

# Humility in Leadership

Rick James March 2012

Humility and courage in leadership is a potent combination. They are essential elements for leading change. Such Biblical principles are being increasingly discovered by management theory. Jim Collins in *Good to Great* talks about the ultimate 'Level Five Leadership' which he describes as a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will. From his research with the top 11 companies since 1965 he discovered they each had great leaders who were far from the expected 'larger than life' norm. Instead he found leaders who were both shy and fearless; leaders with a compelling modesty yet a driving ambition for the cause. This month's thought piece explores humility in leadership, leaving the issue of ambition and courage for another time.

Nelson Mandela highlights how essential it is to have the humility to be open to our own change if we are to dare to try to change the organisation we work in or the society we live in: "You can never change society, if you have not changed yourself... If I had not been in prison I would not have been able to achieve the most difficult task in life and that is changing yourself". He also emphasises how hard this is to do. This may be why humility is one of the rarest leadership virtues.

This is not to say that all humble people are good leaders and or even that not all good leaders are humble. But it seems that great leaders are. Through genuine humility they are able to draw out the best in others and use their own strengths appropriately.

## **Pride - the greatest temptation?**

Pride is arguably the biggest temptation for any leader. While these quotes from African Presidents may appear an extreme caricature, sadly sometimes what we experience in Christian organisations and churches has a flavour of such pride:

"There is no number two, three or four. In Cote d'Ivoire there is only a number one: that's me and I don't share my decisions,"  
President Felix Houphouet-Boigny

"I would like ministers, assistant ministers and others to sing like a parrot after me. That is how we can progress."  
President Daniel Arap Moi

"The chief is the chief. He is the eagle who flies high and cannot be touched by the spit of toads."  
President Mobutu Sese Seko

"I want to be blunt. As long as I am here and you say I must be your President, you have to do what I want, what I like, and not what you like and you want. Your Kamuzu is in charge. That is my way."  
President Hastings Kamuzu Banda

Research on the major cause of business failure in the USA, concluded that pride was at the root of the problem. Pride is so damaging because it leads to impatience, an unwillingness to build consensus, inability to receive criticism and unwillingness to endure periods of trial and uncertainty (Delbecq 1999:348). Sadly pride seems to become a stronger temptation the higher we go as leaders and the busier we become. Why is this?

### **Why is pride so powerful?**

People obviously often rise to leadership through success, but such outer success can often lead us to ignore our inner lives. “Thus we become dangerous, for our power grows even as our consciousness dims. We become increasingly blind and small and we visit our projections onto the world around us. The very factors that propel us into leadership precipitate our downfall and promote pain and discomfort in those we lead” (Parker Palmer, quoted by Kaplan 2002:195). This tendency is often compounded by followers, who may become increasingly reluctant to give us honest feedback as we rise in leadership. Many leaders no longer hear from anyone how they are really doing, but instead only receive deceptive deference and flattery. Self-deception is one of the most important challenges that Christian leaders face. They are placed on pedestals. They are told they are irreplaceable. They do not get honest feedback. Leaders start believing myths about themselves. As with King David in the Bible, they can start to go astray. This can severely jeopardize their effectiveness as leaders.

Pride is therefore a very tempting and dangerous sin for leaders. It closes us off from changing by blaming someone or something else for a problem. No wonder ‘God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble’<sup>1</sup>. Moses proved to be a great leader largely because he ‘was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth’<sup>2</sup>. Yet even he failed to enter the Promised Land because of his pride that made him say in anger - look I have got water from the rock.

Leadership pride is nothing new. The Romans, 2000 years ago, appreciated the dangerous and destructive power of pride. When their Generals were being carried on chariots in triumphal processions, they had a slave constantly saying in their ear, “Remember you are only human”.

If pride is the greatest temptation for leaders, then humility is the only antidote. But what is humility? My favourite quote on humility comes from John Ruskin who said:

“I believe that the first test of a truly great man is his humility. I do not mean by humility a doubt in his own power or hesitation in

---

<sup>1</sup> 1 Peter 5:5

<sup>2</sup> Numbers 12 : 3

speaking opinions... All great men not only know their business, but usually know that they know it ... but they have a curious sense of powerlessness, feeling that the greatness is not in them, but through them; that they could not do or be anything else than God made them”

I like this quote because humility is a proper appreciation of the gifts you have been given. It is an honest assessment of strengths, not just weaknesses. Humility is not humiliation. The critical issue is that humble people know that greatness is not in them, but through them. They know who is in charge, who gave them those talents, and who can take them away at any point. I am not saying for a moment that Christians are more humble and are not beset by pride. But if we really knew our identity in God, like Jesus (who knew who he was and where he came), we would have an incredible advantage...

As Philippians 2: 3-8 exhorts:

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death— even death on a cross!

### **The practical benefits of humility**

Humility is not just a nice thing for leaders to have, it is the most effective way to lead. As John Dickson<sup>3</sup> points it, humility reflects the deep structure of reality. Humility in leadership therefore brings tangible benefits and makes a real difference to actual impact. This is because:

#### **1) Humility is generative**

This means humility encourages growth, learning and development. If we think we know it all, not only are we fooling ourselves completely, but we close ourselves down to learning. The change management guru John Kotter followed the progress of 115 of his students from Harvard. He found that the one who stood out above all others was characterised by humility. ‘Confronting his mistakes, Marcel minimised the arrogant attitudes that often accompany success. With a relatively humble view of himself he watched more closely and listened more carefully than most of the others.’ (1996:180)

#### **2) Humility is persuasive**

Leaders need to be able to persuade others to join them and follow. Aristotle’s classic analysis of the art of persuasion in ‘On Rhetoric’ points out the need for the leader to appeal to the intellect (logos); to elicit emotion (pathos) and to demonstrate character (ethos). Aristotle believed that character is almost the

---

<sup>3</sup> Developed and adapted from John Dickson’s research

controlling factor in persuasion. In many cultures and contexts, we respond well to people who demonstrate humility. But is this the same in all cultures?

### 3) Humility is inspiring

A great leader obviously cannot do everything on their own. The real power of effective leadership is about inspiring others and maximising their potential. This means that to be effective, leaders have to allow others to grow and ensure that take the credit. Humble leaders inspire higher performance and also encourage others to aspire to become like them.

### 4) Humility is transformational

The humility to apologise can unblock seemingly impossibly stuck situations and transform relationships. A friend told me about how he was taken on to manage a change programme in a large Christian NGO. He thought this meant he would be drawing up plans and doing critical path analysis and all the rest of that good planning stuff to get this change off the ground. Instead he found himself listening to frustrated people and angry people and people in tears.

He called a meeting of staff and presented the lessons from the previous few years of attempted change. But more important than his analysis was what happened next. The general director stood up and simply said: 'Sorry' - deeply sorry for the mistakes the leadership had made and for the pain they had caused. At first there was silence. And then one of the middle managers stood up. 'I never thought I would hear that word from the lips of our leadership team', he said with tears in his eyes. 'Only my dog knows what I have been through in the last few years.' That was the turning point. It was the point at which reconciliation began to take place and life started to get back to normal. It took a brave leader to say 'sorry' that day, but God honoured his humble action.

## Cultivating humility

Humility is like a fragile flower that needs to be nurtured and carefully cultivated. A team of fast-track leaders in World Vision International highlighted some practical ways in which they could cultivate this fragile virtue...

- We must put in place strong accountability structures - professionally (board) personally (spouse, coach, mentor, accountability group)
- We need friends who will speak the truth to us. We should not reject 'prickly' people who do not always agree with us.
- We should actively seek open feedback from people we work with. We need to genuinely listen and NEVER punish such feedback. It is particularly important to hear honest feedback from those below us in the hierarchy.
- We need to invest in our personal relationship with God. Unless we are continually rooted in our identity as a child of God, we will go astray. The Director of one of the largest Christian NGOs in the UK takes a half day every two weeks alone with God.

As leaders our humility will come under constant attack. Some may fawn on us and put us on a pedestal. Others might fear us or try and tear us down. A proper realisation of who we are is essential if we are to lead change effectively.

How do you protect and nurture humility?