

Building Higher Trust 108 Humility

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD



Humility is a key characteristic for everyone to embrace. True humility is not seen often in the ranks of leaders. Ego, rather than humility, seems to be the more common trait in management circles. Let's examine why this is and suggest some ideas to modify the pattern.

Anyone who has reached a leadership position has a tale to tell. He or she got there through a series of steps and events. Some steps were deserved, and some of them were just being in the right place at the right time. Another common factor is knowing the right people.

Getting ahead

It usually takes a lot of energy and talent to get ahead. People in the organization may look at a newly appointed leader and remark how they “lucked into it.” As Earl Nightingale said in *Lead The Field*, “Luck is what happens when preparedness meets opportunity.” There should be some level of personal satisfaction for a leader when he or she emerges from the pack and is elevated. We should celebrate this kind of milestone.

The tendency toward inflated egos

Upon reaching a higher level, the leader quickly becomes aware of an increase in power and influence. I once got a big promotion, and a Dilbert-like IT employee in the new organization started calling me “thou” and “thee” until I put an end to it. It is very easy to let the trappings or perks of a higher level inflate one's ego. There is nothing wrong with appreciating one's self-worth if it is kept in proper perspective. It is also important that the person also appreciates and publicly acknowledges the worth of others.

Unfortunately, many leaders do lose perspective and start acting like jerks. Scott Adams, creator of the Dilbert Cartoon Series, would have needed to make a living in some other field if not for the hubris of leaders.

How humility helps

The role of humility in creating and maintaining trust in organizations was well documented by Jim Collins in *Good to Great*. Collins identified passion and humility as two common traits of the most effective leaders – he called them “level 5 leaders.” Here is a very brief video clip of [Jim Collins describing the difference between a level four leader and a level five leader](#).

It would be easy to say, “don’t be too full of yourself,” and show the benefits of humility. Unfortunately for the narcissist leader, changing the thought patterns and behaviors is extremely difficult.

How to fix it?

If it is so important, what can we do about it? Is there a kind of anti-hubris powder we can sneak into the orange juice of over-inflated executives? Oh, if it was only that easy.

What we are talking about here is re-educating the boss with influence from below. We want to let him know that his own attitude is getting in the way of trust. Reeducating the boss is always tricky. It reminds me of the adage, “Never wrestle a pig...you get all muddy and the pig loves it.”

Work to educate the leader

One suggestion is to form a kind of support network with the employees and leaders on the topic of leadership. Book clubs where employees along with their leaders take a lunch hour once a week to study the topic can begin a constructive dialog.

You can’t just march into the boss’s office and say, “You are a total narcissist, knock it off and get down from your pedestal.” You need to use a water drop treatment with lots of [Socratic Questions](#).

Conclusion

If you are a leader, try this little test. If you think you are a humble servant leader all the time, you are probably off-base. Chances are you have some serious blind spots. Go and get it checked out! If your mental picture is one of an imperfect person trying to learn more about how to lead, then you are probably okay.

Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals*, *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online*, and *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind*. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations