

Leadership instalments

Get the focus right.

By Dan Gaynor

WHO WE ARE AFFECTS WHAT WE DO.

For this reason, all great leadership is built on character. Character underpins all healthy and high performing teams just as it does the most toxic ones. While there are a number of characteristics that define great leaders, I'll devote this instalment to one of the most powerful – humility.

Humility has important ramifications. In his break-away bestseller, *Good to Great*, Jim Collins named Level Five Leaders as a key ingredient in all these companies, and it is humility that distinguishes them from Level Four Leaders. Teams have a way of raising humble leaders up and bringing prideful self-centred leaders down. They don't want to disappoint humble leaders – they care about them and work harder for them.

Humble leaders don't see themselves as greater than others, but as one part of a team with many other people – they don't need to be the centre of the show. But it can be easy to misunderstand humility. Too many people associate humility with weakness or low self-confidence when nothing could be more false, so let's pause for a definition. In his international best seller, *The Purpose Driven Life*, Rick Warren writes, "This is true humility; not thinking less of ourselves but thinking of ourselves less." Humility is all about focus.

The strength and confidence of humble leaders is focused on the team and its mission not on what they can take from leadership – their focus is outward. It's also common to see ambition and humility as opposites, yet they are not. They are comfortable partners. Humility makes ambition unselfish. This kind of ambition, the kind focused on the group, is essential.

Humility also enables leaders to admit mistakes, and to see doing so

as a sign of strength. When leaders will not admit mistakes they waste the time and energy of others trying to prove themselves right and they create unnecessary conflict. They lose the respect of their teams. Admitting mistakes is honest and makes us more approachable – it draws others closer. In humility we build trusting, respectful and honest relationships with the people we lead. Increased commitment and performance follow.

In his book *Crowfoot, Chief of the Blackfeet*, Hugh Dempsey paints the portrait of one of the west's great leaders, "Crowfoot was chief of the Blackfoot Nation in Southern Alberta during a twenty-year period which saw the disappearance of buffalo herds, the signing of treaties, starvation, rebellion, and the beginning of a new kind of life under the yoke of the white man." There are few examples in history when an entire way of life disappeared so quickly and traumatically. Born into the Blood tribe in 1830, Crowfoot grew up a fearless Blackfoot warrior.



Just imagine the conflict he must have felt as he faced the unavoidable choice between the annihilation of his people and cooperating with white men. Every fibre within him must have cried out to fight, but in stark contrast to most of his contemporaries, he put the warrior aside. He transformed himself into a skilled diplomat. He became the leading ambassador for his people and was among the first to learn to farm and enrol his children in the white man's school system. He won the respect and admiration of the whites and was instrumental in the survival of his people through the period of Treaty Seven. Without Chief Crowfoot's humility many more lives would have been lost.

Crowfoot's love for his people transformed him, from warrior to diplomat. Crowfoot was the very personification of strength in humility. Leaders like him put the team's interests first. Their focus is outward. If you are to build a high performance team, you and the members of your entire leadership team will lead from humility.

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For more on the fundamentals of building strong productive teams call for a workshop.