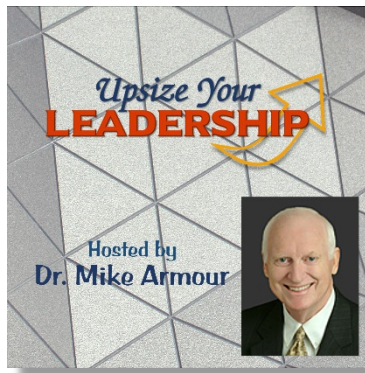


The Most Misunderstood Leadership Virtue

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Episode UYL2107

Podcast Date: June 17, 2021



For more than two decades, Jim Collins' book *Good to Great* has been a "must-read" for any leader. In that volume he told riveting stories about corporate leaders who did something extraordinary. They took a long-established company which had historically performed on par with its peers, and made it the unrivaled leader in its industry, head and shoulders above everyone else.

Not surprisingly, Collins looked for common denominators in the way that these CEO's engendered such success. And his inquiry led him to isolate certain virtues which were

characteristic of their decisive leadership.

In this podcast we're going to delve into one of those virtues. I call it the most misunderstood of all leadership virtues. By the mid-point of today's program, you will know why I describe it this way. Today's content will be as thought-provoking and challenging as any I've ever presented on this podcast. And it lays out principles which, when put into practice, are some of the most powerful ways to Upsize Your Leadership.

Unless you're in the field of marketing, the name Mary Lawrence probably means little to you. But in my youth, she was an icon in the field of advertising. Her firm had an unparalleled reputation for creativity. Its marketing teams produced dozens of commercials and taglines which are now legendary.

Above the entrance to her headquarters in New York City were these words, engraved in stone: "If we were humble, we would be perfect."

It was a modern twist on an old adage, usually traced to Benjamin Franklin, that humility is the one virtue which it's impossible to attain. Once we achieve it, we celebrate by saying, "I've finally gained humility" — at which point we are no longer humble!

I start today with these light-hearted anecdotes because they illustrate an unfortunate truth. Namely, humility is more likely to be a subject of jokes and light-hearted humor than a topic for

serious consideration, especially in discussions of leadership. One notable exception is the attention which Jim Collins devoted to humility in his book *Good to Great*.

Examining the common traits of the CEOs who took companies from perennial solid performers to enduring pace-setters, Collins cites the pivotal role of humility in their style of leadership. The widespread popularity of Collins' book thus sparked countless follow-on discussions of humility in leadership.

Still, with all of the interest which Collins aroused, humility receives relatively little focus in management and leadership literature. Rarely will you find an article on how humility has been purposefully incorporated into a company as a celebrated leadership virtue. This tells me that business leaders are more prone to give lip-service to humility than to devote themselves wholeheartedly to attaining it. Talking about humility is a way of virtue-signaling. Practicing it is an altogether different matter.

Sure, humility is often touched on in leadership training. But it's rare to hear a substantive discussion of how to operationalize it.

Why such neglect of humility? In part it's because our Western models of leadership have their roots in Greek and Roman culture, where humility was hardly a virtue. For the Greeks, being a "real man" (the Greeks and Romans never thought of leadership in terms of women) meant being so tough and strong that you always settled things on your own terms.

Thus, even though the Greeks wrote extensively on ethics, none of these works praised forgiveness as a manly quality. Forgiveness was viewed as weakness. Real men did not forgive. They exacted revenge.

Thus, to Greeks there was no finer exemplar of "being a man" than Odysseus (or Ulysses, as he's commonly known in English). He was away from family for a decade while fighting in the Trojan War. Then, his voyage home was driven into strange waters by a horrendous storm. Lost, he spent another ten years reaching his destination. There he discovered an entourage of men who, presuming him dead, were pursuing the hand of his wife. Without hesitation, he mercilessly slaughtered them on the spot. Odysseus was clearly not inclined to "turn the other cheek," to borrow from the language of Jesus.

Indeed, Christianity's emphasis on mercy, forgiveness, and humility added to the disdain with which Romans greeted this new-fangled religion. Not that the Greco-Roman world discounted humility altogether. After all, Greek theater abounded with stories of overweening pride which led to tragic results. But these dramatic themes aimed at warning against unchecked arrogance, not at purposefully promoting humility.

In time, of course, the Christian ethic eventually prevailed in the Greco-Roman world, and that ethic continues to shape the modern world, as it did the medieval world. Business ethics, for example, are largely an extension of principles from Jesus, Moses, and the Hebrew prophets. It's therefore easy to presume that our models of leadership are drawn from Christian precedents.

But our concept of leadership per se owes much more to the Greeks and Romans than to Jesus. Leadership is typically thought of in terms of winning, not serving. In terms of “taking charge,” not collaborating. In terms of glorious achievement, not humble appreciation for the opportunity to serve.

Little wonder, then, that humility finds little space in contemporary works on leadership. It was equally disregarded by the Greeks and Romans, whose outlook has left such a pronounced stamp on us. Compounding this cause of neglect is the misguided way in which people picture humility. In my leadership workshops I regularly ask my audience what it means, from their perspective, to say that a person is humble. Often as not they respond with descriptions which suggest a personality which is docile, acquiescent, even reluctant to take a forceful stand.

None of these qualities, of course, are traits which we seek in leaders. If this is the way that we view humility, it’s little wonder that “being humble” is not an attribute which we readily associate with strong leadership. Moreover, it is the frequency with which I receive this type of response which leads me to believe that humility is the most misunderstood leadership virtue in our language.

Truth be told, genuine humility requires both a healthy ego and tremendous personal strength of character. Some of the world’s most effective leaders, indeed, have been noted for their humility.

In our own history, men like George Washington and Abraham Lincoln come quickly to mind. Once the Treaty of Paris was signed, ending the American War for Independence, King George III of England asked his ministers, “What will George Washington do now?” The king presumed that Washington would follow the pattern of all other conquerors and successful revolutionaries in history and would proclaim himself king.

To the monarch’s surprise, his advisors answered, “Washington will go back to Virginia and become a farmer again.”

“If that’s true,” the king replied, he is the most humble man on earth.” A few weeks later, Washington was back at Mount Vernon, running his farm.

Despite the Greek and Roman low regard for humility, the ancient world, too, had exemplars of this virtue. Perhaps no example is more striking example than that of Moses, whose impact on history is rivaled by only a handful of others. Yet, the Bible describes him as the most humble man of his era.

This is a striking statement, given the Bible’s telling influence on elevating humility as a core value. If Moses exemplifies an humble leader in the Biblical sense of the word, then humility is far-removed from some namby-pamby, weak-kneed approach to life.

“Humility” traces its origins to the Latin word *humus*, which means “dirt” or “earth.” The verb “humiliate” has the same origin. To humiliate someone is to treat the person like dirt. True

humility, of course, would never humiliate someone. But the root connection between “humility” and dirt offers a telling insight.

Humility, you see, is grounded in the realization that life inevitably ends with a return to dirt — “from dust to dust,” as the expression goes. Since this inglorious end awaits all of us, it hardly behooves us to be boastful or full of ourselves. Ultimately, we all turn into dust. And a hundred years from now, people will be hard-pressed to distinguish between the dust of today’s most eminent aristocrat and the dust of the most abject beggar.

By reminding us that we are of dust and will one day return to it, true humility never lets us lose sight of our human mortality with all of its limitations. Humility keeps us attuned to our frailty, our inadequacy, and our vulnerability. It therefore keeps ego in balance. Humility is the “golden mean” (to borrow from Aristotle) between arrogance and conceit on one side and an anemic existence with no strength of ego on the other.

The root meaning of humility makes its way into phrases such as “an humble village” or someone’s “humble beginnings.” Here the word “humble” clearly conveys the sense of being unpretentious. Humility is primarily an unpretentious attitude toward life and our relationships with others. We are not puffed up about our own self-importance. We don’t act like the world revolves around us. We don’t react defensively when caught in a miscue.

We hear a call for being unpretentious when people say that they want leaders who are “truly authentic.” Stripped of all of its nuances, “being authentic” basically boils down to having no pretense. This very lack of pretense helps people feel more comfortable in being open, candid, and truthful with their leader. It also accelerates the pace at which they build trust in those who lead them.

Because my coaching and training put great emphasis on what I call Trust-Centered Leadership, I’m particularly attuned to the role that humility plays in establishing trust in a leader.

For the leader who wants to enjoy high trust, personal humility returns exceptional dividends. Here are eight of them.

1. Humility lets us dismiss concerns about being the center of attention, so that we can step aside and let others shine. People don’t tend to trust people who insist on taking all of the credit or hogging the spotlight.
2. Humility leaves us open to what others can teach us, no matter what their station in life. As a result, we learn and develop wisdom more quickly, because we let everyone be our mentor.
3. Humility lets us treat even difficult people with such respect that we help them feel worthwhile. People do not typically invest their trust in someone who leaves them feeling invisible or insignificant.

4. Humility preserves a spirit of gratitude. A spirit of gratitude does more than perhaps any other character trait to keep our outlook on life positive and healthy. Sensing this, people are unlikely to put great trust in a leader who is ungrateful, for they realize (unconsciously, at least) that ingratitude is a sign of other character flaws.

5. Humility allows us to confront our own failings and take valuable lessons from them. Nothing is more harmful to trust than a leader who lives in denial or who never learns from things done poorly.

6. Humility allows us to be more patient with those who are still learning and thus prone to mistakes. We see in them a reflection of our own need to learn and improve. Appropriate patience is critical in building trust, for impatience breeds anxiety and even fear among those we lead, and fear is the very antithesis of trust.

7. Humility makes us approachable and receptive to being held accountable. Leaders who hold others accountable must be open and willing to be held accountable themselves. Otherwise, a double standard is at work which is inimical to trust.

8. Humility keeps our curiosity alive. Aware of how much we don't know, recognizing that we have our own pattern of blind spots, we are eager to explore and learn. After all, people don't normally trust "know-it-alls."

As you review this list of ways in which humility contributes to trust-building, you will notice that many of these benefits relate to learning. Learning from others. Learning from mistakes. Learning from being held accountable. Learning by keeping curiosity high.

It's this distinct relationship between humility and learning that makes humility so critical for leaders who would propel an organization to sustained peak performance. The faster that we learn as leaders, the quicker we can take our organization to the top. And the more that we embody humility – true, genuine humility – the faster we can grow as leaders.

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