

leadership instalments

The Power of Humility

By Dan Gaynor

HUMILITY IS AT THE VERY CORE OF EVERY GREAT LEADER. In *Good to Great* Jim Collins named humility as the quality that distinguishes the level five leaders he described, and yet this quality that is so essential is often misunderstood. So let's begin with a definition:

Humility is not thinking less of ourselves, it is thinking of ourselves less.

Humility is about focus. While the prideful leader's focus is on self, the humble leader's focus is on team and mission – always! Humble leaders don't put themselves down. The best are strong and courageous – the issue is focus. And a steady focus on team and mission is the only way to develop a lasting high performance team.

Humility has other important ramifications:

- Teams lift up humble leaders and they have a way of bringing prideful leaders down. When we place ourselves in a superior position we cannot serve well as a leader. The best leaders don't see themselves as greater or superior to others, but one part of a team with many other important parts. From here they can put the interests of the team at the forefront. Humble leaders skillfully use the power they have, but they understand it to be a tool – not a measure of superiority. For them leadership is a privilege they earn and renew daily.
- Humility enables leaders to admit mistakes, and to see doing so as a sign of strength rather than weakness. This is important for two reasons: if we are not able to admit mistakes we will waste the time and energy of others and, we create unhealthy conflict defending positions that are wrong. We lose the respect of the team. Admitting mistakes is honest and makes us more approachable – it draws others closer.
- Humility enables introspection. The best leaders learn from every experience because they can see themselves critically. They see their skills as a rough stone to be polished continuously. This is why the best leaders keep getting better.

In his book *Crowfoot, Chief of the Blackfeet*, Hugh Dempsey paints the portrait of a great leader. Chief Crowfoot's focus on his people, in a way that demanded extraordinary personal sacrifice, stands out. Dempsey writes "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." Born in 1830, Crowfoot grew up a warrior. His bravery was legendary.



We can only imagine the conflict the warrior chief encountered as he faced the choice between the annihilation of his people and cooperating with white men. Every fibre within him must have cried out to fight, but he transformed himself into a skilled diplomat. He won the respect and admiration of the whites and was instrumental in shepherding his people through the period of Treaty Seven.

Chief Crowfoot must have had many introspective moments on the path from warrior to diplomat. He had the right focus. Humility drives leaders like Crowfoot. They confront each difficult choice with the group's welfare in mind. If you are to win the hearts of those you lead, you will lead from humility. If you hire other leaders, you'll insist on it.

Discussion questions:

1. How have the prideful and humble leaders you've known acted and how did they affect the performance and outlook of their teams?
2. Practically speaking, what does a focus on team and a focus on self look like at work?
3. How would you go about looking for humility in the people you interview?

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