2001a, 2001b; Doty, & Gerdes, 2000; Emmons, 1999; Edmondson, 2011; Exline & Geyer, 2004; Foster, 1997; George, 2003; Guthrie, & Venkatesh, 2012; Harvey & Pauwells, 2004; Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991; LaBouff, Rowatt, Johnson, Tsang, & Willerton, 2012; Landrum, 2002; Lee, & Ashton, 2004; McCarty, 2012; Meindl, 1993; Mogabgab, 2000; Morgan, 2001; Morris, Brotheridge, & Urbanski, 2005; Murray, 2001; Myers, 1995; Owens, 2009; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Richards, 1992; Sandage, 1999, 2001; Senge, 2005; Tangney, 2002; Templeton, 1995; Vera & Rodriguez-Lopez, 2004; von Hildebrand, 1997; Weiss, & Knight, 1980). As a construct, researchers have struggled to define it absolutely and struggled even more to measure it. What has resulted in the literature are some conflicting conclusions and varied results. However, in the contemporary research (Casey, 2001; Exline, Campbell, Baumeister, Joiner, & Krueger, 2004; Exline & Geyer, 2004; Landrum, 2004; Mogabgab, 2000; Murray, 2001; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Richards, 1992; Rowatt, Ottenbreit, Nesselrode, & Cunningham, 2002; Tangney, 2000; Vera & Rodriguez-Lopez, 2004), there seems to be more of a consensus on the value of humility as a positive personality trait.

Northhouse (1997) considers humility to be a quaint notion from times past and Nietzsche (1974) holds contempt for the concept of humility. The latter considers it to be a quality of slaves since it requires the lessening of one's self. Spinoza (1994), however, considers humility to be a virtue of having knowledge of one's own mind and a realization that there exists something greater than one's self. So, for all of the research and the lack of research involving the construct

of humility, Owens, Rowatt, and Wilkins (2010) suggest that, in light of the continuing changes and challenges that the 21st century continues to bring, there are:

...general workplace trends such as global competition, technological innovation, team-based structures, information-based economies—all of which make the workplace increasingly dynamic, turbulent, interdependent, and uncertain—make humility in organizations an idea whose time has come. (p. 260)

Indeed, to many leadership scholars, humility is thought of as a key attribute (Doty & Gerdes, 2000; Edmondson, 2012; Guthrie & Venkatsh, 2012; Taylor, 2011; Exline & Geyer, 2004; Greenleaf, 2002; Grenberg, 2005; LaBouff et al., 2012; McCarty, 2012; Morris, Brotheridge, & Urbanski, 2005; Senge, 2005). Senge (2005) favors humility in the workforce due to the increasingly unpredictability in the workplace as it would allow for an environment of learning to flourish through recognition of the areas where workers are ignorant and inexperienced.

Humility Defined

As a construct, humility is an abstract term which can vary in definition. In modern dictionaries, humility is defined as: (a) not proud or arrogant and (b) having a feeling of insignificance, inferiority, subservience (“Humility,” n.d.). In a more flattering definition, Grenberg (2005) suggest that it is a “belief in the equal dignity of shared limits of all persons” (p. 164). The term humility has its roots in Latin which would stand to reason that much of the basis of the exploration of humility has been from a religious perspective and some scholars still argue that it is a virtue in religious terms only (Morgan, 2001; Murray, 2001) as it relates to how a mortal approaches a relationship with or how one relates to a deity.

German philosopher Immanuel Kant offered that humility is a “meta-attitude which constitutes the moral agent’s proper perspective on himself” as well as an awareness of the

insignificance of one's moral worth in comparison to the law (Grenberg, 2005, p. 133). Rowatt et al. (2002) created an operational definition of humility as the magnitude of the difference between a person's own evaluation of self and others evaluation of him or her. They also noted that overvaluing one's self or undervaluing others is indicative of a lack of humility.

Overall, there seems to be general consensus on the facets of humility as an accurate assessment of one's abilities and mistakes, areas of ignorance, and limitations (or strengths and weaknesses) (Ben-Ze'ev, 1993; Compte-Sponville, 2001; Edmondson, 2012; Exline, Campbell, Baumeister, Joiner, & Krueger, 2004; Grenberg, 2005; Guthrie & Venkatesh, 2012; Morris et al., 2005; Rowatt et al., 2002; Tangney, 2002). Ben-Ze'ev (1993) cautions that one can have an accurate assessment of himself but still lack humility if he considers others to be inferior to himself. Others offer additional facets such as low self-focus, low selfishness, and fair mindedness (Ashton & Lee, 2005; Exline & Geyer, 2004). Additionally, several scholars offer the more traditional aspects that humble persons do not think they are better than others but rather tend to be modest and do not brag or draw undue attention to themselves (Ashton & Lee, 2005; Exline et al., 2004; Owens, 2009; Tangney, 2000).

Humility as a "personal orientation founded on a willingness to see the self accurately and a propensity to put oneself in perspective" is a simplistic definition offered by Morris, et al. (2005, p. 1331). Their definition revolves around and consists of at least minimal amounts of three distinct dimensions: self-awareness, openness, and transcendence. Self-awareness is the ability to understand one's strengths and weaknesses. Openness refers to being open to new ideas and ways of knowing (Morris, et al., 2005) and transcendence is the acceptance of something greater than the self and the acceptance of the small role that one plays in the vast universe (Morris, et al., 2005; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Finally, there is the definition of dispositional

humility which appears to be part of a unique sixth dimension that also includes honesty and modesty (Ashton & Lee, 2005; Lee & Ashton, 2004, 2008). The conjunctions humility-modesty (Exline, et al., 2004; Peterson & Seligman, 2004) and honesty-humility (Lee & Ashton, 2004, 2008) have also been construed as a virtue or character strength and will be discussed later.

Humility as a desirable quality

With the roots of the term humility coming from the Latin term humus and literally meaning, on the ground, humility begins its history with a negative connotation. The ancient Greeks viewed humility as a virtuous trait, but one that was not much emphasized. The Greek notion of humility was based not in the lack of arrogance, but in the understanding of human limitations and was considered to be obvious to any educated person. Hence it fostered little discussion among most Greeks (Morris, et al., 2005).

More often, humility is discussed in a theological sense or in reference to religious devotion. The Buddhists and Taoists saw humility as important to attaining human excellence (Morris, et al., 2005). Both of these eastern belief systems viewed humility in terms of letting go of the self in order to connect with the “greater reality” or to achieve personal harmony respectively (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Foster sees humility as something “unpretentiousness...that all people appreciate” (p. 121). Even in more modern scholarly writings, humility is still predominately explored from the theological or devotional perspectives (Exline & Geyer, 2004).

Psychologists have offered insight into humility as well. Generally, they categorize humility as a “temperance virtue” (Park & Peterson, 2003) that guards against excess and view humility as a multifaceted strength having multiple dimensions. Grenberg (2005) holds that humility entails a deeply held belief in the equal dignity of all people that enables a humble

person to explore themselves and others. In doing so, it enables that person to understand the qualities and limitations of each while not producing either a sense of superiority or inferiority. When the Big Five personality traits (openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism) were statistically controlled, Aston and Lee (2007) concluded that humility accounts for “unique variability” in negative qualities such as materialism, unethical business decisions and delinquency. LaBouff et al. (2012) concluded that humility contributed to social relations. And last, but certainly not least, Templeton (1995) suggests that humility represents wisdom when he stated that, “Humility is knowing that you are smart, but not all-knowing” (p. 162).

Self-esteem and Self-worth

Knight and Nadel (1986) posit that humility is the equivalent of having low self-esteem. Morris, Brotheridge, and Urbanski (2005), however, argue with this statement and suggest instead that possessing self-esteem is a good predictor of humility as it “reflects the degree to which individuals hold positive or negative views of themselves” (p. 1336). Means, Wilson, Sturm, Bion, and Bach (1990) seems to concur with the latter as they state that humility is, “an increase in the valuation of others and not a decrease in the valuation of oneself” (p. 214). Bennis (2004) reinforces that notion and suggests that humble leaders do not degrade themselves due to low self-esteem, but rather recognize all people as equal in value.

Aristotle gave humility due contemplation and considered it a mid-point between the extremes of arrogance and lack of self-esteem (Vera & Rodriguez, 2004). Doty and Gerdes (2000) seem to concur with Aristotle as they do not consider humility to relate to a lack of aggressiveness but rather a lack of arrogance (Doty & Gerdes, 2000). Therefore, humility as a construct should not be viewed in terms of inferiority (Owens & McCornack, 2010).

Exline and Geyer (2004) concluded that there is more of a relationship between high self-esteem and humility than to low self-esteem to the extent that self-esteem can be separated from narcissism. While there was a small percentage (10%) of their research population that did associate humility with shame, humiliation, or embarrassment, what they observed in their study was a relation to modesty and humility as almost half of their research participants used the term modesty or made reference to modest behaviors in their definitions of humility (Exline & Geyer, 2004). There was also a link observed between religiosity and humility with the respondents as a greater religiosity if the respondent, the more likely he/she was to desire to be more humble. Grenberg (2005) was able to sum up the concept of self-worth when he stated, “The urgency of the questions of self-worth [for the humble person] recedes because they have been adequately answered. The judgments and feelings which constitute her meta-attitude are not being made constantly but rather, for the successfully humble person, are completed and receded into the background” (p. 159). This seems to point to the accurate self-assessment mentioned earlier.

Humility as strength

Modern dictionaries list such words as meekness and submission as synonyms for humility (dictionary.com). But humility should never be viewed as a weakness but as a strength and a virtue as suggested in anecdotal writings (Doty & Gerdes, 2000; Griffith, 2002; Guthrie, & Venkatesh, 2012; McCarty, 2012; Morris et al., 2005) religious and theological writings (Casey, 2001; Cheline, 2003; Mogabgab, 2000; Murray, 2001; Sandage & Wiess, 2001), philosophical writings (Morgan, 2001; Richards, 1992), and recent writings in psychology (Exline, et al., 2004; Emmons, 1999; Friesen, 2001; Landrum, 2002; Sandage, 1999, 2001; Tangney, 2000, 2002). In fact a recent study demonstrated that this thought pattern is prevalent beyond the scholars when

Exline and Geyer (2004), concluded that the participants in their study were more likely to view humility as a strength in a person rather than view it as a weakness.

Rowatt, Powers, Targhetta, Comer, Kennedy, & LaBouff (2006) also see humility as “an understudied character strength” and declared that humility “may be important for intellectual growth, inspirational leadership, optimal interpersonal relations, and other positive psychological processes” (p. 205). Templeton (1995) sees humility as knowing that you have personal power but not believing that you are omnipotent. This understanding of having limitations does not equate to weakness but rather, reveals how to handle these limits productively, adaptively, and constructively (Owens et al., 2010). As Grenberg (2005) opines:

the humble person is one who has achieved a balance of appreciation of [personal] worth and limit, and thereby avoids despair. Humility... would not be a virtuous state unless it maintained just this balance. The humble person takes her awareness of limit as an impetus to action instead of as a warrant for despairing inaction (p.181).

It seems that Grenberg’s conceptualization of humility is similar to the Taoist belief in humility as a means of achieving personal harmony mentioned previously.

Modesty vs. Humility

The Values in Action (VIA) classifications of strengths lists modesty and humility as synonymous as it offers a single definition for both terms: not regarding oneself as more special than one is (Harvey & Pauwells, 2004). Harvey and Pauwells (2004) suggest that humility and modesty are, “human qualities very likely derived from the experience of loss and coping with this experience” (p. 621). In their study of modesty, Exline and Geyer (2004) saw that being humble and non-boastful were the main terms that were used to describe modesty.

In attempts to evaluate modesty, Costa and McCrae (1992) have, as one of the eight items used to measure this construct in the NEO PI-R, the statement, “I try to be humble” and asks the respondent to rate themselves. A person who scores high on the modesty subscale are considered to be humble and self-effacing. Modesty, is considered to be one of six facets of the larger construct of one of the Big Five personality traits - agreeableness. Ashton and Lee (2005), however, concluded that, rather than being a facet of the larger construct of agreeableness, humility is a sixth factor of personality.

Tangney (2002) specifically points out, though, that modesty is not humility as it does not capture such key aspects of humility as the losing or forgetting oneself. Tangney refers to modesty as a “component of humility” (p. 74). Peterson and Seligman (2004) agree with Tangney as they use a combination of the two words to describe their own construct called, humility-modesty. In a 10-item modesty-humility subscale of the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS), a five-point scale system rates items designed to identify the level that a person may or may not have this construct.

In more simplistic terms, Peterson and Seligman (2004) describe humility as being internally focused whereas modesty is externally focused. They use an example of an actor who thanks his director at receiving an award is exhibiting modesty. Internally, they may feel that they won the award solely based on their extraordinary ability, however. This would mean that, while they are modest, they are not humble and Peterson and Seligman (2004) therefore suggest that authentic humility leads to modesty, but modesty may not reflect true humility.

Honesty-humility

According to Lee and Ashton (2005), being genuine, sincere, fair, modest, and unassuming even when faced with exploitation by others as well as being free of corruption and

greed (both for wealth and social status) is the definition of a construct they call honesty-humility. As mentioned, they consider honesty-humility to be the sixth personality factor where there had traditionally been the “big-five” and offer that consists of four subscales:

- Sincerity – an unwillingness of a person to manipulate or be dishonest in their dealings with others to achieve a desired outcome.
- Fairness – an unwillingness to cheat or steal from others, or take advantage of others as a means to get ahead.
- Greed-avoidance – this person does not seek the monetary gain, wealth, and status.
- Modesty – a person who believes themselves to be no better than any other person. (Lee & Aston, 2005, p. 1327).

Whether honesty-humility can truly be considered a personality trait is still up for discussion and needs further research to say definitively.

Measuring Humility

As a complex and highly philosophical concept, humility has historically proven to be elusive to measure. With all of the recent work on exploring humility, there continues to be struggles in developing methods to accurately and adequately measure the concept (Foster, 2006; Landrum, 2002, 2011; Rowatt et al., 2006). Foster (1997) states that humility is, “as elusive as it is desirable” (p. 122). With the concept continuing to garner interest among researchers Emmons and Paloutzian (2003) state that, “there is an urgent need for tools to measure humility” (p. 390).

Tangney (2000) suggests that humility can be measured at two distinct levels; situational and dispositional with the latter being the component of one’s personality. Myers (1995) and

Tangney (2000) each agree that humility involves focus on others and losing one's self and this quality alone would make self-reporting of humility a difficult measure of the trait as a truly humble person would tend not to focus on their humble qualities (Rowatt et al., 2006). Indeed, in Mark Dever's review of C.J. Mahoney's book, *Humility: True Greatness*, he said of Mahoney, "C. J. Mahoney is not humble. At least that is what he'll tell you." Some recent attempts have gone beyond the self-reporting methods that have challenges in being able to give an accurate measure of humility (Rowatt et al., 2006) and offer some more complex methods that hold promise. Conversely, others may attempt to mimic humble behaviors as a means of obtaining social rewards (Schimmel, 1992) or control their responses to mask their narcissism (APA, 2004) making measuring humility through self-reports even more difficult and less accurate leading Tangney (2002) concluded that, "humility may represent a rare personality construct that is simply unamenable to direct self-report methods" (p. 415).

Working from the new construct of honesty-humility, Lee and Ashton developed the HEXACO model of personality structure (Ashton & Lee, 2005). The term is an acronym which stands for: honesty-humility, emotionality, extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness (Lee and Aston, 2000). Their model went beyond measuring the old "big-five" personality traits by adding the honesty-humility trait which was being criticized by the psychology community. Their model has shown an ability to predict such things as workplace delinquency, vengeance, and risk-taking (Ashton & Lee, 2005).

In the study by Exline and Geyer (2004) where they attempted to measure dispositional humility, they identified that the greatest limitation to their research was only being able to assess people's perceptions and beliefs regarding humility but had no means of evaluating whether their perceptions and beliefs were accurate. In the same year, Peterson and Seligman

(2004) conducted a study and developed a 10 item measure of humility and included a combination term modesty-humility. Their study theorized that modesty fit with other personality characteristics such as forgiveness and self-regulation. Specifically, they focused on such things as not wanting to appear arrogant and not bragging.

A promising method for such measurement, Davis, Worthington, and Hook (2010) offer the relational-humility approach that utilizes peer reports of a person's level of humility and is unique in its approach. Another developed by Rowatt et al. (2006) is an implicit reaction-time measure of humility relative to arrogance. This measurement technique operates on the assumption that a humble person will associate humility traits with themselves more quickly than they would arrogant traits. Correlations were noted between the results of the implicit reaction-time testing and self-report testing for humility (Rowatt et al., 2006). Recent work by Landrum (2011) shows promise as well. He extracted six factors of humility for exploration and was able to break those down into their finite parts and formulate survey questions based on them. Overall, however, humility has not been the focus of as much research as the traditional Big Five personality dimensions (LaBouff et al., 2012). This is likely due to its recent classification as a facet of personality (Ashton et al., 2004; Lee & Ashton, 2004) or virtue (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Situational humility is the second level of humility and would require different measurements altogether. Tangney (2000, 2002) suggests that everyone exudes a level of humility in some situations but not in other situations. As yet, however, there is no agreed upon set of communications or behaviors from the experts in the field and therefore no consistent method or parameters by which to measure this construct (Tangney, 2000).

Narcissism and Machiavellianism

When discussing what humility is, it is also important to note what it is not. If humility is an accurate assessment of one's abilities and mistakes, areas of ignorance, and limitations (or strengths and weaknesses) as noted earlier, than having an inaccurate assessment would tend to be the opposite. It would stand to reason then, that, if humility is a positive personality trait, the opposite would be negative. Narcissism and Machiavellianism could be considered as opposites of humility and bear some explanation.

Narcissism

Bennis (2004) opines that narcissism is the opposite of humility. Narcissism is a psychological condition defined in the DSM-IV and considered to be one of the "dark triad" of subclinical traits (Paulhus, 1998). It is characterized by a sense of superiority, seeking of excessive admiration, lack of empathy, and exploitive and manipulative behaviors to name a few (APA, 2004). Tangney (2000) emphasizes that a narcissist is not simply overconfident and conceited. Rather, a narcissist is a person with a damaged sense of self and who is un-whole but who tries desperately to fill the gaps with "unrealistic fantasies of grandiosity" (p. 75). But a narcissistic person may create the appearance of humility by taking on the behaviors of a humble person in order to mask their arrogance and grandiose sense of self (APA, 2004). However, Baumeister, Smart, and Boden (1996) add that narcissistic people will react defensively to any perceived threat on their self-esteem. Exline and Geyer (2004) offer a more simplistic definition of a narcissistic person as one who is preoccupied with seeing and presenting themselves in a positive light. Morris, et al. (2005) offer that narcissism is a concept that is associated with self-promotion and an inflated sense of self-worth and that a person who possesses either of the traits will be precluded from possessing humility as the latter is a polar opposite of the first two traits.

In terms of leadership, Morris et al. (2005) refer to narcissism as a fatal character flaw that results in behavior that is detrimental to the functioning of one's followers. The narcissist will serve their need for self-promotion by legitimate means if able. If not, though, they will take credit for the work of others and pass the blame of failure off onto others if that is possible (Morris, et al., 2005). The exploitative behaviors of the narcissistic person have been linked by Ashton and Lee (2001) to people with low levels of humility.

Machiavellianism

Machiavellianism is another personality type that stands in contrast to humility. It is derived from Niccolo Machiavelli, a 15th century Italian diplomat. According to Vleeming (1979), a Machiavellianist is person is emotionally distant, pragmatic, and considers that the ends justify the means. These people are also manipulative and will use other people in order to achieve their own goals and, as a leader, such people are destructive (Shipman & Mumford, 2011). Rather than considering others and trying to form relationships, a Machiavellianist person would rather be feared as they have few if any absolute standards of behavior (Morris et al., 2005). Like a narcissist, a Machiavellianist is concerned with getting and maintaining a personal power base and will seek to gather their power through any means (Christie and Geis, 1970 as cited in Morris, et al., 2005).

Application of humility to organizations

Modern scholars posit that there is an increasing need for organizational members to have humility in the 21st century (McCarty, 2012; Morris et al., 2005; Owens et al., 2010; Peterson, & Seligman, 2004; Sandage, 2001; Senge, 2005; Vera & Rodriguez-Lopez, 2004). Vera and Rodriguez-Lopez (2004) hold that humility is a foundation for organizational learning and resilience as well as for high quality service. Additionally, Senge (2005), in his conceptualization

of the learning organization, suggests that modern members need the humility to be able to acknowledge those areas where they are ignorant in order to bring a learning and adaptive culture to the increasingly unpredictable workplace.

Buckingham and Coffman (1999) suggest that humility not only contributes to the success of an organization, but that it also breeds more humility. Lee and Aston (2004) see the value of humility to organizations because of the fair-mindedness and greed-avoidant qualities that truly humble people exude in an organization rather than arrogance. Such behaviors are the foundations upon which relationships are formed. Bennis (2004) uses the failed executive editor of the New York Times to illustrate how arrogance can sabotage a leader. It was arrogance, according to Bennis, that prevented Howell Raines from creating the organizational alliances that every leader needs to be successful.

Care must be taken, however in knowing the culture in which one is operating. Morris et al. (2005) note that in a more feminine culture, humility may be valued. However, they caution that in a more masculine culture where “ostentatious displays of status and prowess” are more valued, humility will likely not be valued. Markus and Kitayama (1991) studied modesty in cultural perspectives and offered that cultural differences in individualism and collectivism will have influence on the value placed on humility. In western culture, for example, there is a significant amount of emphasis placed on the individual and less on the collective. This emphasis will likely result in a generally lower value placed on humility than in those cultures where the group is the focus (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In a collectivist culture such as Thailand, however, there is considerable emphasis placed on humility as well as deference and self-effacement.

Additionally, power distance and culture will affect the value placed on humility in an organization. Peterson and Seligman (2004) offer that in cultures where there is a higher power distance in the organization, the less desired and less effective humility in a leader will be. If humility is not valued by the culture in which the organization operates, it thus could be counterproductive.

Application of humility to leadership

St. Benedict thought of humility as the most important of human virtues (Cheline, 2003). In 2002, Griffith (2002) concluded that, of the companies that added the most market value in that year, a significant amount of the success of each company could be attributed to the organizations' leaders who possessed humility as one of their personality traits. As stated earlier, humility is a virtue. The word virtue is defined as "a quality considered morally good or desirable" (dictionary.com). As a virtue, humility is about character and long-time leadership researcher Bennis (1999) states that character is the key to leadership and that 85 percent of a leader's performance depends on personal character.

If Bennis is correct, then humility should be at the very core of every effective leader. He lists it as one of six key qualities that an effective leader must have (Bennis, 1999). Doty and Gerdes (2000) suggest that "humility transcends context to permeate every action of the leader, renewing credibility and trustworthiness, regardless of the situation, operation, or intensity" (p. 89). Guthrie and Venkatesh (2012) suggest that humility and the ability to admit error may be two of the most important qualities a truly creative leader must have. Kilpatrick (1991) and Kochanski (1997) hold similar view in suggesting that humility as a personality trait positively influences the leader's effectiveness when combined with competence.

Self-Awareness

What this all means is achieving an accurate assessment of one's abilities and mistakes, areas of ignorance, and limitations (or strengths and weaknesses) as has been discussed throughout this essay. It is a self-awareness that allows one to know his/her weaknesses, limitations, and areas of ignorance. Shell CEO Phil Carroll concluded that there are "two qualities of leadership that ought to be present, whatever the situation or the style of the individual. [The first is] humility - if you're not aware of your own flaws and shortcomings and lack of judgment, you will lead people in wrong ways" (Grenberg, 2005). Lencioni (2011) agrees and offers that "The best [leaders] know their limitations, surround themselves with others who fill their gaps, and openly admit to others that they are aware of and comfortable with their shortcomings" (p. 16).

Vulnerability

In speaking about leaders, Lencioni (2011) opines that, while competence is important for a leader to have, it has a limited potential if it is not accompanied by honesty and humility. He states that, "it is not the smartest of most competent leaders who succeed most but those who achieve adequate competence, and then enhance that with trust-inspiring vulnerability" (p. 16). Doty and Gerdes (2000) posit that, "a leader who can maintain an unpretentious disposition will likely inspire a sense of camaraderie and esprit de corps" (p. 90). And Guthrie and Venkatesh (2012) ask:

What is more powerful than an individual who can stand in front of his or her employees and admit that the failure was his or hers? What better way to gain the respect and admiration of your team than to take the blame and responsibility on yourself rather than calling out someone on your team?

They then provide the answer, “By admitting you are wrong, by taking blame, you will have a group of more committed followers.” Owens and Hekman (2011) seem to concur and suggest that a leader, who can overcome their fears of vulnerability and actually broadcast them, will endear themselves to their followers and the result will be higher-performing organizations.

Humility allows for (and almost requires) the admittance of vulnerability by leaders. Philosopher Kant stated:

From my standpoint , all true commitment lives in the domain of doubt. Anything less than that is calculation based on a belief that is held as absolute. Without uncertainty or doubt, there is no foundation for tolerance. If there is one "right view," which we will generally see as our own, we have no space for the possibility that a different point of view may be valid. Because of that, we have no empathy for those with different views. Because of that, of course, we have no humility. How can we have humility if we've got the answer? (Grenberg, 2005, p. 215)

In this statement, he explains the positive correlation between admitting a vulnerability such as doubt and tolerance that results from having humility.

Other desirable character traits can result from having the humility to express vulnerability that can be advantageous for a leader. In many leadership theories such as transformational leadership, relationships between the leader and follower are emphasized as necessary for effective leadership (Bass and Riggio, 2006). An important aspect of building that relationship is trust and Lencioni (2011) suggests that, “Nothing inspires trust like vulnerability – there’s something very attractive and inspiring about humility and graciousness” (p. 16).

Retired Shell Oil CEO Phil Carroll spoke of vulnerability as it relates to leadership. One of his great discoveries was that vulnerability is a very important element in leadership. So important,

he feels, that if you're not willing to make yourself vulnerable then you can't provide good leadership (Grenberg, 2005).

Hubris

Yet, so much of the popular press focuses on the star and superhero-esque qualities of many of today's top executives and hails them as having single-handedly spurred the success of their respective companies (Khurana, 2002). Collins (2001b) counters this with the conclusion that a leader who brings true humility to the organization with him or her brings significantly more benefits to an organization than do the celebrity leaders. He emphasizes this point by offering that the consistently high-performing companies were "led by people who possessed a blind humility and strong personal will" (Collins, 2001b, p. 71). This stands in stark contrast to the aforementioned superhero-esque leader who seems to exude confidence from every fiber of their being.

Exline and Geyer (2004) found in attitudes of the respondents in their study of humility positive views of humble people in terms of both their confidence and their leadership ability. Shipman and Mumford (2011) studied the effects of overconfidence in leadership. Their research is based on the premise that overestimation of oneself is detrimental as a leader and that this facet of overconfidence can prevent a leader from admitting their limitations and flaws (Dorner & Schaub, 1994 as cited in Shipman & Mumford, 2011). The study of overconfidence in terms of this ability to see deficiencies showed that overconfidence is detrimental to leader activities such as planning (Shipman & Mumford, 2011). In terms of overconfidence as having an expectation of positive outcomes, the study showed it to be neither helpful nor detrimental. Guthrie and Venkatesh (2012) offer this advice for leaders regarding hubris:

Leaders who cultivate humility don't trade on hubris, nor are they guilty of denigrating their colleagues or competitors to aggrandize themselves. Quietly confident, they inspire others to tap their talents and to seek achievement, all in service to the organization and its mission.

Authority and power

Templeton (1995) opines that, “[humility] is accepting that you have personal power, but are not omnipotent” (p. 162). Power and authority are often implied when discussing leaders. The very term leader denotes having authority and power over one or more other people. But leadership is not necessarily the same as the label of leader. Northouse (2007) gives a definition for leadership that centers on influencing others to achieve a common goal. Power is certainly a means to provide that influence but it is the type of power that a person utilizes that makes the difference.

Morris et al. (2005) discuss two separate types of power: personalized and socialized. They note that personalized power is manifested through dominance over others to bring them into a submissive state. It serves to accomplish tasks and goals in order to bring recognition and status to the leader. Socialized power, on the other hand, operates at the higher level (Morris et al., 2005) and is characterized by a concern for the collective and their goals. The utilization of socialized power serves to influence others to achieve organizational goals in order to benefit everyone involved.

The link to humility is observed as the leader serves to lead the members of an organization to a point where they are capable of leading themselves. This sharing of power and the emphasis on the development of the followers is indicative of a humble person. Morris et al. (2005) suggest that leader humility would predict a socialized power motivation and are

therefore positively related. Greenleaf (2002) posits that a test of humility is ability for the powerful to learn from and graciously accept any offered gifts of the less powerful.

While closely related, authority is not synonymous with power. One can act with power over another person but not have the authority such as a conqueror exhibits over their defeated foe. Authority is a rightful or granted power over others as with our police forces in democratic nations who get their authority from the people they are sworn to serve (Police power, 2012). Greenleaf (2002) denotes a moral authority and defines it as the sum of our moral nature, our principles and sacrifice. The sacrifice, Greenleaf (2002) tells us, is the essence of moral authority as it enables one to act in a naturally moral way consistent with “universal principles” and that humility serves as the foundational attribute of sacrifice (Greenleaf, 2002, p. 11).

Relationships

As mentioned earlier, many leadership theories list relationships as an important element in terms of leadership effectiveness. Exline (2008) makes the connection between healthy interpersonal relationships and humility. A core element of the virtue of humbleness is the value that a humble person places on not only themselves, but on others (Morris, et al., 2005). This, in turn, leads to egalitarianism rather than superiority (Lee & Ashton, 2004). Thus, humility facilitates relationships as leaders with high levels of humility tend not to engage in competition with others or disrespectful behaviors (Richards, 1992) and are more prone to forgive rather than harbor ill feelings (Sandage, 1997).

The relationships that revolve around effective leadership rely not on power, but on a legitimate caring for the followers by the leader which then gets reciprocated by the followers to the leader (Burns, 1978; Kouzes & Posner, 2002). Over time, the relationship is strengthened through trust (Bass & Avolio, 1994a, 1994b) and congruence with the followers’ values and their

dedication to service (either to the leader or the organization) (Alimo-Metcalfe & Alban-Metcalfe, 2005).

Humility in contemporary leadership theory

Many of the components of humility discussed have direct application to leadership. A humble leader will seek the guidance of those who know what they do not know as they are aware of their limitations. They will not view a person who disagrees with them as a threat to their authority, but rather as a point of view that he/she may not have considered. As leadership theory continues to develop, an alignment with various leadership theories and humility can be observed.

Servant leadership

As a U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel, Joseph Doty and Dan Gerdes (2000) believe that humility provides a will to serve in leaders that eclipses any notion to advance one's self. By its very definition, humility is "free of ego and self-aggrandizement" that facilitates a focus on the many rather than the "prominence of an individual" (Doty and Gerdes, 2000, p. 90). This is consistent with the servant leadership model proposed by Greenleaf (2002) which calls for the leader to operate on the basis of "I serve" rather than "I lead" (Greenleaf, 2002). In offering this model of leadership, Greenleaf (2002) stated, "It has generally been my experience that the very top people of truly great organizations are servant-leaders. They are the most humble, the most reverent, the most open, the most teachable, the most respectful" (p. 12).

The leader in the servant leadership model seeks to fulfill the interests and needs of the organization as well as the betterment and development of those under them (this development is the litmus test of servant leadership). This selflessness is, again, indicative of humility and Morris, et al. (2005) suggest that it is humility that is the operating mechanism whereby a servant

leader functions. Collins (2001a) too observed this link and offered that leaders with higher levels of humility are more likely to be servant leaders.

The altruism that humility allows for (Morris, et al., 2005), is believed to be reciprocal (Ashton & Lee, 2007) where subordinates give back this selflessness to the leader. Altruism is a facet of agreeableness which, as mentioned, is one of the Big-Five personality traits in the Five-Factor Model and has been linked to humility (LaBouff, et al., 2012). Graziano, Habashi, Sheese & Tobin (2007) found a relation between agreeableness, helping behaviors, and “other indicators of reciprocal altruism” (as cited in LaBouff et al., 2012, p. 19) as did LaBouff et al. (2012). The latter found support for their humility-altruistic motivation hypothesis that states that, if humble people are altruistically motivated to help others out of concern for individual need, then dispositional humility is positively related to helping people in situations where there was little pressure of censure for failing to help (LaBouff, 2012).

Authentic leadership

Avolio, Luthans, and Walumbwa (2004) define authentic leaders as “those who are deeply aware of how they think and behave and are perceived by others as being aware of their own and others’ values/moral perspectives, knowledge, and strengths; aware of the context in which they operate; and who are confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient, and of high moral character” (as cited in Avolio & Gardner, 2005, p. 4). Each component of this definition can be related to the relational aspect of leadership as the self-awareness that is inculcated into the definition results in a process whereby authentic relationships can form (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). As mentioned previously, humility entails the honest assessment of one’s self in order to ascertain one’s strengths and weaknesses as well as remaining true to one’s self. We can conclude from the definition that authentic leaders exhibit just these qualities (Avolio & Gardner,

2005). May, Chan, Hodges, and Avolio (2003) reinforce the notion of humility in authentic leadership and offer that authentic leaders are humble by nature. Additionally, there is a strong desire in authentic leaders to serve their followers (George, 2003) which denotes a humble posture.

Transformational leadership

Going beyond simply giving pay for hours worked, transformational leadership stimulates followers by addressing their self-worth through a mutual relationship that seeks to meet the higher needs of and empower the follower (Bass & Avolio, 1994a, 1994b; Bass, 1996). Bass (1996) posits that this leadership philosophy consists of socialized and personalized components. Morris et al. (2005) suggest that humility is necessary in order for a leader to truly engage in transformational leadership in that it facilitates the egalitarian behavior of the leader to serve the interests of the organization while developing and empowering the followers. However, Peterson and Seligman (2004) offer a caution that if a leader is unwilling to place him/her self in the center of attention when needed for the purpose of inspiring his/her followers, than the humility may do a disservice to the organization.

Further, Morris et al. (2005) believe that three of the four component parts of transformational leadership (Bass, 1996); Bass & Avolio (1994a, 1994b) are influence by humility. First, the leader acting as role model through demonstration of ethical conduct and the consideration of the needs of others before the leaders require a level of humility. Second, humility facilitates the provision of intellectual stimulation that a leader can provide through encouragement for creative thinking by the followers and the refraining from any public criticism of the follower for bad choices for such creative problem solving. Finally, the leader

provides individualized attention to the followers in order to mentor and develop them into the next generation of leaders for the organization.

Spiritual leadership

Spirituality is a construct that can apply to many different leadership theories. As the term implies, it has a focus on the spirit of the leader. Giacalone and Jurkiewicz (2003) offer a definition of workplace spirituality that consists of organizational values that “promotes employees’ experience of transcendence through the work process, facilitating their sense of well being connected to others in a way that provides feelings of completeness and joy” (as cited in Dent, Higgins, & Wharff., 2005, p. 627).

Fry (2003) links spirituality to organizational leadership and suggest that a spiritual leader is one who helps others to care for their spirit as well as their heart, mind, and body. In other words, the ultimate goal of a spiritual leader is the continuing improvement, learning, and liberation of the members of an organization as a means of bringing out the best in them. The hope is an achievement of inner peace for all of the organizational members (Fry, 2003). And what this sounds a lot like it love.

Love, and specifically altruistic love, provides the connection between spiritual leadership and humility. Dent et al. (2005) caution that the concept of humility needs to remain in a conceptual framework if it is to be a part of being spiritual (p. 647). But, Fry (2003) insists that, in the vein of spiritual leadership, altruistic love is defined by its concepts that make up altruistic love: sense of wholeness, harmony, well-being produced through care, concern, and appreciation for both self and others (p. 709). At the foundation of these concepts are several values of which humility is one.

Charismatic leadership

In charismatic leaders there exist two types as identified by Howell and Shamir (2005): socialized and personalized. In the latter, the leader uses their charisma to exploit others for their own purposes disregarding their needs. Such leaders are quick to get rid of those who do not go along with their agendas. Socialized charismatic leaders, however, serve the interest of the

collective (Howell & Shamir, 2005). This socialized power motive discussed earlier is behind the motivation of the leader in such cases.

One can easily notice the connection between socialized charismatic leadership and humility. Kirkpatrick and Locke (1991) offered three primary behaviors of a charismatic leader: visioning, exemplary vision implementation, and communication. Nielson, Marrone, and Slay (2010) propose that such key behaviors are positively related to humility and that the influence of such leaders on follower behavior outcomes such as trust in the leader, motivation, and willingness to sacrifice are maximized when high levels of humility are perceived by the followers.

Christian leadership

From early on in the Christian religion, humility has been defined simply as truth; the truth about oneself before God (Cheline, 2003). In terms specifically related to Christian leadership, Malphurs (2003) posits that there are eight “core distinctives” of Christian leadership. One of those distinctives is emphasizing Godly character which would imply a humble posture. A few years after Malphurs published her book, Bekker (2009) proposed six characteristics of what he termed a mimetic Christological model of Christian leadership taken from an analysis of the *Rule* of St. Benedict. These characteristics could be construed as similar to Malphurs’ eight core distinctive, but perhaps more philosophical in nature. They are: (a) Christological mimesis, (b) kenosis (self-emptying), (c) servant posturing, (d), humane in its orientation, (e) active humility, and (f) missional obedience (as cited in Bekker, 2009, p. 147).

The *Rule* of St. Benedict actually outlines twelve steps toward achieving humility (Bekker, 2009; Cheline, 2003). Climbing all twelve “rungs of the ladder” will result in the achieving of humility and thus, the perfect love of God (Cheline, 2003). It is in this perfect love

that the “Abbot,” or leader chosen by the monks, will lead by exemplifying the “one who has been formed in living the Christian way” (Cheline, 2003, p. 111). One step in particular seems to stand in stark contrast to what western culture has been taught for generations, however. The sixth step calls for men to “be content with the poorest and worst of everything, and that in every occupation assigned him he consider himself a bad and worthless workman...” (as cited in Bekker, 2009).

While very few if any would make argument with any of these points, Niewold (2007) does consider that servant leadership/servant posturing, in its current secular form, may not be what the church needs in its leaders. As the contextual emphasis is on human fulfillment through service rather than being mimetic of Christ’s life or focusing on the transforming power of Jesus Christ, the servant posture focuses the emphasis incorrectly.

Level 5 leadership

In 2001, Jim Collins put forth a rather radical approach to leadership in the corporate world. As much of the writing on leadership had focused on traits of the leader, not much mention had been made of humility. What Collins proposed was that the most effective leaders have two traits in common: an intense professional will and extreme humility (Collins, 2001b).

In studying executives over a five year period, Collins (2001b) and his colleagues had concluded that those executives who were able to effect transformation within their respective organizations and bring their companies to the higher level of greatness, had both intense professional will and extreme humility. Possessing both of those qualities meant that the leader was a top level leader or “Level 5” leader in a hierarchal structure that had been created out of the research.

The hierarchy of leadership from Collins was not simply the traits of will and humility. The Level 5 leader would also possess all of the qualities of the lower levels as well such as: stimulates the group to high performance standards (level 4) and organizes people and resources toward the effective and efficient pursuit of predetermined objectives (level 3). Interestingly, Collins (2001b) explains how the duality correlates by describing the Level 5 leader as “modest and willful, shy and fearless” (p. 140). He points out too that none of those qualities should be mistaken for weakness as leaders who possess them are strong as well. This definition of humility aligns with much of what the research described throughout this essay determined as well.

Conclusion

Humility is certainly a construct worth exploring further and it is a construct that appears to be particularly important in answering some of the leadership questions of modern times. In a unique mixing of words by Jane Harper, a 30-year veteran of IBM, Taylor (2011) offers this:

So what does it take to unlock the quiet genius of colleagues, the collective genius of customers, and the hidden genius of potential collaborators of all sorts? The answer is certainly not less leadership. Nor is it more of the same leadership, but with a little less ego and a little smarter approach to brainstorming. What it takes is an entirely new leadership mind-set—a clear eyed recognition that in a high-pressure, fast-changing world, where the only way to outperform the competition is to outthink the competition, the most successful leaders are the ones who make it their business to get the best ideas from the most people, whatever their background, job title, or position in the hierarchy. In other words, what it takes is humbition (p. 25).

What is quite evident in reviewing the available literature on humility is that it is a trait that is associated with the strong and the determined. It is desirable for a follower and even more desirable as a leader. It allows a person to know their strengths as well as their weaknesses, to accept their mistakes, and to seek out those who are smarter and more talented than him or her in order to achieve the greatest desired outcome. When looked at in such a manner, it is easily seen why humility is such an important attribute for a leader and why it would indeed make him or her a Level 5 leader. The difficulty comes in trying to achieve it as Foster (1997) states, “the more we pursue it the more distant it becomes. To think that we have it is sure evidence that we don’t” (p. 122).

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