Digital Collections @ Dordt

2008

Humility in Leadership: Abandoning the Pursuit of Unattainable Perfection

Erik Hoekstra
Dordt College, erik.hoekstra@dordt.edu

Antony Bell
Leadership Development, Inc.

Scott R. Peterson
Harbor Consulting Group

Recommended Citation

Hoekstra, E., Bell, A. & Peterson, S.R. (2008). Humility in Leadership: Abandoning the Pursuit of Unattainable Perfection. In S.A. Quatro & R. R. Sims (Eds.), Executive Ethics: Ethical Dilemmas and Challenges for the C-Suite. Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing.

Humility in Leadership: Abandoning the Pursuit of Unattainable Perfection

Abstract

Chapter on humility and leadership by Hoekstra, Bell, and Peterson in S.A. Quatro & R. R. Sims (Eds.), *Executive Ethics: Ethical Dilemmas and Challenges for the C-Suite.* Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing, 2008.

Keywords

humility, leadership, business ethics, executives

Disciplines

Business | Christianity | Human Resources Management | Organizational Behavior and Theory

Humility in Leadership: Abandoning the Pursuit of Unattainable Perfection

ERIK HOEKSTRA
Dordt College
498 4th Ave NE
Sioux Center, IA 51250
Voice: (712) 441-1914
E-mail: ehoekstra@dordt.edu

ANTONY BELL
Leader Development, Inc.
1903 Gadsden Street
Suite 201
Columbia, SC 29201
Voice: (803) 240-7591
E-mail: abell@leaderdevelopmentinc.com

SCOTT R. PETERSON
Harbor Consulting Group
1520 N. Main
Sioux Center, IA 51250
Voice: (712) 441-1408
E-mail: scott.peterson@harborcg.com

HUMILITY IN LEADERSHIP:
ABANDONING THE PURSUIT OF UNATTAINABLE PERFECTION

Humility in leadership is back on the table. It should never have left the table, but fortunately, in the past decade, both leadership scholars and practitioners alike have re-discovered its importance. The impetus for its recent reemergence started with Robert Greenleaf's (1970) Servant as Leader several decades ago, and has been considerably strengthened by people such as Jim Collins (2001) with his *Level 5 Leader* in Good To Great and Bill George (2003) with his exposition of Authentic Leadership. Many others have added their voice, and this shift in leadership theory and practice is now pervasive. Pervasive though it is, it is much misunderstood. What follows is an attempt to bring some clarity and to underscore the importance of humility in the ethical practice of corporate leadership.

If we define ethics as the study of values and customs of a particular person or group, we can define leadership ethics as the study of the values and customs of those who lead or seek to lead. Framed this way, humility in leadership becomes a primary ethical consideration. If cutting edge theory and practice call for leaders to blend humility with the more traditional leadership characteristics (what we term leadership passion, including personal charisma, achievement drive, and professional will), we need to dig deeper into the genesis of humility within a leader's values system.

What makes humility such an interesting and challenging topic in leadership is its seeming dichotomy with many of the more traditional 'strong leader' characteristics described above. For too long, the dominant paradigms of leadership have centered upon being a passionate leader—decisive, powerful, masculine, driven, self-assured, fearless, ruthless, risk-taking, and so on. As the need for humility in leadership becomes more

widely recognized (as well as the extraordinary power that comes with it), it is important to understand precisely what humility is, where it comes from, why it is important, and how it operates in the daily lives of already effective leaders and those striving to become more effective. And we need to go further—beyond understanding the nature and impact of humility, we need to help leaders not only understand the need for blending passion with humility, but also suggest ways to assist them in integrating both into their leadership ethic.

We begin by exploring the pressures towards perfectionism that up-and-coming leaders face in striving to be the best leaders they can be. The pursuit of perfection can get in the way of developing the appropriate blend of humility and passion. Next, we consider where proper humility stems from, the worldview and core values genesis of leadership. At the heart of this chapter is an exploration of five key ideas that, from our experience, define leadership in action—fallibility, vulnerability, transparency, inadequacy, and interdependency. Leaders who develop a comfort level with these five key abilities are those who engender loyalty from their followers and find long-term effectiveness in leadership. Aligned with each key attribute, are specific actions and expressions which help define and make practical each of the five key ideas. Finally, we explore the conditions for making humility permanent in the life of a leader.

The Pursuit of Perfection—Why Humility has a Hard Time Getting Good Press

Imagine a group of new corporate recruits at a Fortune 500 company. It is orientation day, and everyone is dressed to the nines, Blackberrys and DayTimers at the ready, and Waterman and Mont Blanc pens (freshly unwrapped as graduation gifts) poised to take notes. Think back a moment to our list of humility's attributes—fallibility,

vulnerability, transparency, inadequacy, and interdependency. What is the likelihood of these attributes of defining these fresh recruits in the orientation room? Sadly, pretty remote.

And understandably so. Given the competitive nature and the economic realities of the corporate world, those who show weakness, hesitate, admit mistakes, and lean on others are very often left behind. Particularly in the United States and throughout much of the Western industrialized world, the attributes that get leaders (especially young leaders) noticed are more often than not attributes of independence, determination, quick thinking, and a pioneering spirit—which form the backbone of a Darwinian selection process that separates high-potential leaders from their peers. Too often, however, these very attributes that define early leadership potential become the seeds of later destruction, putting leaders on a self-destructive course that ends up in derailment at some point later on in their careers.

These misperceptions create an inherent tension for leadership development and leadership selection, especially for selecting and developing high-potential leaders. The success factors that trigger early detection and allow young leaders to 'get noticed' in an organization—whether by superiors or peers—are the same factors that head these same leaders down a dangerous path. With success come the accolades and the promotions, and before long, these leaders start not only reading but also believing their press clippings. It inevitably starts going to their heads, and makes these young leaders feel quite special.

And in a very real sense, they *are* special. A balance sheet with a strong entry of core abilities on the professional passion side of the ledger is far from common.

Leadership devoid of drive, responsiveness, courage, initiative, and a certain dose of charisma is weak leadership. But as we have worked with leaders from many walks of life, it has become clear to us just how destructive it is for leaders to have such a one-sided balance sheet. The long list of powerful abilities and the abundance of strong talent often tempt leaders to think in ways that ultimately become very dangerous, because these attributes inhibit them from exercising true, effective leadership in any sustained and consistent manner.

At some point, these young leaders buy into a lie, and this is where the destruction begins. They buy into the pursuit of perfection in leadership. As these young leaders develop, this relentless pursuit sets in, and they whisper seductive messages to themselves such as 'never let them see you sweat,' 'damn the torpedoes, full steam ahead,' and 'throw caution to the wind'. Hearing time and time again this internal (and too often external) validation for the gifts and talents of leadership they exhibited early on creates a toxic environment for the alternative side of the leadership balance sheet—humility as defined by fallibility, vulnerability, transparency, inadequacy, and interdependency. They are like the proverbial frog in the kettle: throw a frog into a pot of boiling water, and the frog will jump out. But put a frog into a pot of cold water and slowly bring it to boil, the frog will never jump out—to its ultimate demise. It never makes the adjustment its changing circumstances require. For these young leaders, they never realize that their changing responsibilities require a very different response than the one they have conditioned themselves to give.

So instead of a lopsided balance sheet, we need a balance sheet where both sides of the ledger are strong—where professional passion on one side and personal humility

on the other combine to provide the exercise of true, long-term, effective leadership, just as Jim Collins described in his Level 5 Leadership. Too often, however, the dominant paradigm for leadership has focused on the professional passion ledger to the near exclusion of personal humility. And few organizations help their leaders: what gets young professionals noticed in many organizations are the accomplishments not typically seen as attributable to personal humility. So the conditions are set in which leaders are projected into this relentless pursuit of perfection in leadership.

Applying the psychological diagnosis of *neurotic imposture* to organizational life, Kets de Vries (2005), a prominent management scholar and trained psychotherapist, highlights how this perfectionist pressure creates a profound internal tension for upcoming leaders. Afraid to be 'found out', they must inevitably take one of three roads—either admit that individual efforts to attain perfection are impossible and instead develop appropriate humility, or continue to hold up the façade, live the charade of perfectionism and deal with the internal angst as long as possible, or—as he notes in extreme cases—carry out extreme and dangerous activities by consciously or subconsciously sabotaging their careers, thus avoiding the possibility of promotion and advancement—effectively releasing themselves from this perfectionist pressure—albeit in a damaging manner.

A lopsided balance sheet also has implications for a leader's ability to learn and to be taught. Chris Argyris (1991) writes of the particular challenge that high-potential leaders face in their leadership development in his insightful article, *Teaching Smart People How to Learn*. Having studied the leadership development of the 'best and brightest', Argyris found that the specific talents, strengths, and abilities of high-potential

leaders can create the internal conditions that make them the least able to learn—specifically, they lack the ability to reflect upon their actions, seek out new possibilities, and develop alternative approaches due to a defensiveness based on a universal human tendency to design one's actions around four basic values:

1. To always remain in unilateral control
2. To maximize "winning" and minimize "losing"
3. To suppress negative feelings
4. To be as "rational" as possible

Argyris found that the purpose of these values was to "avoid embarrassment or threat, feeling vulnerable or incompetent." It is precisely this defensiveness surrounding perfectionism that not only gets in the way of learning as Argyris describes, but also, we believe, short-circuits the development of true, appropriate humility in high-potential leaders.

The acknowledgement of this defensiveness and the appropriate realization that being an imposter chasing perfection is simply unattainable is the first major step forward in developing as a leader with the appropriate blend of professional passion and personal humility. This brings us to our working definition of humility in leadership, building upon both Lencioni (2002) and Marcum & Smith (2007)—

Humility is an appropriate self-awareness that avoids thinking too highly of ourselves, blended with a healthy self-respect that avoids thinking too little of ourselves—allowing us to realistically assess our own accomplishments while continuing the pursuit of our own personal development.

Figure 1

DEFINITION OF HUMILITY

Appropriate Self-Awareness	Realistic Assessment of Our Own Accomplishments
+	+
Healthy Self-Respect	On-Going Pursuit of Our Own Personal Development
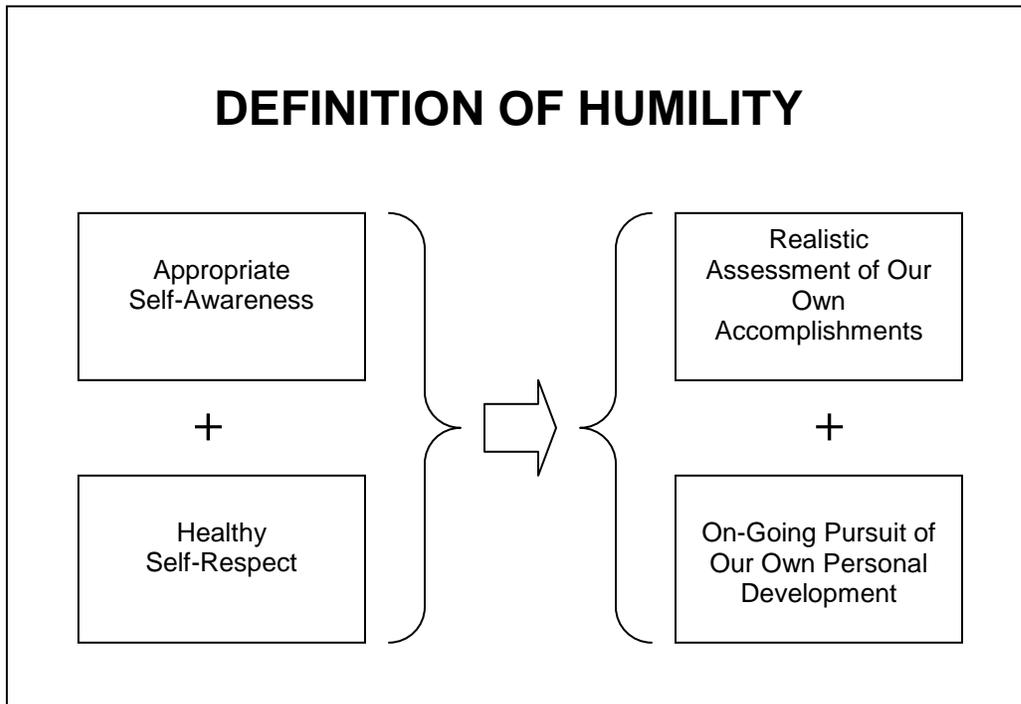
For leaders to develop to their full potential, they must find ways to integrate this type of humility with the more traditional leadership characteristics of such as charisma, drive, professional will, courage, and determination. It is precisely the co-existence of these two seemingly opposite characteristics—humility and passion—that leaders must strive to achieve in order to develop their full potential for long-term leadership effectiveness.

Worldview and Core Values—The Genesis of Humility in Leadership

What we see on the outside is a reflection of what is inside. The visible behaviors of leaders that we observe every day are expressions of their deeply held internal beliefs, values, and concepts—whether they are conscious of them or not. We call this a leader's

worldview. The figure below helps clarify this—on the outer ring, we find a leader's

behaviors—how they carry out their leadership tasks day-to-day. Deep within the

subconscious and unconscious layers of the self are the core values and worldview that a

leader has developed throughout their life. In the middle layers, important attributes and

characteristics such as emotional intelligence, personality type, and knowledge, skills,

and talents flavor the observable leadership behaviors. It is helpful to think of this

conceptually as a 'leadership onion' (Zigarmi, Blanchard, O'Connor, & Edeburn, 2005)

in which the outer layers are 'flavored' by the inner layers. Whatever inner thoughts a

leader holds at the core will come out, filtered and flavored by the middle layers, in the

outward behaviors which followers respond to daily.

Figure 2

The Leader's Individual Foundation

World View & Values

Talents & Aptitudes

Emotional Intelligence

Personality Preference

Behaviors

Performance
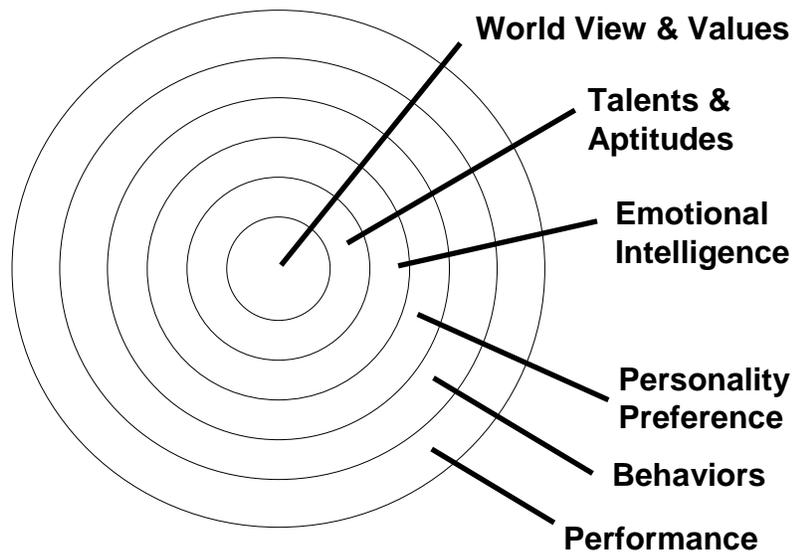
Too often, leaders spend little time, energy, or focus on the core of their leadership onion—worldview and values. The fast pace of change, the multitude of daily responsibilities, the voice mails, emails, meetings, and frenetic schedules of most leaders leave little time for reflection on the deeper core beliefs, values, and worldview issues of life. Without time to reflect and develop a proper center, leaders often accept, adopt, or borrow a worldview from others. Management concepts such as 'Don't get too close to the people you lead', 'This isn't personal, it's business', and 'The purpose of a corporation is to maximize shareholder value' are all dominant worldview statements that operate in the lives of many leaders today—often times with little or no reflective choice or intentionality.

Whether or not leaders truly believe these statements is—sadly—not a part of many leadership development programs. Most training and development efforts for leaders focus on the outer ring of leadership behaviors, without digging deeper into the worldview and values issues at the core. One of our clients, James, was a technically proficient, hard-charging, high-potential leader in a finance company. With a terrific resume of successful projects early in his career, James had been asked to take on greater and greater responsibility and a wider span of control. As he was promoted, James' responsibilities grew to include more and more the growth and development of others and less and less direct 'hands on' project-related duties. As James struggled with departmental turnover, accusations of micromanagement, and personal burnout from having to work harder and harder just to keep up, he had been sent to various training programs to assist him. Time management sessions, delegation training programs,

coaching seminars, all seemed to have little impact on James' ability to lead well. When we were asked to work with James, we began not with the outer ring of the onion—his behaviors—but with the deeper core of James' beliefs, values, and worldview. As we helped James pull back the layers of his leadership onion, he found that many of the leadership behaviors he was caught up in were due to his worldview—a self-centered, win at all costs, leader as perfectionist outlook. James also found that this worldview was not an intentional choice, but rather something he had accepted along the way in his professional career. As he reflected on the core issues of his leadership, James eventually came around to answer the deeper questions—why am I here, what is the purpose of my leadership in the lives of those I lead, what contribution do I want to make, and what legacy do I want to leave in the world? With time, the alternative (and intentionally chosen) worldview that James developed began to flavor his leadership behaviors. Slowly, and with great effort, James began to become other-centered—working personally to support, develop, and guide his followers—rather than controlling, micromanaging, and directing his followers. The adjustment of James' worldview and his behavioral change was the development of humility in his leadership.

James embraced humility in leadership not by a disciplined effort to change his behaviors but by a deliberate examination of the one real factor that could most profoundly impact his behaviors—his worldview. To his great credit as a leader, he did what few leaders do: he examined his life, and as Socrates pointed out thousands of years ago, "The unexamined life is not worth living."

This inner reflection is vital. Taking the time to reflect upon the deeper concepts of worldview and core values is vital to the type of leadership development that integrates

humility and provides long-lasting impact. Critical though it is, however, it is far from

easy, and leaders struggle to engage in that kind of thinking. It requires help and

discipline, and that help and discipline include enlisting the advice and counsel of a

mentor or coach, regularly writing down thoughts and reflections in a leadership journal,

spending time regularly in mediation and/or prayer, and drafting a personal mission

statement as a permanent reminder of one's worldview. We have seen the value and

impact of these powerful tools and activities as we have worked with leaders, digging

deeper into the core issues of their worldview.

However one accomplishes this reflection and clarification of worldview, it is

essential to the development of the humility side of the leadership balance sheet. Without

resolving the core, any leadership development and training effort will only have a

temporary impact on the outer layer of a leader's behaviors. Lasting change in leadership

requires resolution and clarity on worldview, purpose, and core values. The root of

humility—the Latin *humus* for ground or earth—hints at what appropriate self-awareness,

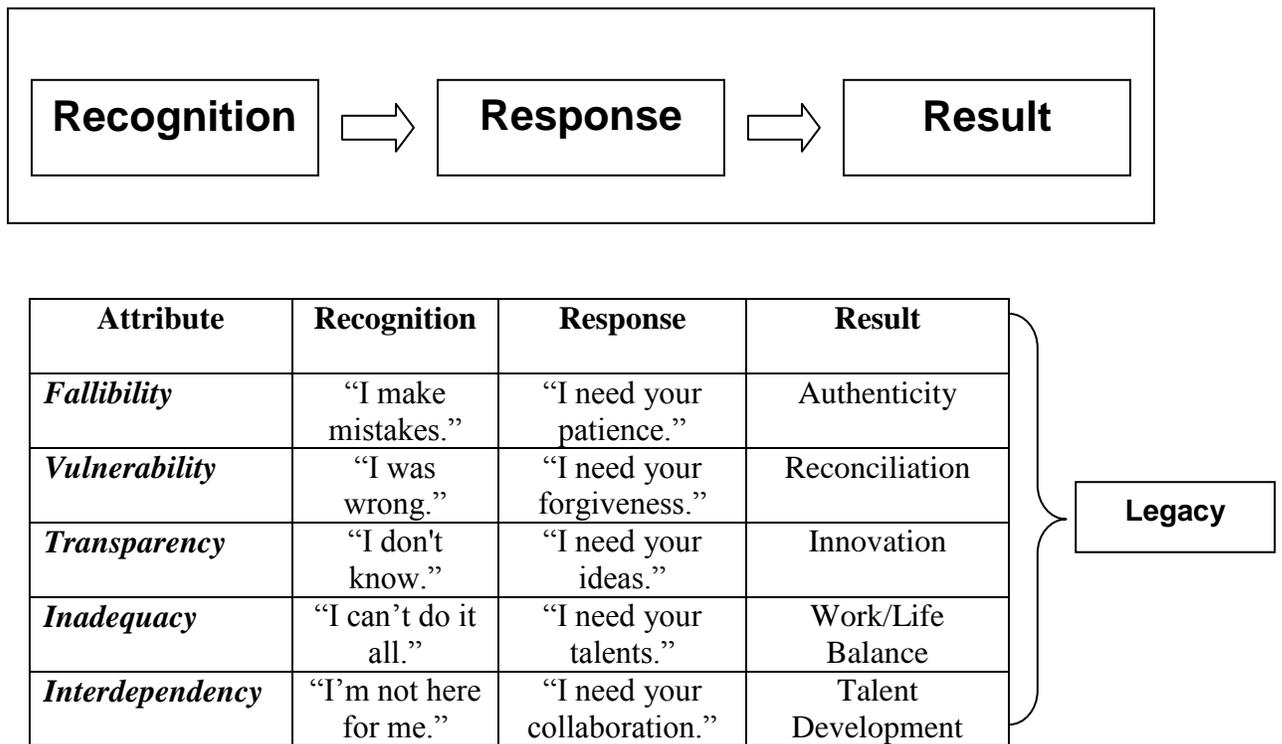feedback, and reflection does in the life of a leader, it keeps them grounded.

The Foundations of Leadership Humility

After a leader comes to clarity of purpose, values and worldview, the next steps

are to understand what true humility in leadership is based on. In a similar way to the

leadership onion concept, if a leader simply tries to 'act humbly', it won't work. There is

an essential truth that undergirds the development of humility in leadership: you can't

get at it directly. You cannot wake up one day and say to yourself, 'From now on, I'm

going to be humble'. It must begin with worldview, and not just with any worldview: it

needs to be one that allows you to understand and integrate the five foundational

principles of humility—fallibility, vulnerability, transparency, inadequacy, and interdependency.

Only when a leader truly understands each of these, recognizes the need to act upon them, and takes the initiative to respond appropriately, will they yield the appropriate results. In our effort here to assist leaders with humility, we will explore each of the foundational elements in that way—explanation, recognition, response, and result.

Figure 3

| Recognition | ⟹ | Response | ⟹ | Result |

Attribute	Recognition	Response	Result	
Fallibility	"I make mistakes."	"I need your patience."	Authenticity	
Vulnerability	"I was wrong."	"I need your forgiveness."	Reconciliation	**Legacy**
Transparency	"I don't know."	"I need your ideas."	Innovation	
Inadequacy	"I can't do it all."	"I need your talents."	Work/Life Balance	
Interdependency	"I'm not here for me."	"I need your collaboration."	Talent Development	

First, we will explain the nature of each one of these attributes, then we will explore what leaders need to recognize about themselves (Recognition). We then provide the appropriate response a leader must give to each element (Response), and finally, we will show the benefit to the leader that comes from embracing the attribute, recognizing

what they need they need to recognize, and providing the appropriate response (Result). All of the elements then combine to develop the humility side of the leader's balance sheet with the goal of leaving a permanent, enduring leadership legacy.

Fallibility—Accepting Imperfection and Seeking Authenticity

On the journey to humility, a leader needs to confront and accept that the pursuit of perfection is an impossible pursuit. Perfection is unattainable. Earlier, we identified the negative pressure and destructive power that seeking perfection has for a leader. With the realization that mistakes can, will, and do happen, pressure is released in a very positive way, and a leader discovers a healthy acceptance and rebuilds a productive, forward-thinking energy.

The recognition that a leader must come to with fallibility is this: 'I make mistakes.' Not simply that mistakes will happen in some sort of a third party, random way; but rather the leader needs to accept and recognize that followers do not expect a leader to be perfect. When a leader recognizes this internally, the external response to followers must be, 'I need your patience.' By internally recognizing that 'I make mistakes,' and by externally responding with, 'I need your patience,' a leader demonstrates an authenticity that is very appealing and attractive to the people the leader leads. Embracing an appropriate fallibility, the leader is freed from living out the charade of perfectionism and the façade of never being wrong.

This is not about being soft or lowering standards. Far from it. Having high-standards and holding oneself and others accountable for quality performance continues to be just as important. The difference is that by accepting and exposing personal fallibility, leaders cease to be 'above' their followers and begin to create a safe

environment for authenticity, where not only the leader but also everyone else can be authentic. Leaders who point out the fallibility of followers without acknowledging their own are like the 'emperor who has no clothes.'   Everyone knows that leaders make mistakes, and everyone knows that their own is no exception, so it is very refreshing when a leader actually admits it. It is actually very endearing. Followers see the mistakes their leaders make and accept their mistakes without expecting them to be superhuman. By recognizing their personal fallibility, then, leaders become real and authentic—and build a climate of credibility. And they do it without sacrificing quality or lowering standards.

Vulnerability—Asking Forgiveness and Seeking Reconciliation

It is one thing for leaders to generally acknowledge that they make mistakes … it is quite another to acknowledge the specific situations where they have either taken a wrong path or created pain through some misguided action. Accepting fallibility in a general sense is far easier than becoming vulnerable, because vulnerability means admitting specific wrongs and asking for forgiveness for those wrongs.

This second foundational aspect of humility—vulnerability—is precisely that—a willingness to look at our own contribution to the crises, problems, and challenges we encounter. Consider the metaphor of a window and a mirror: when we have worked with leaders who struggle with vulnerability, their first reaction to a problem or crisis is to look out the window for someone to blame. Faced with the same problems or crises, leaders with true humility look first in the mirror to see how their own actions or inactions contributed to the problem. And when things are going well, these same humble leaders look out the window to acknowledge the contributions of others in the

success. By contrast, leaders who struggle with vulnerability go to the mirror instead of the window in times of success and prosperity, and, like Narcissus, enamored with themselves, they succeed in one thing—alienating their followers.

Vulnerability means recognizing that 'I was wrong' and responding to the recognition by seeking forgiveness from those we have wronged or hurt. Too often, leaders we have worked with say things like, 'That was a mistake,' or 'Something went wrong,' and assume that such statements are enough to clear the air. How mistaken they are. When things go wrong, being vulnerable as a leader requires a specific acknowledgement and a focused apology rather than a vague statement or a carefully crafted press release. The latter create noise; they don't generate reconciliation.

When a leader clearly, personally, and unambiguously accepts responsibility and says, 'I ask for your forgiveness', the leader moves from authenticity to reconciliation. When the slate has been wiped clean on past struggles, the relationship between leader and follower can go forward without residual ill-will or leftover pain. This second foundational stage of building humility requires courage for a leader, but once exercised, the trust gained through the reconciliation is a huge and substantial benefit.

Transparency—Admitting Ignorance and Seeking Innovation

As leaders move along in their career, the scope of their responsibilities becomes wider, and therefore more complex. In previous positions, the challenges they faced were more concrete, were based on shorter time horizons, and sent fewer tentacles of impact across the organization. As leaders move into this new realm of increased responsibilities, the easy answers are no longer adequate for the new realities they face.

If humility is absent, leaders respond by trying, usually unsuccessfully, to continue to be the 'know it all.' Indicators of such leadership come in many forms—requiring information to flow through the leader first, needing to sign off on all decisions, and becoming a bottleneck to the free flow of ideas. Inevitably, this type of leadership stifles creativity and innovation. As the leader keeps trying to be the one with all the 'right' answers, followers (either visibly or invisibly) begin to shut down and stop thinking creatively, offering ideas, or providing suggestions. Consider the former Communist bloc: for sixty years, all thinking and ideas were generated by the central government, creating a stifled population devoid of innovation, creativity, and entrepreneurialism.

While we can see the devastating impact of this type of control in such large-scale historical examples, it is more difficult to see how this same phenomenon can be at work in our own leadership. Recognizing as a leader that we don't have to have all the answers and saying to our followers, 'I don't know' is a profoundly significant (and courageous) step.

For many leaders, there is a deep-rooted fear associated with saying, 'I don't know;' they consider it as the ultimate sign of weakness in leadership. But the reality is that when followers see their leader make this acknowledgement, their natural response is to bring their best thinking to the leader. As leaders move from the recognition of their own ignorance to the response of telling their followers, 'I need your ideas', what often follows is the innovation and creative thinking required for the complex issues and challenges they face. When unleashed by an appropriately humble leader, this collaboration takes hold and energizes the followers. Rather than being a sign of

weakness, the transparency created by the leader becomes a badge of courage, inspiring collaborative work between the leader and the led.

Inadequacy—Acknowledging Mortality and Seeking Work/Life Balance

Similar to the trap of being 'the one with all the answers' is the trap of being 'the one who does it all,' an affliction suffered by leaders with too much passion and too little humility, who see themselves as the reincarnation of Superman. Trying to 'do it all' is just as dangerous as trying to 'know it all,' and just as destructive to a leader's career. Humility requires leaders to courageously deal with their own inadequacy to work harder and longer—to keep more and more of today's responsibilities while taking on more and more of tomorrow's challenges. The statistics on burnout are staggering—work/life balance is an illusive, yet very important aspect of long-term leadership effectiveness.

Charan, Drotter, & Noel (19xx) have noted a peculiar tendency of newly promoted leaders at any level—underworking. The crux of their theory is based on having worked with leaders at various levels in organizations and constantly finding leaders doing the work of subordinates. Most often, this work is comfortable and comforting—primarily because it is the work that the leader was doing—and doing successfully—just prior to the promotion. It takes courage and discipline to leave our previous functions and responsibilities behind, especially when we did them so well. And to leave them behind, leaders have to be willing to admit to themselves their inadequacy to do it all. Without such an admission, they add new responsibilities to the old, and end up stressed out and burned out—and surrounded by a staff waiting to be given something to do.

Only when leaders honestly look inside and acknowledge the fallacy of being superhuman can they begin to go down the road to humility. Humbly admitting to oneself, 'I can't do it all' is the recognition that allows leader to tell their followers, 'I need your talents.' And when leaders extend this invitation, a new energy is unleashed for both leaders and followers alike. The leader begins to see not only the possibility of achieving a reasonable work/life balance, but also the joy of watching followers unleash their talents in the pursuit of their collective goals. For their followers, this admission and invitation validate their role in helping the leader and give them new opportunities to reach for their potential.

Interdependency—Moving from Self-Centered to Other-Centered and Developing Talent

One of the marks of great leaders, leaders who genuinely live out this humility, is the selflessness of their leadership. What they communicate is that 'it's not about me. I'm not here for my own interests. I'm here for the good of the organization.' While this kind of unselfishness is remarkable for its absence, research underscores its power. This was one of the characteristics that Jim Collins uncovered in his research in *Good to Great*, where what he defined as 'Level 5' leaders were instrumental in taking their organizations from good performance to outstanding performance. Such leaders combined an intense drive and focus with an unswerving commitment to the good of the organization—even at the expense of their own particular needs and interests.

When a leader recognizes that 'I'm not here for me' (the recognition step), it has a profound effect on the organization. It is something akin to a paradigm shift, and it may take an epiphany, or even a crisis, to generate such a shift. Once leaders embrace this paradigm shift, they start wearing a different set of glasses and they look at the

organization through a different set of lenses. They see needs and opportunities in a new light, and more importantly, they see their people in a different light: instead of tools to further their own interests, they are now partners in the pursuit of their collective goals. Once leaders realize and can say to themselves, 'I'm not here for me,' it is not a difficult step to be able to say to others, 'I need your collaboration' (the response to the recognition).

When leaders acknowledge their inadequacy (the previous block in humility), they recognize the need for the talents of their people. With interdependency, the final attribute of humility, great leaders recognize that they need not only the talents of their people but also the committed engagement of those talents to the goals they are collectively pursuing. This means involving them creatively and meaningfully in the definition of their common goals and the means they will use to achieve them.

Interdependency has another very positive side-effect. Once leaders recognize that 'I'm not here for me' and respond with 'I need your collaboration,' they look at the development of their people in a different way. Instead of developing people for the pursuit of their own particular interests (the characteristic of a leader devoid of humility and this particular expression of it), they think of development in terms of the needs of the individual and the interests of the organization. In effect they say, 'I need your collaboration, and I believe you would benefit greatly if you could develop your skills and strengthen your talent in this particular area—and it would also help us enormously as we pursue these goals.' Interdependency breeds a development mindset.

And the results are nothing short of spectacular—levels of productivity hitherto unmatched and unheard of. Interdependency is a very powerful force, but it shouldn't

surprise us, because interdependency not only unleashes talent but it also channels the talent towards the interests and purposes of the organization. If ever there were a pragmatic case to be made for humility in leadership, it is right here—interdependency as a key expression of humility.

So there we have the five key foundations of humility—five key expressions of humility in leadership: fallibility, vulnerability, transparency, inadequacy, and interdependency. All five are critical and all five are intertwined and interrelated—they come as a package, and all five combine to create authentic and genuine humility in a leader. At the same time, they represent a journey: great leaders who exhibit this concept are constantly learning and never claim to have arrived. Which leads us to our final point: how do we make humility last?

Making Humility Last—The Importance of Teachability, Accountability & Feedback

Powerful though it is, everything in the workplace conspires against humility. Many start out well; few finish well. However well intentioned, leaders who at some point embrace the importance of humility can also at some point abandon its pursuit and practice. The more a leader advances, the harder it gets: the accolades come at a faster pace, the flattery becomes more pervasive, and the vying for favor becomes more competitive. It takes a strong leader to maintain an enduring commitment to humility.

So for those leaders who sustain and strengthen this humility, what keeps them strong? We see three things in the leaders we work with, all three closely related: teachability, accountability and feedback.

Leaders who maintain this commitment to humility are committed learners. They never feel they have arrived, and they are constantly open to fresh ideas, fresh input, and fresh stimulation, whatever the source. Typically they keep a leadership journal and record the lessons they are learning, to make sure they don't forget them.

Leaders also need people they can trust who hold them accountable. They need people who themselves embrace the value of humility in leadership, and who have been given permission to ask the tough questions, even when there is no evidence that the tough questions are warranted. Such people may not exist within the organization; people outside the organization may have greater freedom and less vested interest in the questions they ask and the advice they give.

But that doesn't mean that leaders shouldn't be accountable to the people they work for and who work for them. The really great leaders, those who exemplify this kind of humility, create an internal environment where accountability is embraced—giving those around them the responsibility and freedom to hold the leader accountable in a safe environment. Asking the tough questions is encouraged and supported, not sanctioned nor brushed aside.

Closely associated to accountability is feedback. Accountability defines the standards and identifies the people that provide it; feedback describes the process. Feedback is the mechanism that tells the leader how he or she is doing, both good and bad. Feedback comes to leaders both formally and informally. It can come by way of a formal 360-feedback questionnaire; with multiple people (including the leader himself or herself) responding to a structured set of questions based on desirable leadership behaviors in order to measure the leader's performance. In addition to ratings, a quality

360-degree feedback instrument will provide space for open-ended comments, both positive and constructive ideas for the leader to consider.

Feedback may also come in the shape of people—direct reports, peers, and mentors, for example—who on their own initiative give the leader feedback on his or her performance. For people to be willing to give that kind of feedback, leaders need to create an environment where feedback is safely given and warmly welcomed, whatever the content of the feedback. Great leaders, leaders who embrace the humility we have been describing, are constantly and constructively asking, 'How am I doing? What should I keep doing? What should I stop doing? What should I start doing?'

For C-suite leaders, getting this type of feedback will likely require actively 'hunting' or 'trolling' for such feedback. The bureaucracy of organizational silos and layers, in addition to deferral and negative assumptions about giving feedback to 'the big boss', will likely act as a series of filters to receiving regular feedback without action by the leader. Making it specific—'How did I come across in that meeting', 'What specific improvements could I make to my presentation', and 'Please give me two suggestions on improving this report'—are context specific questions to drive feedback. In addition, when senior leaders ask followers for this type of specific feedback, there is a hidden benefit. Not only does the leader receive constructive feedback to grow and develop, but also a trust-bond is built between the leader and follower. In the act of asking for the feedback, the leader elevates the status of the follower, demonstrates trust in the opinions and ideas of the follower, and displays a trust and openness to that follower. By actively seeking out feedback, the leader immediately demonstrates all of the foundational

attributes of humility—fallibility, vulnerability, transparency, inadequacy, and interdependency.

Leaders who ask these questions, who surround themselves with people willing to answer them, and who take to heart the responses they hear—these are the leaders who maintain an ongoing and durable humility, and when they combine this humility with the drive and passion on the other side of the ledger, they create a balance sheet that reflects a genuine greatness in leadership. These are the leaders who deeply impact their world, the leaders who leave an enduring legacy.

Appendix—Questions and Listening as Essential Tools of Humility in Leadership

Two very practical fruits of true humility are the ability to ask great questions and the ability to listen well. In leaders we have helped make the transition from traditionally unbalanced leadership based on passion only to a more even-handed approach balancing passion and humility appropriately, these two abilities have proven their importance time and again.

In our coaching sessions, we often ask leaders to self-report two statistics—first, the ratio of time they spend during meetings or in sessions with followers making statements compared to the time they spend asking them questions. The second is the percentage of time spent during a typical "leadership day" listening versus speaking. For leaders overbalanced on the passion side of the ledger, the ratio of statements to questions is nearly always at least 10:1 and the listening time is normally less than 20%. For true humility to develop, these statistics need to change.

When a leader asks good questions—the type that drive followers to deeper levels of thought—the leader immediately exhibits many of the five foundational attributes of humility. They show an interest in the thoughts and contributions of the team, they put themselves in a supportive, guiding role, and they challenge followers to greater levels of performance. Seeking to be understood through statements and edicts builds the power and control of a leader over the followers; seeking to understand through questions and listening builds the authority and loyalty from the followers toward the leader.

The second aspect, the act of listening—truly focused time seeking to understand—creates energy and spurs others' imagination. In the <u>Servant as Leader</u>, Greenleaf (1970) highlights the importance of listening:

> 'I have a bias about this which suggests that only a true natural servant automatically responds to any problem by listening first. When one is a leader, this disposition causes one to be seen as a servant first. I have seen enough remarkable transformations in people who have been trained to listen to have some confidence in this approach. It is because true listening builds strength in other people.'

Our experience in helping leaders grow in their leadership humility bears out what Greenleaf is saying. Leaders who regularly exhibit the art of listening—and who ask great questions in order to listen well—have stronger teams and stronger team members. They have more loyal followers. And they see more clearly and further: they see beyond the immediate, beneath the surface, and above the noise. The insight listening and asking give, as well as the ability to build and strengthen their people that listening and asking questions releases, is very powerful. They are indispensable elements of great leadership.

REFERENCES

Argyris, C. 1991. Teaching Smart People How to Learn. *Harvard Business Review*, 69(3): 99-109.

Charan, R., Drotter, S., & Noel, J. 2001. *The Leadership Pipeline*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Collins, J. 2001. *Good To Great*. New York: Harper Collins.

George, W. 2003. *Authentic Leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Greenleaf, R. K. 1970. *The Servant as Leader*. Indianapolis: The Robert K. Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership

Kets de Vries, M. F. R. 2005. The Dangers of Feeling Like a Fake. *Harvard Business Review*, 83(9): 108-116.

Lencioni, P. 2002. The Problem with Humility. *On Mission & Leadership*., Hesselbein F. & Johnston, R. eds. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Marcum, D. & Smith, S. 2007. *Egonomics.* New York: Fireside.

Zigarmi, D., Blanchard, K., O'Connor, M., & Edeburn, C. 2005. *The Leader Within*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.