Humble Leaders: What defines them, and how they unlock a high-performance culture

Dale
Carnegie.

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Introduction: The Humble Leader

Does your leader make you feel smaller or bigger?

I won the lottery with my first boss. She always made me feel bigger — and by that, I mean more confident, more capable, and more valued. On the surface, she was rather quiet and unassuming. But no one garnered more respect. She made time for everyone. And when you were with her, she made you feel important by the way she listened, cared, and celebrated your strengths over her own.

Years later, I worked for a different type of boss. He was nice enough, polished, talented and smart. On the surface, he was a boss anyone would want. And yet, I couldn't figure out why I was insecure around him. Something was different about him compared with my first boss.

Over time, I began to notice an interesting behavioral pattern exhibited by this new boss. Whether he was name-dropping, not *really* listening when you talked, or never admitting to his mistakes, he always seemed to be indirectly reminding everyone that he was the most powerful one in the room. These subtle power plays probably made him feel superior. It made the rest of us feel a lot smaller.

The defining quality of my first boss was evident: humility. It's what made everyone around her better.

Research suggests that humility in leadership not only drives others to higher levels of performance, it also contributes to lower turnover, lower absenteeism, higher quality, and stronger teamwork. When people feel "bigger," they accomplish more and do better work. When they feel "smaller," they shrink from challenges and lower their aspirations. Humble leaders, just like my first boss, make people feel bigger.

> **"Be more concerned with your character than with your reputation, for your character is what you are, while your reputation is merely what others think you are."**
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> -Dale Carnegie

Part of the reason humble leaders are able to do this is because they're more willing and able to learn, grow, and build trust with others. Other leadership experts have noticed this as well. Jim Collins called this type of person a Level 5 leader. Patrick Lencioni says humility is one of three qualities of the ideal team player. Ryan Holiday says that "ego is the enemy," and top personality assessment provider Hogan plans to release a new profile that measures humility in job candidates.

Given the positive outcomes of humble leadership and the powerful effects I've seen personally, I decided to examine at a deeper level the key characteristics that define it. So, together with Mark Marone at the Dale Carnegie Research Institute, we set out to determine what those characteristics are, with the premise that the world needs more humble leaders. By better understanding these characteristics, we hope to enable leaders to develop them more fully. Through self-reflection, study, coaching, and training, leaders can evolve their mindset and skillset to have a greater impact on others.

What is humility in leadership?

Generally speaking, a humble person is someone who typically avoids the spotlight and downplays their own strengths and successes. They let their actions speak for themselves. For a leader within an organization, humility takes on an added dimension related to their interactions with subordinates who are ultimately responsible for performing tasks and achieving goals. Like the successful military leader and statesman Cincinnatus, effective organizational leaders find ways to relinquish power for the good of others. In this context, humility requires a more sophisticated understanding.

Our definition of a humble leader, based on interviews, literature reviews, experience observing leaders' behaviors, and teaching leadership principles in the classroom, is composed of three dimensions. Each encompasses a set of characteristics and behaviors. The dimensions defining our version of a humble leader include: 1) being others-focused, 2) being self-aware, and 3) creating a safe environment.

Others-Focused

Humble leaders have an outside-in view of life, focusing on those around them and the value they can provide rather than primarily being concerned with themselves.

As C.S. Lewis said, "Humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less."

Leaders who are others-focused understand that success depends on their team's performance exceeding the sum of its individual parts. As a result, they put their team first by supporting their employees, showing genuine care, recognizing each success, and praising every improvement.

Dale Carnegie pointed the way toward this dimension of humble leadership when he wrote, in *How to Win Friends and Influence People,* that leaders should "become genuinely interested in other people" and "talk in terms of the other person's interests."

Self-Aware

Leaders who are self-aware behave in ways that reveal a confidence and security with who they are. They are genuine, and their actions are consistent with their personal beliefs. Self-aware leaders aren't afraid to show their emotions or accept feedback. They continue to improve themselves, recognizing that personal growth is an ongoing endeavor.

In her book *Mindset*, Dr. Carol Dweck of Stanford University notes that leaders are more successful when they work on *improving* rather than *proving* themselves. When the goal is to improve, they'll view their faults as opportunities for growth rather than something to be rationalized, hidden, or ignored.

Humble leaders also regularly reflect on their personal attachments — what they *need* in order to feel okay. Do they need the approval of others? Is their ego dependent upon winning? Do they need to be "right" in every debate? These needs can have negative consequences; because humble leaders are aware of them, they can self-monitor, self-regulate, and reduce their dependence on these attachments.

> **"He's not hierarchical. He doesn't believe that a title makes him better than anyone else."**

Safe Environment

Humility is also about creating an environment where others can flourish. It means supporting and modeling psychological safety, valuing input from everyone, not blaming others, and reacting to events in a consistent way. In a safe environment, subordinates are included in decision-making whenever possible, and people are encouraged to try new things because they know they won't be punished for failing. When leaders create an environment of psychological safety, every individual is free to express themselves and, therefore, cognitive bias within the team is reduced. (Research indicates that the human brain will often sabotage good decisions due to mental shortcuts and emotions. Involving other perspectives can expose and challenge these biases.) People are also more likely to apply their innate creative intelligence and take risks, which ultimately leads to more innovation and higher team performance.

Why Humility Matters

Our research sought to uncover the ways that humble leadership might lead to more positive workplace outcomes. The methodology included a literature scan, in-depth interviews of executives nominated by others for their humility, and a survey of 525 employees in the United States.[1] The following summarizes the research findings, along with implications and suggestions for any leader aspiring to make a more positive impact on their team.

We began by identifying a list of 30 leadership attributes related to the three areas of humble leadership and asked employees to rate their level of agreement with how well each attribute describes their current supervisor.

We then analyzed the relationship those attributes had with three primary outcome variables that are proven to drive organizational performance:

1. **Team Environment**: Employees' perception of their team's ability to attract and retain top talent, along with their likelihood to recommend their team to others as a place to work.
2. **Commitment:** Their commitment to their organization, which includes how deeply they care about their job and their intention to stay with the organization for the long term.
3. **Relationship with Manager:** Their satisfaction with their manager.

After an initial analysis of the data, we narrowed our list of attributes in each of the three areas to the top humble leadership drivers – those that had the greatest impact on all three outcome variables. These humble leadership drivers demonstrated the strongest fit with Team Environment, Commitment, and Relationship with Manager.

It's noteworthy that only 21% of respondents reported having a strong team environment, described as one in which they strongly agreed that their team attracts and retains top talent and where they are highly likely to recommend their team to others as a place to work. Just 31% of those surveyed are highly committed to their organization – that is, they care deeply about their job and plan to stay for the long term. And fewer than half (45%) of employees in our study strongly agreed that they have a good relationship with their manager.

While some of the humble leadership drivers had more impact than others, overall, we identified four key drivers for each of the three dimensions of Others-Focused, Self-Aware and Safe Environment.

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[1] An online survey was sent in October 2018 to a range of US-based, full-time employees (excluding CEOs and business owners) over the age of 21 with more than five years of work experience. The 525 respondents are generally distributed representatively across company size, age, gender, and role.

Key Humble Leadership Drivers		Percent reporting a strong *Team Environment*		Percent reporting strong *Commitment*		Percent reporting a strong *Relationship with Manager*	
Others-Focused	Listens more than talks	45%	11%	58%	20%	79%	32%
	Values subordinates for who they are as people	41%	9%	59%	15%	80%	26%
	Gives public recognition to subordinates	43%	10%	55%	20%	80%	29%
	Takes the time to learn about subordinates' interests	43%	11%	55%	21%	80%	31%
Self-Aware	Is genuine	42%	6%	55%	14%	77%	23%
	Is open to criticism	51%	9%	59%	20%	85%	30%
	Utilizes resources to personally grow	48%	9%	63%	16%	80%	30%
	Discusses personal self-improvement opportunities	54%	10%	63%	21%	88%	32%
Safe Environment	Doesn't blame people for problems	45%	9%	58%	18%	81%	28%
	Fosters a safe environment for people to be honest	41%	6%	56%	13%	78%	22%
	Reacts predictably to difficult interactions	49%	11%	60%	20%	82%	32%
	Graciously receives compliments from subordinates	46%	9%	55%	19%	81%	29%

Percent of those who strongly agree their supervisor demonstrates this key humble leadership driver
Percent of all others

As we review each of the top four key humble leadership drivers in each dimension, we will highlight examples of real-world leaders who were identified in our research by their subordinates as being particularly humble and effective.

Others-Focused

1. **Listens more than talks.** Human beings have a need to be heard and known. When employees strongly agree that their supervisor listens more than they talk, they are four times more likely to report having a strong team environment compared to all others, three times more likely to be committed, and two and a half times more likely to have a good relationship with their manager. As Dale Carnegie wrote in *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, being a good listener and encouraging others to talk about themselves are essential to building trust.

2. **Values subordinates for who they are as people.** It might seem only natural to value yourself and others based on accomplishments. However, when identity is tied to accomplishments, self-esteem fluctuates with the quality of someone's most recent project, sale, initiative, or meeting. This fluctuation can reduce self-confidence and the willingness to take risks. Valuing people for who they are, rather than for what they achieve, has a significant effect on the outcome variables.

3. **Gives public recognition to subordinates.** Sometimes it's hard to deflect the spotlight and remember to shine it on others, but everyone craves positive recognition. It's a leader's job to make sure they get it often. Humble leader Susan Brust, SVP and Director of New Product Development at Nordic Ware, refers to this as "pushing people ahead" rather than "pulling people along." It can be done through formal and informal recognition strategies. And it's worth noting that it doesn't matter if the leader *thinks* people are recognized enough. What matters is whether people *feel* they've been recognized enough.

4. **Takes the time to learn about subordinates' interests.** Alison Brown, CEO of The Science Museum of Minnesota, is another humble leader who surfaced in our research. She blocks time on her calendar each week to walk around the building. While that sounds fun to do in a science museum, she does it to get to know the people who work there. She wants everyone to bring their full personalities to work, so she asks great questions, listens, and remembers the answers. She models the Dale Carnegie principle, "Become genuinely interested in other people."

Self-Aware

1. **Is genuine.** It's exhausting to maintain a façade, both for you and for those around you who are left to wonder who you really are. The data suggest that a leader's authenticity has enormous impact on outcomes: Those who strongly agree their leader is genuine are about seven times more likely to report having a strong team environment compared to all others, four times more likely to be committed, and three times more likely to have a good relationship with their manager. Being genuine requires self-reflection, understanding, and being comfortable with who you are – your values, your personality style, your emotional triggers, and your priorities.

2. **Is open to criticism.** The research also shows that high impact leaders take criticism well, whether it relates to their own performance or the organization's. Chris Bachinski, President of GHY International, provides a great example. Every evening, he reviews employee and customer feedback related to safety, quality, well-being, and work environment, and he responds to each person, individually, with gratitude and receptivity. Taking time to thoughtfully listen to criticism demonstrates courage and a willingness to improve.

3. **Takes advantage of resources for personal growth.** Growth mindset leaders have greater impact than fixed mindset leaders. Leaders who are curious, willing to change, and work to improve themselves set an example for others to follow. When teams adopt personal growth as the norm and value ongoing learning, it leads to better skills, and that leads to higher performance.

4. **Discusses personal self-improvement opportunities**. In 2014, Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella publicly apologized for comments he made about pay gaps between men and women. He went on to declare to the company that he needed to increase his appreciation of issues related to gender equality, admitting that he had not been proactive enough in this area, and he set a course for Microsoft to close the gender gap. That level of vulnerability on the part of top-level leaders was a departure from the legacy Microsoft culture of command and control. Many have credited Nadella with improving Microsoft's market competitiveness through this kind of cultural transformation.

Safe Environment

1. **Doesn't blame people for problems.** As the Chief Technology Officer at SPS Commerce, humble leader Jamie Thingelstad takes a constructive approach when things go wrong. Rather than blaming and shaming, he is measured and thoughtful. He focuses on the problem, not the person, by getting the team together to talk about the issue and how to make improvements, never highlighting *who* is to blame. A leader's reaction to problems and mistakes has considerable impact on the outcomes we studied. Those whose leaders create a blameless environment are about five times more likely to report having a strong team environment compared to all others, and about three times more likely to be committed and to have a good relationship with their manager.

2. **Fosters a safe environment for people to be honest.** Honesty seems like an obvious pre-requisite for trust and improvement. So why aren't people more honest? Perhaps it's because people are afraid of the consequences. Humble leaders make it clear that honesty is rewarded, not damaging. Alan Mullaly, former CEO of the Ford Motor Company and Boeing Commercial Airplanes, operates businesses with a systematic approach: He establishes performance metrics that every senior leader must give a weekly status update around. When Mullaly introduced this method at Ford, senior leaders typically reported only positive updates for fear of looking bad. Finally, after one senior leader had the courage to provide a complete, candid update, Mullaly publicly applauded him. The result? The following week, most of his senior leaders gave candid updates as well, providing the leadership team with the complete view of company performance they needed to be able to work on real improvements.

3. **Reacts predictably to difficult interactions.** Deon MacMillan, the Chief HR Officer at Ardent Mills, describes the company's CEO, Dan Dye, this way: "With other leaders, I might walk into their office and not know who's going to show up. I never have to worry about that with Dan. He never shows up differently, whether he's meeting with research scientists or hourly employees." Humble leaders are consistent, and that reduces stress for their employees.

4. **Graciously receives compliments from subordinates.** This driver may have been the most surprising to our research team. It seems counterintuitive that receiving compliments would factor into humble leadership. At the same time, leaders who get results can't avoid some of the spotlight. The question is, what do they do when they're in it? Some leaders clearly relish the spotlight, beating their chest with pride. Other leaders seem to enjoy it but put up a false front of modesty. "Oh, it was nothing. Everyone played a role. The credit goes to the team," they might say. Those team sentiments are productive when genuine. But graciously receiving compliments doesn't mean deflecting them all the time. Sometimes people need to hear their leader say, "Thank you for the encouragement and approval. It feels great to have an impact." Accepting compliments with gratitude makes others feel honored to have given the appreciation.

Becoming a Humble Leader

Anyone can learn to become more of a humble leader and tap into the benefits of a more positive team environment, committed employees, and strong relationships. Here are some things you can do, based on our research and the examples of the humble leaders we interviewed:

> **"He doesn't give me compliments about things I've done. Instead, he talks about who I am as a person and what I bring to the firm."**

1. **Spend time alone.** Get to know yourself better. Consider your strengths, weaknesses, and attachments.
2. **Invest time with others.** Block time for relationships. Value genuine connections.
3. **Decide what you value.** Adopt the mindset: It's not about me, but it's up to me.
4. **Raise your psychological safety radar.** Constantly consider how others feel around you: "bigger" or "smaller"?
5. **Admit your mistakes and uncertainties when appropriate.** Make it okay — for yourself and others — to fail.
6. **Develop a growth mindset.** Celebrate *improving* more than *proving*. Consider working with a coach.
7. **Follow humble leaders.** Read about them (see the References list), and look for them.
8. **Ask people to hold you accountable.**
9. **Identify your areas for improvement.** Take our Humble Leader Assessment to get clarity.
10. **Commit to humility.** It's a decision that requires dedication and practice. Be intentional about how you lead.

In business, politics, and social media, hubris often attracts short-term attention, but it rarely yields sustainable (or necessarily positive) results. Developing and attracting leaders with attributes centered on humility offers a surer path to a strong corporate culture and long-lasting employee engagement. As humble leader and CEO of Ardent Mills Dan Dye says, "We're all equal. Everyone just has a different role to play."

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About Dale Carnegie:

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