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The Economics of Developing Humility in the Workplace



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Executive Summary

When you look at the title of this white paper, it may not be readily apparent that there is an inextricable relationship between humility and the economic prosperity of your organization. However, I intend to prove that there is untold profitability inherent within humility ... and a staggeringly high cost associated with hubris.

After working as a consultant and business coach in the field of organizational development for over forty years, I have learned that you can divide organizational leaders into two mutually exclusive categories—those who “get it” and those who don’t. Those leaders who “get it” are characterized by an ever present aroma of humility; those who don’t consistently emit the nauseating stench of hubris!

It is my contention that the Number One killer of organizational profitability is hubristic leadership. We must not read that statement, shake our heads in sad acknowledgement of its truth, and then simply return to the tyranny of the urgent. What are you and I, as business leaders, going to do about this problem? I submit that hubristic leadership is the malignant root of the unprofitable fruit that too many leaders are harvesting.

I am not alone in asserting the destructive effects of hubristic leadership. Jim Collins, in his definitive work, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap ... and Others Don't*, unequivocally states, “In over two-thirds of comparison cases

Cont'd ...



(average/good companies), we noted the presence of a gargantuan personal ego that contributed to the demise or continued mediocrity of the company.”¹

Moreover, in *Good to Great*, Jim Collins and his research team demonstrate that those companies that achieve greatness are led by what they call “Level 5 Executives,” men and women characterized by “a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will.”²

When I first picked up a copy of *Good to Great* in 2001, I could not put it down! I love this book and recommend it to all my clients. *Good to Great* was one of the first books to empirically document the irrefutable fact that humble leaders have a direct impact on the sustainable profitability of an organization. And Collins simultaneously substantiated the brutal truth that hubristic leadership is a corporate killer!

However, despite all of Collins’ masterful research with regard to disclosing that humility is the quintessential leadership trait that distinguishes great companies from good ones, *Good to Great* never sets forth a comprehensive definition of humility. Furthermore, Collins does not offer a prescriptive methodology for his readers who wish to learn more about the specific steps required to become a Level 5 Executive.

My purpose, therefore, in publishing this white paper is not only to emphasize the profound connection between humility and sustainable economic profitability, but also to provide a comprehensive definition of humility, coupled with a detailed, step-by-step methodology for developing humble leaders.

This article will provide you with two practical takeaways that you can immediately implement in your organization. First, if you want to evaluate where your organization stands with regard to any gaps in humility, you can invite your leadership team to take the twenty-five point assessment, titled “The Characteristics of Humility.” Second, if you desire to instill a Humility Improvement Program in your organization, you can utilize the section entitled “Twelve Actions to Raise Your Humility Quotient.”



My desire in writing “The Economics of Developing Humility in the Workplace” is to speak to the hearts and minds of leaders, so that they will herald the monumental importance of every member of their organization growing in humility as *the* means to living a richer, more fulfilled, and profitable lifestyle, both personally and professionally.

¹ Jim Collins, *Good to Great* (New York, NY: Harper Business, a division of HarperCollins Publishers Inc., © 2001), p. 29.

² *Ibid.*, p. 20.



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What Does Humility Have to do with Economics?

Let's get right to it: "What in the world does *humility* have to do with economics?" you might well ask. "How could being *humble* possibly help me be more successful in my business?"

These are questions any astute business person would naturally ask. At first glance, there might seem to be no natural connection between humility and prosperity. I freely confess that I didn't see it for a long time. For most of my life, my focus was on making more money; I gave very little thought to how I could be more humble. However, I have learned that there is an inextricable relationship between economics and humility. Furthermore, I have learned—the hard way, I should add—that the path to sustainable prosperity is only discovered by a humble heart, not by an arrogant one.

The High Costs of Hubris

Hubris (pronounced "HYOO-briss") is defined as "overweening pride or self-confidence; arrogance."¹ Self-confidence is a good and necessary leadership quality; *excessive* confidence is destructive.

Most readers are familiar with Jim Collins' internationally best-selling book, *Good to Great*. Collins and a team of researchers devoted five years to identifying traits that distinguish companies that consistently outperform their competitors. Collins warned leaders that hubris can be an impediment to sustainable success:

"In over two thirds of the [companies that were NOT "great"], we noted the presence of a gargantuan personal ego that contributed to the demise or continued mediocrity of the company."²

Dartmouth professor Sydney Finkelstein, author of *Why Smart Executives Fail*, analyzed Thorsten Heins' disastrous 22-month stint as CEO for BlackBerry. Most of us owned a BlackBerry device at some point in our careers; virtually no one I know does today. The low point for BlackBerry came in the third quarter of FY 2013, when the once-formidable organization announced losses of \$4.4 billion. Dr. Finkelstein readily acknowledges that Heins was dealt "a tough hand"—BlackBerry was already losing great chunks of market share to the iPhone and Android platforms—but Heins' "Damn the torpedoes! Full speed ahead!" approach caused the company's stock value to plummet by nearly 60% during his time at the helm.³

When one boils down *Time's* postmortem of Ron Johnson's 16-month term as CEO of JC Penney, it becomes painfully apparent that Johnson fell prey to delusions of his own intellectual grandeur. Fresh from successes with Target and Apple, Johnson seemed like the perfect choice to turn Penney's struggling fortunes around. But when his desperate "Hail Mary" gambits (I'm sure Johnson would have called them "bold moves") to reinvent Penney's image, pricing, and marketing strategies failed spectacularly, Johnson refused to shoulder the blame. Instead he sniffed that JC Penney's customers needed to be "educated."⁴

¹ Merriam-Webster Britannica Digital Learning Unabridged <http://unabridged.merriam-webster.com/> Viewed 6/25/2014

² Jim Collins, *Good to Great* (New York, NY: Harper Business, a division of HarperCollins Publishers Inc., © 2001), p. 29.

³ Sydney Finkelstein, "The Worst CEOs of 2013," BBC Capital, December 12, 2013 <http://www.bbc.com/capital/story/20131212-the-worst-ceos-of-2013> Viewed 6/24/2014

⁴ Brad Tuttle, "The 5 Big Mistakes That Led to Ron Johnson's Ouster at JC Penney," *Time*, April 9, 2013 <http://business.time.com/2013/04/09/the-5-big-mistakes-that-led-to-ron-johnsons-ouster-at-jc-penney/> Viewed 6/24/2014





One writer insists that Johnson fell victim to his own hubris. Lauren Sherman of *Fashionista* observed, “He’s got an ego ... He wanted to sweep in and save Penney because he believes he is special and capable of doing so.”⁵

Ego can kill a career and destroy a business. At its peak in 2000, Canadian giant Nortel employed more than 90,000 workers and boasted a net worth of nearly \$300 billion, making it one of Canada’s most valuable companies. Just nine years later, the company had filed for bankruptcy, and it never recovered.⁶ A three-year study conducted by a team of professors from the University of Ottawa concluded that Nortel’s collapse was primarily due to “a culture of arrogance and even hubris combined with lax financial discipline. Nortel’s rigid culture played a defining role in the company’s inability to react to industry changes.” The lead researcher for the case study, Professor Jonathan Calof, said, “It’s our hope that this research will aid in educating tomorrow’s leaders.”⁷

In their book *Egonomics: What Makes Ego Our Greatest Asset (or Most Expensive Liability)*, authors David Marcum and Steven B. Smith sought to quantify the high cost of hubris.

Ego is the invisible line item on every company’s profit and loss statement ... Fifty-three percent of businesspeople estimate ego costs their company 6 to 15 percent of annual revenue; 21 percent say this cost ranges from 16 to 20 percent ... That’s somewhat astonishing, considering “ego” is difficult to measure by any standards. But even if ego accounts for only 6 percent of revenue, the annual “cost of ego” would translate to nearly \$1.1 billion to the

average Fortune 500 company—roughly equal to the average annual profit of these same companies.⁸

Leader, did that last sentence hit you in the face like a bucket of ice water? It certainly did me; my hubris could wipe out my company’s profits! And I am sincere when I say “my hubris.” I think most leaders, if we are honest, will admit that living in humility—and refusing to be governed by our hubris—is an area of constant struggle.

And hubris is by no means limited to the business world. In a book titled *The Narcissism Epidemic*, Drs. Jean M. Twenge and W. Keith Campbell warn of “the relentless rise of narcissism in our culture, insisting that “in America today there are few values more fiercely held than the importance of self-admiration.”⁹

Some readers may wonder, “What’s the big deal? Aren’t we *supposed* to have a healthy self-esteem?” But Twenge and Campbell warn that narcissism (which they define as “a very positive and inflated view of the self,” causing those who succumb to it to “think they are better than others in social status, good looks, intelligence, and creativity”¹⁰) is reaching epidemic proportions in the United States. For those who would scoff at this statement, Twenge and Campbell point to data collected from 37,000 college students, which showed that “narcissistic personality traits rose just as fast as obesity from the 1980s to the present.”¹¹

Whether you’re a college student, a stay-at-home mom, or a hard-driving executive, you must keep constant vigilance against hubris manifesting itself in your life. For many executives (this executive included) leadership can be something of a Jekyll-and-Hyde experience ... with the “H” in Hyde standing

⁵ Lauren Sherman, “Ron Johnson Out at JC Penney – Why He Should Never Have Been ‘In’ in the First Place,” *Fashionista*, April 8, 2013 <http://fashionista.com/2013/04/ron-johnson-out-at-jc-penney-why-he-should-never-been-in-in-the-first-place#awesm=~oldSG6Cmrcj3Nu> Viewed 6/24/2014

⁶ “Key Dates in Nortel Networks’ History,” *CBC News*, January 14, 2013 <http://www.cbc.ca/news/business/key-dates-in-nortel-networks-history-1.802117> Viewed 6/24/2014

⁷ Janet McFarland, “‘Culture of Arrogance’ Felled Telecom Giant Nortel, Study Finds,” *The Globe and Mail*, March 18, 2014 <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/culture-of-arrogance-doomed-nortel-analysis-concludes/article17521736/> Viewed 6/24/2014

⁸ David Marcum and Steven B. Smith, *Egonomics: What Makes Ego Our Greatest Asset (or Most Expensive Liability)* (New York, NY: Fireside Books, a division of Simon and Schuster, Inc. © 2007), p. 1

⁹ Jean M. Twenge, Ph.D., and W. Keith Campbell, Ph.D., *The Narcissism Epidemic; Living in the Age of Entitlement* (New York, NY: Free Press, a division of Simon and Schuster, Inc. © 2009), Introduction, Chapter One 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Chapter Two.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Introduction.



for *hubris*! Forty years as a consultant have shown me that the more accomplished and successful a leader becomes, the greater the temptation to succumb to pride becomes. It's so easy to forget about caring and developing people and to slip back into controlling and dominating them.

No human being likes to be steamrolled by an out-of-control ego. We may forget 90% of a lecture that we heard two days ago, but we remember 100% of how a person made us feel—last week, last month, even last year! Any person who has been dehumanized by a overbearing leader will never forget it. Far from bringing out the best in them, the experience will inevitably create resentment, in many cases resistance, and in some a desire for revenge.

I gave serious thought to titling this paper "Confessions of an Alpha Dog," because I am painfully aware of how my own ego has had a negative impact on my wife, my friends, and my business associates. I freely admit that I haven't "arrived" at the point where I unflinchingly lead in genuine humility. When I speak on this subject I often tell audiences, "As soon as I finish this message, you can give the same message right back to me! I'll sit right here and listen to you, because I need to constantly hear it!"

And yet we business leaders walk such a delicate tightrope! We all know that people don't follow uncertainty; they follow unwavering confidence! Jim Collins pinpoints this quandary in *Good to Great* when he describes the ultimate "Level 5 Executive" as a man or woman who "builds enduring greatness through a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will."¹² Collins is acknowledging that the phrase "self-assured humility" seems like an oxymoron—a contradiction of terms. When we first see the words *humility* and *confidence* placed beside one another, we tend to see them as antonyms rather than synonyms. But these two qualities *can* exist in the same individual! Collins calls these exemplary leaders "a study in

duality: modest and willful, humble and fearless."¹³

So how do we develop that duality? How do we stay in balance? How do leaders project a strong, confident personality that will inspire others to their highest and best, while at the same time guarding against succumbing to the hubris that crushes the human spirit of those we lead?

We at People First International believe we have developed the solution; I will present it to you in this paper.

What Does Humility Look Like?

The dictionary defines *humility* as "The quality or state of not thinking you are better than other people."¹⁴ Humility, then, would be diametrically opposed to *hubris*, which is the quality of thinking that you *are* better than other people. Definition demands distinction; in order to define what humility is, we must understand what it is not. So it's important to state here that humility is *not* defined by thinking less of ourselves; humility is thinking about others more and, consequently thinking of ourselves less.

The old Eastern exhortation, "**Let no one seek his own, but each one the other's well-being,**" beautifully expresses the attitude of true humility; humble people do certainly look to their own self-interest, but their self-interest is solidly grounded in seeking the well-being of others.

I have written on the distinction between *self-interest* and *selfishness* elsewhere, but it bears repeating here. When we hear the term *self-interest*, we tend to assume that it means *selfishness*, but that assumption is not always correct. If our self-interest includes the self-interest of others, we're not being selfish; we are displaying humility.

Dr. John Robbins explained this distinction in his magnificent book, *Freedom and Capitalism*:

What about the missionary? He acts in his self-interest by enduring hardships because he has a different conception of his interests from most people.

¹² Good to Great, p. 20.

¹³ Ibid., p. 22.

¹⁴ Merriam-Webster Britannica Digital Learning Unabridged (emphasis added) <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/humility> Viewed 6/26/2014.



How about the mother? She acts in her own interest because her conception of her own interests includes the well-being of her children.¹⁵

Dr. Robbins was highlighting the truth that two people we would consider to be acting selflessly—a missionary and a mother, both of whom are laboring for the good of others with little or no remuneration—are still acting in their self-interest. That’s because they have voluntarily expanded the realm of their self-interest to include the interests of others. They are displaying true humility; they don’t think less of themselves, but they do think about others more.

Marcus Luttrell’s gripping book, *Lone Survivor*, recounts the heroism of Navy SEAL Lieutenant Michael Murphy, who exposed himself to a vicious hailstorm of enemy fire in order to call in a rescue mission for his surviving teammates. Lieutenant Murphy knew full well that to do so was to sign his own death warrant; indeed, he was mortally wounded as he spoke to headquarters. Shot through the chest, Lieutenant Murphy courteously thanked the person at the other end of the phone and then picked up his rifle and returned fire at the enemy closing in around his men. Moments later, Michael Murphy was dead. He was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor, the first member of the Navy to receive that award since the Vietnam War.

Lieutenant Michael Murphy’s life and death offers the highest example of humility that any man can provide. Perhaps you’re thinking that Lieutenant Murphy suffered from low self-esteem. As a Kung Fu master who has personally trained combat-bound United States Marines, let me assure you that anyone who graduates from the SEALs’ grueling BUDS training does not suffer from a lack of confidence! Our SEALs rank with the finest fighting men in the world; they wear the Trident insignia with a deep pride forged in the furnace of repeated testing and remarkable endurance. Lieutenant Michael Murphy possessed the self-assurance to lead these remarkable men into battle ... and the humility to seek their well-being before his own, even at the expense of his life.

Like the missionary and the mother that John Robbins wrote of, heroes like Michael Murphy include others’ self-interest in their own self-interest. In that climactic moment when he exposed himself to deadly fire to save his friends, I’m quite sure he didn’t ponder his decision, because he had already made that choice long before the event occurred. His self-interest—what he was most interested in—was serving his country and serving others.

“Greater love hath no man than this,” the inspired literature says, “that a man lay down his life for his friends.” For Michael Murphy, the best way to serve his country and his friends in that moment of truth was to lay down his life for his friends. He lived out his values in a time of trial that few of us can even rightly imagine. And yet the choice Lieutenant Murphy made, as counter-intuitive as it may seem, was the greatest choice he ever made in regard to his own self-interest. This extraordinarily tough, resourceful, confident, humble warrior freely chose to express his love for his friends in the most powerful way possible.

Hubris and Humility Don’t Coexist!

Humility stops hubris in its tracks because humility knows that hubris does not bear the same identity as itself. I want to state at the outset of this paper that much of what I am about to say may seem at first glance to be so obvious that it does not require this level of detailed explanation. However, when you develop a deeper understanding of the laws of logic and their distinctions, you will gain a more mature appreciation of why it is important to explore the philosophical constructs of humility and hubris and bring their differences to light.

The second law of logic states that a term is always itself. This is called **the law of identity**. In formal language, this law is expressed by the phrase A is A. In other words, a term is identified by what it is; it can never be anything other than what it is. A can never be B and B is never A. A cat can never be a dog, and a dog is never a cat.

The law of identity also mandates that a term can

¹⁵ John W. Robbins, *Freedom and Capitalism; Essays on Christian Politics and Economics* (Unicoi, TN: The Trinity Foundation, © 2006), p. 417.



only reflect itself. Consequently, hubris cannot reflect the characteristics of humility and humility will not reflect anything that would be defined in terms of hubris.

It logically follows, then, that *hubris* and *humility* are mutually exclusive terms. Hence, they cannot occupy the mind at the same time because they contradict one another. When you posit hubris, you necessarily negate humility. They are polar opposites. Hubris cannot coexist with humility and vice-versa.

One of the most beneficial exercises for the human mind is to discern the difference between these two diametrically opposed states of mind. Without a comprehensive understanding of the meaning of both humility and hubris and their necessary consequences, a person will never experience the profitable high road of life that will bring good to themselves, to everyone who knows them, and to the organizations they serve.

Not everyone chooses to take that high road! We can all agree that it is easy to spot a deplorable lack of humility in a great many organizational leaders who sincerely believe they *are* better and brighter than other people! This hubris begins in the halls of academia; we don't learn about a balance of confidence and humility in schools. People are taught that they should graduate from our schools of business and education, go out into the world, and radiate confidence; they've learned *nothing* about the importance of winsome humility. All too often, that confidence our students have learned to project crosses the line into unalluring pride.

Pride cancels out my confidence. If I am out of balance—if I don't keep my confidence in check—I won't inspire people. I certainly won't inspire their hearts! And I'm not going to empower them. Once I slip past confident into cocky, I begin to believe that "If I want to get it done right, I have to do it myself." This creates a need for control. And once I am locked into this hubris, I can't let go of control, because someone else might do it ... and do it as well as I can! I will *never* allow empowerment to occur! This creates a "doom loop" of keeping my fingers firmly planted in more and more pies,

having less and less time to concentrate on my long range Key Business Imperatives, and demotivating more and more of my purpose partners. (At People First International, we use the phrase *purpose partners* instead of *employees*.)

Don't I Need At Least *Some* Hubris?

It's a fair question: Aren't there times when a leader needs to evidence *some* hubris in order to make bold decisions and inspire others? If I, as a leader, appear to have no pride, won't others think me to be timid, perhaps even weak? My answer to these questions is an emphatic "No!"

One of my best friends is the CEO of a multinational corporation. This man lives the kind of humility I have been describing in this paper. He is fully aware that hubris is a deadly enemy of his personal and professional success, and he stays on guard against it.

He recently gave me a draft of a document he planned to present to his senior leadership team. "Jack, would you review this?" he asked. "I want you to see if there's any pride in this document." He also invites me to speak the truth in love to him. "I give you permission," he has said, "to call me on the carpet any time you see pride raising its ugly head."

My friend is one of the most praise-averse men I know—when it comes to praise directed at him. When others start talking about him and his professional accomplishments, he quickly changes the subject. "It's not about me," he'll say; "everyone here is a leader." He has told me that he wants to leave a legacy of enriching, inspiring, and empowering others.

However, anyone who thinks that my friend's meekness is a sign of weakness is in for a stinging surprise! He is the embodiment of Jim Collins' description of the Level 5 leader who possesses that "paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will." This man is nobody's pushover; he is very strong, deliberate, and forthright in establishing his expectations and holding leaders accountable for accomplishing their goals. He sets very high standards for himself and his executive team.



Some people might think that being humble means you're not strong; I'd love to bring them into some of our private conversations, where I have witnessed my friend's indomitable spirit. I've heard him say, "It is unwarranted, and it will not be tolerated. If anyone violates the principles that we've established here, we must let them go." As he proclaims his non-negotiables in these situations, he looks like a five-star general leading his army into battle. You look into his eyes and see that steely resolve.

Where does that resolve come from? It is rooted in his inner security, which bears the fruit of his personal confidence. Thus, humility and confidence do not contradict one another; they are inextricably related. Many people labor under the misconception that a person cannot maintain healthy humility and at the same time act as a bold, confident, and strong-willed leader. This is simply not the case.

Let me unpack this for you. Unless a person possesses an inner sense of security, they cannot exhibit a life of humility. Why is this true? Because every selfless act, manifested by a humble person's behavior, is a magnanimous display of a person's freedom from insecurity. In other words, this freedom is liberty from all of the self-absorbed behaviors that are driven by insecurity and fear. It follows that the more insecure and fearful a person is, the less freedom he has to think about other people's interests and needs.

Hubristic people feel no need to serve others or to place their well-being over their own. What they crave is for others to stroke their own egos—to validate their worth—because their insecurity keeps them in a moment-by-moment state of neediness. They are always working *for* a sense of self-worth and never *from* a secure sense of well-being.

The humble person, unlike the hubristic person, does not need others for self-validation.

Truly humble people understand that their human spirit, and all of the incredible intellect and ability that spirit comprises, is a gift. Yes, they have worked hard to expand that intellect and develop those

gifts, but they understand that they cannot boast about creating themselves. Once they embrace the gracious nature of their existence, they have taken the first step toward developing a humble heart ... but they are also developing *confidence*.

In order to grasp a comprehensive meaning of confidence, you must first of all understand that confidence is the natural outcome of certainty. Metaphorically speaking, certainty is related to confidence as a root is related to its fruit. Humble people are not driven by a need to prove to everyone they meet that they have self-worth, because they live in that certainty. They are secure in themselves; thus, they are confident, and that confidence frees them to seek the well-being of others before they seek their own. **Confidence, therefore, is the underpinning of humility, not its negation.** Humble people stand solidly on the bedrock of an unwavering sense of confidence; they feel no need to prove themselves, to compare themselves with others, or to compete with anyone in order to gain a sense of self-worth and security.

A hubristic mindset, on the other hand, is rooted in insecurity. Fear is the prime driver behind all hubris. Pride blinds the mind from being able to see the amazing gifts, talents, and potential of others. The lives of hubristic people are characterized by an inordinate need to reassure themselves that they are superior to others; their pompous posturing is a dead giveaway that they are striving to acquire a sense of confidence and security.

Humble leaders feel no need to shine a spotlight on themselves, nor do they hide from the harsh glare of that spotlight when it reveals their failures. After Pickett's Charge was repulsed on the third day of the Civil War's pivotal Battle of Gettysburg, Confederate General Robert E. Lee rode out among his retreating soldiers, offering them words of comfort. "It is all my fault," he was heard to say.

George Pickett, for whom the disastrous charge is named, approached; Lee ordered him to reform his division. Pickett, who had just seen more than half his men shot down in less than an hour, replied brokenly, "General Lee, I have no division now."



“Come, General Pickett,” Lee replied. “This has been my fight and upon my shoulders rests the blame. The men and officers of your command have written the name of Virginia as high today as it has ever been written before.”¹⁶ Lee was loved by his troops and respected by his enemies, and this is one of the reasons why. He did not hide in the face of disaster or seek to shift the blame; he stood before his battered troops and told them that they were not at fault for the crushing defeat.

Some historians have made a compelling case that Lee’s second-in-command, General James Longstreet, failed to properly support the attack and was the one responsible for the catastrophic failure at Gettysburg. Lee made no such effort to place blame on another; he later admitted, “I thought my men were invincible.”¹⁷ Only a humble man, grounded in confidence, could make such an admission. A hubristic leader would have been scrambling to pin the defeat on anyone but himself.

My CEO friend reminds me of the character of Robert E. Lee, who is often referred to as the most respected general on either side of the Civil War. Humility is not about becoming a “shrinking violet,” devoid of all confidence, non-negotiable convictions, and personal willpower. Lee was a fighter! Advised to maneuver around the Union lines at Gettysburg, Lee pointed toward the Union center and said firmly, “The enemy is there, and I am going to strike him.”¹⁸

My friend is one of the most genuinely humble people I know, but he is also the strongest and boldest man I’ve ever worked with. Whether he is delivering praise or a rebuke to a member of his team, he consistently treats people with dignity, respect, and honor. It should come as no surprise that his greatest professional challenge is managing his organization’s rapid growth. He is living proof that the power of humility consistently trumps hubris. We gravitate toward humility and are repelled by arrogance. My friend’s leadership model is producing dramatic results.

“I am Somebody; You are Somebody!”

So how do I keep my hubris in check? It’s actually surprisingly simple! Let me give you a formula, which is illustrated by the graphic below:

Four Character Traits and Their Consequences

The graphic shows four possible mindsets with which we all may approach our personal and professional relationships. You’ll also see the results of living with such a mindset. These four beliefs are:



1. I am somebody; you are somebody.
2. I am somebody; you are nobody.
3. I am nobody; you are somebody.
4. I am nobody; you are nobody.

As you see, the first mindset—I **am somebody; you are somebody**—is the mindset that produces genuine *humility*. This philosophy finds its roots directly in the founding of our nation. Our Declaration of Independence expressed this foundational premise: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.” You and I are created equal; I am somebody; you are somebody! I have been endowed with exalted dignity, exalted worth, and exalted potential ... and so have you! I am a walking marvel, a masterpiece, and a miracle ... and so are you!

¹⁶Noah Andre Trudeau, *Gettysburg: A Testing of Courage* (New York, NY: Perennial, a division of HarperCollins © 2002), p. 521.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 542.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 436.



This mindset allows me to live in self-assured humility; the phrase is *not* a contradiction in terms! I am confident that I have gifts, strengths, talents, experience, and skills ... and I honor, value, esteem, and respect your gifts, strengths, talents, experience, and skills. I can lead with confidence, even a bold confidence, because I know that *I am somebody*, yet I will not trample your spirit, because I sincerely believe that *you are somebody*. This kind of confident humility will bring out the best in the people whom I lead. As the graphic shows, the people on my team will feel inspired, confident, and empowered.

The second mindset is portrayed in the upper-right corner of the graphic: **I am somebody; you are nobody**. This is the mindset of the *hubristic* leader. Perhaps we see this most clearly in our elected representatives in Washington today. When I was young, we referred to these men and women as “civil servants.” Today these people increasingly seem to view themselves as rulers. We cannot be trusted to make wise decisions about what to eat and how to live; our all-wise, all-knowing masters in Washington believe they must regulate those decisions for us.

Leader, what have you accomplished that makes you “more human” than the men and women who work in your organization? Do your advanced degrees, financial successes, or social status make you a more superior human being? Do you recognize that all of these accomplishments are very special gifts that you have received, which should equip you to be a more humble servant to others? Or have your education, wealth, and image erected a lofty platform for self-aggrandizement?

I came across an ancient proverb almost forty years ago. As a young man, I never fully grasped the inherent profitable implications of its wisdom until I began my consulting business: “Humility goes before honor.” The path to honor is paved with humility, not pride. Humility is not a character trait that detracts from a person’s honor; it is the quality that logically proceeds and opens the gateway to honor!

As I visit organizations all over the country, I see

the clues that their leaders don’t understand this philosophy. What are those clues? The graphic provides three: when an organization’s purpose partners are dispirited, disempowered, and disengaged—when they feel like mere “employees”, rather than partners working toward a common purpose—you can be reasonably certain that their leadership is characterized by hubris.

I walk into these organizations all the time. I see no humility in their leaders, and precious little engagement in the staff. These leaders don’t know what it means to be human! And because there is no humility—because leaders believe *they* are somebody, but the staff is nobody, little more than recalcitrant children who need a firm hand to keep them in line—their organizations struggle to gain significant market share. They’re not nearly as profitable as they could be.

I ask leaders in these dispirited organizations: “What does it mean to be human? Have we defined people truthfully?” If leaders can’t define what it means to be human properly, how can they treat human beings properly? You walk through these companies and see people who are lifeless and powerless. Tragically, they are simply a product of the dehumanizing philosophy of their leadership. You can sense the closed, cautious, defensive environment almost from the moment you walk through the front door. I’m reminded of the gloomy description of Nortel’s failed leadership: “A culture of arrogance and even hubris.” Such a leadership culture is a precursor to dismal failure. As the old adage warns, “Pride goes before destruction.” Excessive arrogance creates a superior mindset that repels all people, regardless of where they fall on the socio-economic scale.

Moving to the lower-left corner of the graphic, you see the mindset of *inferiority*: **I am nobody; you are somebody**. This is the attitude that frequently reflects an outcome of hubristic leadership. Those whose spirits have been trampled by the overwhelming arrogance of leaders who have succumbed to pride will feel fearful, insecure, and unconfident. They are disengaged from their work, because they do not believe that what they do makes any significant contribution.



I frequently tell business leaders that every man, woman, and child has the letters **MMFI** stamped across their forehead — **Make Me Feel Important!** Understanding this dynamic is one of the keys to creating peak engagement in the workplace. When workers understand how their individual roles and responsibilities contribute to the success of the overall whole, they are *far* more likely to engage in their work with eager passion.

A business leader who has fallen into this lower-left corner of the quadrant will inevitably muddle in mediocrity. It does not matter what product or service is offered, people will not follow—nor will they buy—fear and insecurity; they follow confidence. Purpose partners and customers alike are repelled by a leader who believes “I am nobody; you are somebody.” We recognize that such an attitude is unhealthy; we vote with our feet and move away from it.

Humble people are very much in touch with their weaknesses *and* their strengths. They do not berate themselves for their weaknesses, nor do they exalt their own strengths, because they recognize that they are learning and growing on a daily basis. If you and I do not go through life simultaneously grasping both the reigns of our strengths and our weaknesses, we will not realize the benefits of living in humility. An improper sense of self produces an imbalance in a person’s psyche; a proper appreciation for one’s own gifts, coupled with a realistic view of how much one still needs to grow and improve, gives us the right kind of internal equilibrium.

Finally, in the lower-right corner of the diagram, you see the mindset of the *malcontent*: **I am nobody, you are nobody**. In many cases, the malcontent started out as one who felt inferior, but over time their resentment at being made to feel this way has hardened into resistance, perhaps even revenge. “You think you’re so great?” the malcontent fumes. “Well, I think you’re nobody. Perhaps *I’m* nobody, but you aren’t any better than me!” The angry malcontent is a cancer in the organization, seeking to enlist others to join in an “us versus them” campaign against the organization’s leadership.

I interviewed a long-time line worker who estimated that he had cost his manufacturing firm tens of thousands of dollars over the years, simply by letting mistakes go by that he could easily have corrected. This negligence was his revenge on a manager who had bullied and belittled him. Is a malcontent like this responsible for his own destructive attitude? Of course! But the malicious mindset is the rotten fruit produced by the unhealthy root of the hubristic leader’s dehumanizing philosophy. Both the malcontent and the leader need an attitude adjustment!

Developing Genuine Humility

Humility is not acquired simply by determining to be more humble. Humility is, first and foremost, a composite of ideas that clearly define what humility is and what it is not. Consequently, if you and I are to become humble in our thoughts and behavior, we must understand the meaning of what determines humility.

Definition demands distinction; in order to know what something *is*, we also must know what it is *not*. So let us begin with a clear understanding of what humility is *not*. Humility is *not* the kind of whining subservience that announces to coworkers, “Oh, I’m the weak link in this chain. Everybody else here is so great! I’m just happy to be the water boy on this team.” Do you recognize this pattern? This is not modeling humility; it is declaring one’s own inferiority! This speech fits into the **I am nobody; you are somebody** corner of the quadrant presented earlier.

There are also those who use this “Just happy to be here” language as a convoluted expression of their hubris. “Look at ME!” such a person is saying. “Look how ‘humble’ I am! Did you hear ME? I’m ‘just happy to be the water boy!’ Aren’t you impressed by ME? I certainly am!”

Truly humble people recognize that they, just like their coworkers, possess exalted dignity, exalted worth, and exalted potential, so they feel no need to call attention to their own gifts. Nor do they trumpet a message that they don’t trumpet their message! It has been well said that “Meekness is not weakness, but strength under control.” The



very same phrase accurately describes genuine humility. It is a quiet confidence that is well aware of its own dignity and worth, but prefers to shine the spotlight on the accomplishments of others. Truly humble people maintain a balanced perspective by not thinking too highly or too critically of themselves. They have developed a mental gyroscopic system that sustains an accurate, balanced, and stable perspective of their person. They do not exalt themselves over others by means of self-aggrandizement, nor do they abase themselves to the point where their self-effacement renders them of little or no value to others.

Jim Collins identified humility as a common element among the great organizational leaders he and his researchers interviewed. "During interviews with the good-to-great leaders," Collins reported, "they'd talk about the company and the contributions of other executives as long as we'd like but would deflect discussion about their own contributions ... It wasn't just false modesty. Those who worked with or wrote about the good-to-great leaders continually used words like *quiet, humble, modest, reserved, shy, gracious, mild-mannered, self-effacing, understated, did not believe his own clippings*; and so forth."¹⁹

As Collins correctly noted, this reluctance to blow one's own horn is not a sign of inferiority or false modesty; it is strength under control. Humility is characterized by a silent inner strength that is free from the relentless need to draw attention to itself. On the other hand, hubris is driven by a clamorous inner weakness that draws all attention away from others to itself. There is a wise old saying that asserts that the more noise a wagon makes as it travels on a road is indicative of its emptiness ... not its fullness.

The hubristic leader believes, "I am here to be your superior." The humble leader believes, "I am here to serve you; I want to help you develop your gifts and enjoy success." The hubris leader insists, "The beatings will continue until morale improves!" The humble person exhorts, "The blessings will

continue until morale is through the roof!" And these blessings are not a technique used to manipulate, but a way of living and leading that recognizes and celebrates the exalted dignity, worth, and potential of humanity.

I've seen the profitable, sustainable fruit of this philosophy in the businesses we work with who have adopted it. I meet scores of leaders who tell me, "We need this! Our leadership team needs to be more humble. We want this 'I am somebody; you are somebody' belief to cascade throughout our organization. We want to live out this philosophy in both our personal and professional lives."

Are We Leading our Companies Toward Humility? Or Hubris?

How can we develop genuine humility? Belief precedes behavior; philosophy precedes performance; knowledge precedes application. It all starts with what we believe about men and women. Here is a list of those philosophical underpinnings. This list is by no means an exhaustive one, but it should give you plenty of food for thought.

(1) Life is a gift. The things that are most valuable in life are absolutely free.

Relationships are the greatest gifts of all, and they don't cost a penny! You entered your family without cost to you and without cause in you. Your family relationship is an undeserved favor; it is a grace gift.

I am reminded of the eastern saying, "What do you have that you have not received?" The rhetorical question emphasizes the truth that our existence—and all of the wonderful things that accompany life—is a gift. Your mental, physical, spiritual, and social abilities are all part of that undeserved grace package that is called humanity. You and I truly have a lot to be thankful for and celebrate!

¹⁹ Good to Great, p. 27.



(2) We all possess the very same dignity and worth as human beings. One person is not “more human” than another. That is why hubristic one-upmanship is an unwarranted, impermissible, and illogical state of mind. No person can make himself or herself “more human” by means of their status, appearance, or performance.

Simply put, humility is the expression of authenticity. In other words, it is an accurate perception of reality. To think of yourself more highly than you ought to think is a false perception of yourself and of reality. Humble people have accepted the truth about who they are and the truth about all reality.

(3) We are all finite and fallible. We are all still “under construction.” Since we have not arrived, and never *will* arrive at the point of perfection, we should hold tight to a good, healthy attitude of humility!

You and I aren’t perfect. We don’t have all the answers! A study of economics leads to the understanding that no human being has infinite resources; therefore, we must create social networks and collaborate with other people in order to accomplish our goals, needs, and desires. And the greatest basis for cooperation, empowerment, and engagement is the belief that every human being possesses the same exalted dignity, exalted worth, and exalted potential. Human life must not be devalued, dishonored or disrespected by any individual or institution. It is to be viewed through a sacrosanct lens.

(4) Everyone I meet can and will contribute to my growth and development as a human being.

Therefore, I should be the best listener possible because every man, woman, and child I meet is my teacher! I frequently tell my clients that this humble mindset is not about “being nice,” as important as that is.

It is an ironclad fact that **you cannot impart what you do not possess.** Leader, do you want your external customers to feel valued, honored, and respected? Do you want your sales, service, and support staff to make your customers feel like they are Number One? Of course! But how will the men and women you employ (your purpose partners) communicate that message from a platform of inferiority?

Let’s go back to the lower-left corner of the graphic. If your employees have been made to feel that **I am nobody; you are somebody**, they will be insecure, fearful, and unconfident. “Well, that’s certainly not the case at *our* company,” you may be thinking dismissively. Are you sure? Are there leaders in your company whose attitudes and actions clearly communicate their belief that **“I am somebody; you are nobody”**? If this is the case, you can be sure they are creating feelings of inferiority and discontent throughout your organization.

But even if your leaders do not express this kind of hubris, what is the message that is communicated to those who interact with your customers? Many companies regularly remind their staff that “The Customer is Number One!” “The Customer is Always Right!” “Whatever Our Customers Want, Our Customers Get!” If the customer is Somebody, where does that leave your purpose partners who serve them? Are they ... nobody? Whatever you want your external customers to feel, your internal customers must feel first!

Some years ago, I met with customer service personnel at a nationally known facility that entertained hundreds of thousands of people annually. Their customer satisfaction numbers were high, but keeping them there was an unceasing struggle. One staffer remarked acidly, “They tell us all the time, ‘The customer always comes first.’ Well, what about us? When is anybody going to care about us or listen to us?” Clearly, this purpose partner had been made to feel that he was nobody ... and the customer was Somebody!



We *must* have a philosophy in place that encourages our purpose partners to reach for their highest and best. We must move away from hubris and become living, breathing examples of humility. This holds true for you and I as individual leaders and for all the members of the organizations we serve. There simply is no sustainable, profitable competitive advantage in hubris. History has taught us that lesson time and time again. The hubristic mindset will necessarily move people toward controlling and dominating others; humility moves you toward a mental model of caring and development.

Until your mind is set free from the prison of your own self-importance, you will never enjoy sustainable success! So many leaders are painted with the glaring strokes of pride and not the soft hues of humility. The widespread lack of humility in every area of human endeavor is nothing short of tragic. You see it in politics, in education, in business, in professional sports, and in the rise of the so-called “mega-churches,” many of which rise and fall on the powerful personality of one dynamic speaker. You even see it on the battlefield, where an egotistical leader like Hitler or Napoleon believes that he cannot be defeated. I am reminded of the steward who told a passenger boarding the *Titanic*, “God Himself could not sink this ship.” Pride goes before destruction!

The Characteristics of Humility

What are the characteristics of humility? Have you created your own personal humility assessment to measure your growth in this area? If not, I’d like to encourage you to take the self-assessment that follows and see if your life is characterized by humility or hubris. I use this checklist to be sure that I am keeping myself in check.

I must issue a disclaimer before you read through the statements that follow. I do not want to imply that any person is either 100% humble or 100% hubristic in their behavior. If you examine the total behavior of people, you will find that they exhibit both behaviors throughout their lives ... often throughout each day!

My intent in developing this assessment is to help leaders intentionally contrast the lifestyle of humble leaders with hubristic leaders. I wanted to paint such a stark contrast between the two that you will be motivated to disdain the characteristics of the hubristic leader and forthrightly choose the beliefs and behaviors of the humble leader.



There are more times than I’d care to admit when I run through this “Humble or Hubristic?” checklist and find myself shaking my head. In the blink of an eye, I’ll wake up and be 70 years old ... and I *still* lapse into hubristic behavior! And just when I start to believe that I am so humble that I no longer have any blind spots, my wife is there to remind me that I most certainly still do!

So, having developed a checklist to evaluate my own behavior, I have also developed a list of attitudes and actions that I must take in order to rein in my own hubris and live and work in humility. Do you want to take this assessment? It’s simple; just put a check next to the statement that most closely describes you.



Humble^{or}Hubristic

Humble or Hubristic?

1. **Hubristic people** are impressed with themselves. _____
Humble people are more impressed with others than themselves. _____
2. **Hubristic people** believe they are always right. _____
Humble people realize that they don't have all of the answers. _____
3. **Hubristic people** think more about themselves; they seek their own well-being, not the well-being of others. _____
Humble people think more about others; they seek their own well-being and the well-being of others. _____
4. **Hubristic people** want to be served by others. _____
Humble people delight in serving others, even when it is not convenient. _____
5. **Hubristic people** don't know what is important to others. _____
Humble people want to know what is important to others. _____
6. **Hubristic people** make others feel inferior. _____
Humble people make others feel important. _____
7. **Hubristic people** are oblivious to the frustration they create in others. _____
Humble people are in-tune with any changes in the body language and behavior of others. They quickly sense if they are causing tension. _____
8. **Hubristic people** take no responsibility for interpersonal conflicts; they see no need to apologize for their behavior. _____
Humble people always take responsibility for their role in any conflicts; they are quick to sincerely apologize when they offend others. _____
9. **Hubristic people** talk more than they listen. They interrupt and monopolize conversations. _____
Humble people talk less and listen more. They allow others to finish speaking before they talk. _____
10. **Hubristic people** control and dominate others. _____
Humble people care for and develop others. _____
11. **Hubristic people** find fault in others but not in themselves. They believe they have no blind spots. _____
Humble people honestly examine themselves to see if they are at fault and ask you to show them their blind spots. _____
12. **Hubristic people** have very little self-awareness because they are so self-absorbed. _____
Humble people have great self-awareness because they are so others-focused. _____
13. **Hubristic people** rarely treat people with dignity, respect, or honor. _____
Humble people strive to treat others with the highest dignity, respect, and honor. _____
14. **Hubristic people** act as if they are perfect and need no improvement. _____
Humble people know that they are imperfect and under construction. _____



- 15. Hubristic people** are not teachable. They are correction averse! _____
Humble people welcome opportunities to learn from everyone. They know that unless their co-workers give them honest feedback about their performance, they will not grow. _____
- 16. Hubristic people** hold no sense of responsibility for helping others feel good about themselves or their contributions to the whole. _____
Humble people assume the responsibility for telling others how important they are and explaining the value of their contributions. _____
- 17. Hubristic people** fear that if they value others they will devalue themselves. _____
Humble people know that when they value others they are valuing themselves. _____
- 18. Hubristic people** are not free to enjoy or appreciate others because they are preoccupied with esteeming themselves. _____
Humble people are free to appreciate, honor, and value others because they are not prisoners of their own self-importance. _____
- 19. Hubristic people**, because of emotional immaturity, have a tendency to become sullen or throw a tantrum when they don't get their way. _____
Humble people are unfazed when their goals are blocked because they know that they can often serve others more effectively when they put others' interests ahead of their own. _____
- 20. Hubristic people** have a difficult time giving credit to others because they want to take credit for everything themselves. _____
Humble people are constantly looking for opportunities to give credit to others. _____
- 21. Hubristic people** do not practice the art of honoring others with their thoughts, words, and deeds because it does not serve them. _____
Humble people highly esteem the virtue of honor and they make it a daily habit to honor all people, when and where honor is due, regardless of their station in life. _____
- 22. Hubristic people** are quick to rub people's noses in their mistakes and faults. _____
Humble people are quick to be gracious and forgiving with others because they are painfully aware of their own weaknesses and flaws. _____
- 23. Hubristic people** are incapable of seeing the potential of others because they are blinded by their own self-importance. _____
Humble people live every moment with their eyes wide open to the amazing abilities and talents of others. They understand that their personal growth is inextricably related to their willingness to help others recognize, develop, and unleash their potential. _____
- 24. Hubristic people** make other people responsible for managing their emotions. _____
Humble people understand that they are solely responsible for managing their own emotions. _____
- 25. Hubristic people** use all of their accomplishments as a platform to exalt themselves over others as their superior. _____
Humble people use all of their gifts, talents, experiences, and accomplishments as a means to more effectively serve others. _____



Models of Genuine Humility

An ancient Eastern proverb warns, “When pride comes, so does disgrace; wisdom comes with the humble.” The art of leadership is the art of living, moment-by-moment, in humility. Humility is truly a state of mind—and the leader must understand that hubris and humility are diametrically opposed states of mind. At People First International, we are trying to help leaders focus on the wisest business philosophy so that they can enjoy the best results. The wisest leader is the one who is the most humble. And the humble leader is clothed in honor, for humility is the key that opens the gateway to honor. One of the most beloved and respected presidents in the history of our nation is Abraham Lincoln. Everyone is familiar with the nickname “Honest Abe,” which was hung on him years before he ever ran for elected office. But “Humble Abe” would have been every bit as appropriate. There are a plethora of stories which attest to Lincoln’s utter lack of hubris, but my favorite regards his contentious relationship with his Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton. Stanton was a blunt man, and he made no secret of his disdain for Lincoln, once referring to Lincoln as a “long-armed ape.” Knowing this full well, President Lincoln appointed Stanton anyway, believing him to be the best man to lead the War Department during the War Between the States.

After Stanton’s appointment, Lincoln issued an authorization to the War Department for an initiative a Congressman had proposed. Stanton refused to carry it out, saying that Lincoln was a fool for issuing it.

“Did Stanton say I was a damn fool?” Lincoln asked the Congressman when he reported back to him.

“He did, sir, and repeated it.”

At which point, Lincoln opined, “If Stanton said I was a damn fool, then I must be one, for he is nearly always right and generally says what he means.”²⁰

Clearly, our sixteenth president understood *he* was somebody ... and Edwin Stanton was somebody! “Nearly all men can stand adversity,” Lincoln once said, “but if you want to test a man’s character, give him power.” Abraham Lincoln’s leadership was tested in one of the most fiery crucibles in our nation’s history, yet “Humble Abe’s” confident humility shone through in his dealings with others.

The story of Lincoln and Stanton brings to mind a humorous quote from the Greek philosopher Epictetus, who suggested, “If anyone tells you that a certain person speaks ill of you, do not make excuses about what is said of you but answer, ‘He was ignorant of my other faults, else he would not have mentioned these alone.’” This is the clear-thinking attitude of the humble man or woman.

Humility is the only lens that enables you to see the exalted worth, exalted dignity, and the incredible, God-given abilities of others. Humility gives us both the desire and the freedom to appreciate the gift of humanity given to others and to sincerely, wholeheartedly celebrate their accomplishments. Humility frees the mind from the destructive need to dominate, control and suppress others, and it eliminates every self-serving desire to impress, compare, compete, and prove anything to anyone.

General Omar Bradley commanded the United States Army Group from 1944-1945, the largest command ever held by an American officer. Later he served as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Bradley’s remarkable resume was due in no small measure to his abilities as a battlefield commander. Biographer Jim DeFelice reports that Bradley’s peers considered him to be a master tactician, yet Omar Bradley routinely deflected praise, preferring to credit his subordinates.

DeFelice insists that Bradley’s success was due “most of all [to] his ability to keep his ego largely in check: a rare quality in a general of any rank, let alone one who ended his career with five stars.”²¹

²⁰Russell Razaque, M.D., “Learning Humility from Lincoln,” *Psychology Today*, April 12, 2012 <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/political-intelligence/201204/learning-humility-lincoln> Viewed 7/2/2014; Article originally appeared in *Political Intelligence*.

²¹Jim DeFelice, *Omar Bradley: General at War*, page 5 <http://www.jimdefelice.com/uploads/bradintroexcerpt.pdf> Viewed 7/2/2014 Omar Bradley was the last American five-star general.



After his retirement, Bradley declined to engage in any of the “Monday morning quarterbacking” that seems to characterize so many aging public figures. He tartly explained, “I am convinced that the best service a retired general can perform is to turn in his tongue along with his suit and to mothball his opinions.”

When one’s mind and actions are clothed in true humility, it is one of the most attractive and ennobling character traits that a human being could possess. This humble spirit *always* serves leaders well, and it will be welcomed, honored, and rewarded in any and all vocations and associations. Humility is one of the greatest multipliers for sustainable profitability.

Furthermore, humility is one of the greatest dispositions of the mind for producing the most profitable life that one could ever imagine. When leaders are humble in mind and deportment, then and only then are they fully prepared to seize upon every opportunity for their personal and professional development. Humility of mind and behavior creates a willingness and openness to learn from every person we encounter in our various life experiences. In other words, humble people have disciplined their minds not to think of themselves more highly than they ought to think.

“Shh! He’s Here!”

Without humility, you won’t bring out the highest and the best in people and your hubris will frequently reduce them to their lowest and their least. And what I have seen, time and again, is that the prideful person is the last one to realize that he or she is “hitting the kill switch” in the human spirit of others; hubristic people don’t know that they don’t know!

Some years ago, the CEO of a national firm asked me to map out an organizational development strategy with his senior leadership team. On the day of the meeting, the CEO was delayed, so his leadership team and I went to work without him. We were having a great time together and also a very productive time. The team was fully engaged; there was lots of positive energy, and we joked and laughed together as the plan quickly took shape on

a large white board. The CEO walked in about 40 minutes after we’d started ... and the dynamics in the room changed in an instant!

I had a great relationship with the CEO; I respected him, but I wasn’t intimidated by him in the least. So I was mystified as I watched his team go through a remarkable metamorphosis; their demeanor and their interactions completely shut down, as if someone had flipped an “Off” switch.

As I say, I had enjoyed several very positive meetings with this CEO before, but I had never seen him interact with the members of his senior team. It was obvious to me that all the energy in the room had disappeared, but I had no idea why. I assumed that I must have unwittingly said something that turned the team off. So I asked innocently, “What’s wrong? Did I say something to shut you down?”

The CFO was standing next to me; he actually *whispered* to me, “He’s here!”

I was bewildered by his behavior. “Who’s here?” I asked in a normal tone of voice.

“Shh!” the CFO hissed. “The CEO is here!” All the heads in the room were downcast, just like schoolchildren who had been misbehaving in a classroom until their strict teacher unexpectedly returned. Faces that had been beaming with smiles were carefully expressionless; voices that had been raised in laughter and playful banter were subdued and cautious.

Later that morning, I sat down alone with the CEO; I’ll call him “Bill.” I asked Bill, “Do you know your team is not themselves when you’re around?”

“What do you mean?” he asked. It was obvious that Bill had no idea what I was talking about.

“Bill, before you arrived, there was excitement, engagement, communication, and joy! But when you walked in the room—” I snapped my fingers “—they shut down *immediately*. They believe that you don’t want them to behave that way, so they shut down.”

Bill stared at me in disbelief. “I had no idea that I’m producing that in them. I don’t *want* to do that to them.”



As I interviewed different members of Bill's team, I learned that he exhibited the kind of high-command, high-control behaviors that throw the kill switch in the human spirit. *That* was why Bill's arrival so completely changed the tone of the meeting. I had allowed and encouraged the team to be themselves. Bill had communicated the message that he wanted his team to be like him: businesslike, "no-nonsense," and serious. The outcome was that his leadership team was closed, cautious, defensive, and somber in his presence, even though that was not their true personality.

It is sad truth that hubristic leaders are usually the last to realize that they are extinguishing engagement in their team. Bill was amazed when I told him that his senior leaders were *much* more outgoing when he was not in the room because he'd never seen them in that outgoing, engaged state. Bill's hubris kept them from being themselves ... and kept him from seeing that they were not themselves!

Hubristic people are often so self-absorbed that they don't even ask themselves, "Do I allow the people around me to *be* themselves? Do I truly want them to be themselves, not clones made in my image? Do I want people to feel free to shine as individuals in the workplace? Or am I producing an enforced, sterile conformity?"

In my *People First* book, a business leader is asked two questions; the second one pierces his heart. **"Have you ever met a leader that the room lights up, radiates, and glows ... when that leader walks out of the room? Are you one of those leaders?"** I frequently challenge business leaders to ask others, starting with their loved ones at home, this question: "How do you feel about you ... when you're around me?" If the spouse or children of a hubristic leader were to reply honestly, they might well say, "I don't feel good about me when I'm around you, because you don't allow me to be me!" Hubris is the Number One barrier of man having fellowship with his fellow man! Hubris destroys relationships, marriages, organizations, and governments.

Hubris: A Random Corporate Serial Killer

Leader, is hubris affecting your relationships and your organization? There are lots of leaders who struggle with this problem. During forty years of leadership consulting, I've lost count of how many people have told me that their leader's self-absorbed attitude is costing their company dearly. One supervisor told me that he finally snapped one day and bluntly told his senior leader that he would not tolerate his demeaning attitude for one more day. "You will never talk to me like this again," he said, "or I'll quit on the spot!"

An administrative assistant at an international firm told me, "My boss has no idea how disrespectfully he treats all of the admin staff. He's going to burn through a *lot* of admin people in his career! No one will put up with his demeaning attitude." Scores of middle managers tell me every year that they and many of their peers are actively seeking work elsewhere because their leaders aren't humble enough to listen to their innovative ideas.

It is my contention that the Number One killer of organizational profitability is hubristic leadership! I have cited Gallup's stunning 2013 *State of the American Workplace* in other white papers. Jim Clifton, Gallup's Chairman and CEO, estimated that actively disengaged employees may cost American companies as much as *\$550 billion annually!*²²

That figure takes my breath away every time I read it. But we must not read that statement, shake our heads sadly, and then simply return to the tyranny of the urgent. What are you and I, as business leaders, going to *do* about this problem? I submit that hubristic leadership is the malignant *root* of the unprofitable disengagement *fruit* that many leaders are harvesting.

When Gallup's data was released, business leaders were aghast. But rather than wringing our hands and sighing, "Oh, this is terrible," we should seek to identify the cause. *Why* are we experiencing this disengagement? And more importantly, what is the solution? This is why I wanted to write a prescriptive white paper, not just another diatribe

²²Gallup Inc., "State of the American Workplace," Gallup Inc., © 2013, page 5 <http://www.gallup.com/strategicconsulting/163007/state-american-workplace.aspx> Viewed 7/3/2014



that shrills, “Leaders, our workers aren’t engaged!” or warns “Leaders, we’re not humble!” I wanted to write a paper that moves beyond diagnostic data to offering a prescriptive plan.

If we’ve got a giant weed growing in a corner of our garden, we may simply cut off the branches ... we might even lop the weed off at the base ... but if we leave the root, the weed will grow back, often larger and bushier than it was before! There is an engagement doom loop that is very similar to gardening: we simply incur the same costs, experience the same disappointments, fret about the same disconnection, and agonize over the same disengagement. We must use a weed-puller to address this problem, not pruning shears!

It Can Happen to You!

We leaders must talk about this hubris that disempowers and disengages so many of our purpose partners. We need to keep it top-of-mind. You and I will never graduate from this class! We must keep checking ourselves and holding each other accountable. There will never come a day in your life or mine when we will no longer need to be warned about hubris. We will mature, yes, but we will never “arrive.”

The proclivity to hubris starts in childhood. We don’t need anyone to teach us hubristic self-centeredness; we’re born screaming, “Me, me, me!” not “We, we, we!” And no matter what stage of life we’re currently in, we can slip back into “The Terrible Twos” at any moment. I’m perched in my high chair, happily slurping up sweet applesauce, when suddenly it spills all over the floor. Immediately I begin waving my spoon and banging it angrily as if it was a scepter. “Pay attention to ME!” I yowl. “I want more food now!” To be sure, we become more sophisticated at expressing our regal aspirations, but we never outgrow them.

We must constantly evaluate ourselves. We’ve all seen ads for high-performance automobiles that can accelerate from zero to sixty in scant seconds. Well, you and I can accelerate from zero to hubris



in one second ... but it takes a lifetime of consistent self-evaluation to move from zero to humility.

It’s a moment-by-moment mental test you and I are facing: will we choose hubris or humility? Hubris is waging an ongoing battle for every human heart. Granted, the battle is less intense for some than it is for others. However, when I discuss this battle with the most humble people I know, they freely admit that the motive behind every thought, word and deed of theirs is *not* always governed by the maxim, “Let no one seek his own, but each one the others well-being.” To believe that I have arrived at the point of true humility and can now move on to “the next thing” is to grossly underestimate the formidable foe we face. We will never move past this! Every day you and I climb into the ring for another battle with the giant named Hubris.

I’ve met a great many leaders, especially those who move up into the C Suite, who’ve done well all their lives. They’ve always been the “phenoms,” the high-potentials. Many of them excelled in high school, in college, and throughout their graduate work. When they joined the workforce, everyone acknowledged their superior performance. They’ve excelled in everything. They’re the all-stars, the elite. And they know it! They’ve been assured that they received a superior education; they believe that they possess a superior intellect; and they are highly confident in their ability to rapidly analyze a situation and make the correct snap decision. Some are legends in their own minds, but in many cases their business acumen is off the charts.

All of that background provides a great foundation for self-assurance; sadly, however, all of that accomplishment and approbation also creates a fertile breeding ground for an enormously outsized ego. When they speak, their imperious tone practically shouts, “Listen to ME! I don’t need to listen to you because I’m so much smarter than you! I’ve been told that I’m brilliant since I was six, so you’d better recognize my brilliance and tell me that also!”



These pampered poodles expect “our people,” as they frequently refer to purpose partners, to listen to them and jump to obey their every command. They are command-oriented rather than listen-oriented. It is a constant battle for these very bright young men and women to be humble ... a battle they all too often lose. They tend to dominate, and they feel quite comfortable doing it because they know how smart they are.

Are you one of these rising stars? Or perhaps you already *are* the star of your organization. Are you the one people come to for fresh energy and ideas? If so, you must honestly evaluate yourself on a regular basis. Do you display the hubris that communicates to others that “I am somebody and you are nobody”?

Everywhere I go, I see that developing genuine humility is a missing link toward generating sustainable profitability. Business leaders must engage in honest discussions about the difference between humility and hubris. We should come together for meetings and warn each other that hubris is a company killer. We must insist that “We will not tolerate hubristic behavior in ourselves or in others.”

“Faithful Are the Wounds of a Friend”

There are so many good young leaders who have all the potential in the world, but their prodigious hubris makes it unlikely that they’ll ever arrive at “great.” We need to speak the truth in love to them and to each other!

General George Patton wrote:

For over a thousand years Roman conquerors returning from the wars enjoyed the honor of triumph, a tumultuous parade ... The conqueror rode in a triumphal chariot, the dazed prisoners walking in chains before him. Sometimes his children, robed in white, stood with him in the chariot or rode the trace horses. A slave stood behind the conqueror, holding a golden crown and whispering in his ear a warning: that all glory is fleeting.

We need someone to stand behind us, whispering in our ear, “Did you hear what you just said?”

Have you thought about how you’re behaving? You’re not behaving as a humble leader should! So many people don’t have the fortitude to tell the emperor that he has no clothes! An ancient proverb assures us, “Faithful are the wounds of a friend; deceitful are the kisses of an enemy.” Leaders *need* that friend who will give them a wake-up call!

When we can honestly admit to one another that we all battle with a tendency to make everything about “Me” and not about “We,” we create a great environment—given that it is permission-based—for each person to speak the truth in love to one another so that we can help each other avoid the deadly effects of hubris.

In other words, once we all admit that our hubris can get the best of us and end up hurting the team and destroying relationships, we mutually agree to give each other permission to call one another out in love when a member of our team has unwittingly lapsed into an excessively arrogant “Me” mentality.

Too many people begin to believe their own press clippings and start to develop a god complex. Some leaders become extremely intoxicated with this self-exaltation. And all gods must have worshipers. Hubristic leaders are surprised and offended when people don’t seem impressed with them. “All my life people have told me how special I am—my parents, my teachers, my coaches. Why aren’t you worshiping me?” They can come across as if they are the immortals who inhabit Mt Olympus and condescend to check in occasionally with us dimwitted mortals.

Let me be blunt here: no one can assert that they are omniscient, omnipotent, or omnipresent. Readers who have done any theological study will recognize that these are the attributes of God, not man. When we begin to believe that we are all-knowing, all-powerful and able to project our presence everywhere at once—when we ignore the natural limitations of our humanity, rejecting the truth that we are finite and fallible—then we begin to believe that we are gods, and we begin to act like we are superior to everyone else.



Every hubristic leader that I have ever met is desperately trying to play the part of God. However, man does not do a very good job in that role!

Leaders who truly want to grow should review the four quadrants I've presented here and ask the people they lead where they fall. Most leaders will fall in one of the top two: **"I am somebody; you are somebody"** or **"I am somebody; you are nobody."** Or do you vacillate? Do you spend time in both humility and hubris? If so, what is the percentage of time spent in each quadrant? There's only one way to find out: honestly assess yourself and then ask faithful friends who will speak the truth to you in love for a second opinion.

I've seen leaders who have been called out for their hubris; many get defensive and angry. But there are those who hear the truth and then go back and ask their staff, "Am I that bad? Do I really engage in that kind of hubristic behavior?" When the staff assures them that they most certainly do, the leader will ask in a pained voice, "Why didn't anyone tell me?" And I've been in the room when some brave soul has replied, "Tell *you*? We're all afraid for our jobs! No one would dare tell you!"

I would submit that the elephant that looms in the center of many board rooms, ignored and undiscussed, is the leader's hubris that everyone is afraid or unwilling to confront. We must start talking about the elephant and recognize its harmful costs to us and our organizations.

"Hubristics Anonymous"

I was joking with my staff that so many people are helped by AA (Alcoholics Anonymous), perhaps we should create HA (Hubristics Anonymous.) I could chair the meeting.

"Hi, I'm Jack," I'd say. "I'm a gratefully recovering hubristic leader."

"Hi Jack," the group responds dutifully.

"I'm going to have to pick up another white chip tonight," I admit. "I've been having a tough time. Work has been very busy, and I've been talking a lot about me. In fact, I've written a new song. About me! It goes like this: Me-Me-Me-Me-ooooh!"

Some of the HA attendees who have an appreciation for singing on-key wince, but I'm belting it out: "Me-Me-Me-Me-ooooh!" It's my favorite song!

"Jack!" Someone hastily interrupts my impromptu recital. "What does your wife say? What do your purpose partners say about how you've been acting?"

"Not much," I reply cheerfully. "I don't give them much of a chance to say anything. I've been too busy talking about Me-Me-Me-Me-ooooh!"

Someone in the back of the room groans loudly. A young man in the front row is looking at me intently. "Jack, I think you need to call your sponsor. You don't really *believe* you're that great, do you?"

"Oh, I don't know," I reply modestly. "I just gave a speech to 3,000 people last week and they gave me two standing ovations. When I was done, at least fifty people lined up to tell me how great my talk was. Several of them asked me to autograph their copy of my book. I loved it! I really am starting to believe that there's a lot to like about Me-Me-Me-Me-ooooh!"

An older man at the back of the room leaps to his feet. "Jack, I know you're trying to work on developing humility, but you've still got a *long* way to go. You need to do what that young man said and call your sponsor. Maybe you should think about getting more sponsors! And *definitely* stay for the next meeting!"

Praise can be so intoxicating! It inflames the hubristic mindset. Power and control are exhilarating. You look at a lot of leaders and you realize that it's no longer about the money for them; they already have plenty of that. It's about the power! There is no greater addiction.

There's no such thing as Hubristics Anonymous, of course, but you and I certainly need someone who will act as an accountability partner! We need someone to help keep us from falling off the "humble wagon."

"Oops! There goes Jack! He's fallen off the wagon again! Jack! You need to call your humility sponsor!"



“Why? What makes you think there’s a problem with Me-Me-Me-Me-ooooh?”

“Well, Jack, for starters, you’re singing that song again.”

“Isn’t it great? Me-Me-Me—”

“Jack! Just call your sponsor. It will help all of us!”

Winston Churchill readily admitted, “In the course of my life, I have often had to eat my words, and I must confess that I have always found it a wholesome diet.” We need people around us who will encourage us to put our hubristic words and attitudes on a bun and swallow them down whole—no doubt grimacing as they go!

John Ruskin, the 19th century artist and author, wrote, “It is better to lose your pride with someone you love rather than to lose that someone you love with your useless pride.” The wisdom literature tells us that a leader who truly wants to grow and be the best he or she can be will welcome an unflinching exposure of their hubris.

Let a righteous man strike me; it is a kindness;

Let him rebuke me; it will be like an excellent oil poured on my head;

Let my head not refuse it.

The proverb is speaking of the “faithful wounds of a friend” that I mentioned earlier. Great leaders will appreciate these “wounds” as a kindness that helps them grow. This is one of the great marks of truly humble individuals: they have submitted themselves to the lifelong discipline of gratefully receiving it as a gift when someone “strikes” them with the truth.

On the contrary, those who refuse any and all rebukes are sending out a major clue that they are succumbing to hubris. A leader who prides himself on being an alpha dog won’t look at this white paper and say “Ah, at last! This is just what I needed! This is my handbook.” But it should be!

Failure: the Great Teacher!

“Humility goes before honor,” the ancient adage assures us. It’s critical to unpack the

meaning of this truism. So many people, when they are honored for academic or professional accomplishment, will become puffed up in pride if they have not first been humbled. Without the humility that only trials and failure can bring, someone who sets out to accomplish a task will glory in the honor that is received at its accomplishment, and hubris grows. Only genuine humility will allow you to receive any and all honor.

If it is true that humility goes before honor, then there is no task that we should set out to perform without acknowledging that we must first of all be humbled in order to be properly prepared to receive the honor of the task without self-exaltation. Humility is the key that unlocks the prison of our preoccupation with our self-importance.

People may look up to you for your successes and accomplishments. However, they will be inspired the most by the way you deal with trials, failures, and criticism. They will be profoundly influenced by learning how your failures humbled you, strengthened you to be the person that you are today, and taught you the righteous lessons that can be acquired only through blunders and disappointments.

I can personally assert with absolute conviction that I have learned more from my failures than I have learned from the sum total of all my successes. Thus, to withhold from others that which has been my greatest teacher and to not share the immense benefits that I have gained from those failures would only serve to contribute to others’ prolonged discouragement and self-flagellation. I wouldn’t be helping them to understand that there is forgiveness and life and success that come after failure

A humble heart is tempered in the fires of adversity. Sword makers in ancient history discovered that fire was the greatest means for tempering steel and creating the most formidable swords for winning battles. The steel of an insuperable sword was prepared for battle in the blazing heat of a furnace.



The use of a furnace as a tempering agent for the sword is analogous to the adversity that the humble heart must endure in order to be prepared for every fiery challenge that life will throw at us. If the heart has not submitted to the lessons that the tempering agents of failure, loss, criticism, and rejection will subject us to, then that heart is not suitably prepared for winning the greatest battles of life. It's true: humility *does* go before honor.

"Did You Get Your PhD?"

One of the accomplishments that can be a tremendous asset, but also a terrible point of pride, is education.

Now, I am confident that no one who knows me will ever accuse me of being anti-intellectual. I love learning, and I have been researching best business practices for 40 years. I eagerly devour books, professional journals, and articles. Most members of our People First International team hold advanced business degrees, including two PhDs. My *People First Leadership* training manual spotlights education as one of the core competencies of great leadership. I encourage young and old alike to learn and grow and pursue the next level of education.

However, you and I have both met people whose educational accomplishments push out ahead of them like the turbulent air that pushes out from a tractor trailer on the highway. I see this with some young MBA grads and particularly with those who have earned their PhD in virtually any field.

"Hi, I'm Jack Lannom," I'll say to someone I'm meeting at a social function. "And you are?"

"Doctor John Smith," my new acquaintance intones.

"Oh? You're a medical doctor?"

"No, I earned my PhD in economics from Georgetown. And you, Jack? Where did you get your doctorate?"



I am utterly confident that I have *not* just met a paragon of humility!

I'd like to suggest a new education program for all leaders. And in this era of skyrocketing college costs, the best news of all is that you don't need to take out a student loan to get this degree. This white paper will give you all the information you need to gain a new kind of graduate degree. I'd like to encourage you to pursue your ...

MBA in Modeling a Beautiful Attitude

Phd in Pursuing Humility Daily

Now the conversation may go quite differently!

"Jack, have you gotten your PhD?"

"Well, John, I'm working on it ... it's a little different from the one most people receive from the university. Pursuing Humility Daily actually takes several decades to master!"

"Yes, but what an admirable pursuit! And I can see that you achieved your MBA. You certainly are Modeling a Beautiful Attitude!"

"John, you're so kind to say so! I'm very fortunate to have people in my life who will tell me when I'm not keeping my grade point average up. At our company we're really working at becoming a learning organization."

"Oh? How?"

"We're all working at getting our MBAs and PhDs."

"Wow! You're *all* doing that?!"

"Yes. Everyone on our team really values the process of becoming a learning organization."

John laughs. "I've got some friends with MBAs and PhDs from the top business schools who could benefit tremendously from taking your course!"

When you have developed a comprehensive understanding of humility, there is no room left for pride. Once you understand the complete rationality of humility, you're able to understand the irrationality of hubris. Humility is rational; hubris is irrational. If you believe that you're superior to others because of your educational and/or professional achievement—if you believe



that there is virtually no imperfection in you and you don't need to be corrected—your belief is irrational! It is self-deception.

When we lapse into this kind of illogical thinking, we can slide into narcissism and self-aggrandizement. My hope is that this paper will shine a bright light into all those dark places where hubris wants to hide. You and I must expose it in our own lives first. As we grow and mature, the more readily we will identify hubris raising its incipient, self-exalting head everywhere.

The Sentry at the Gate

We should imagine that we have a little sentry standing guard over our mouths. The sentry acts like a gatekeeper who won't allow hubris to pass through our lips. Because I earn a living by speaking to large groups, leadership teams, and individuals, I must be particularly careful to evaluate my communication. I keep my sentry very busy; when I'm speaking, I constantly evaluate my words and ask myself questions like these:

- Am I talking too much about myself?
- Am I promoting myself and my agenda?
- Am I falling in love with the sound of my own voice?
- Am I monopolizing this conversation?
- Am I interrupting?
- When did I last throw the conversational "ball" back to the other person?
- Am I showing a genuine interest in others by asking questions about them?
- Am I modeling humility? Or hubris?
- If I were to stand before a jury of my peers, would there be enough evidence to convince them that I truly am humble?

These are questions that all of us who lead—for that matter, all of us who live—should write down and use as a check on our indwelling hubris. It's a self-assessment which will help us to become self-aware. Develop that sentry to guard the gateway of your lips and be ready to admit to yourself, "I can't say that! That's not humble. I don't want to come across as hubristic."

We should engage in self-talk like, "I'm getting ready to say this: am I about to demonstrate humility? Or hubris? Am I trying to make myself look bigger than I am? Am I trying to impress others with who I am and what I've done? Am I trying to prove my worth to someone? Am I trying to compete with others? To compare myself to them?"

I have to stay on guard—and so do you—because hubris is always seeking to envelop us. We were focused on self from the moment we came out of the womb. That's why the work to earn our PhD (Pursuing Humility Daily) never ends, because we will *never* graduate! Our natural inclination is to think about self, promote self, serve self, and exalt self. My belief is that our natural state is self-centeredness ... and that's not just because I struggle with hubris on a daily basis, but because I've met so many others who do also! It's something we'll never grow out of, although we can certainly hope to grow in humility over time.

How Can I Grow in Humility?

If hubris crouches at the doorway of our hearts and seeks to leap past the gateway of our lips ... if narcissism is becoming embedded in American culture ... how do we resist it? I'd like to suggest twelve steps that leaders can employ to make an honest evaluation of the culture in their organizations. Do leaders display genuine humility? Or does their behavior expose hubristic tendencies?

Twelve Action Steps to Raise Your Humility Quotient

1. Don't think more highly of yourself than you ought to think. In other words, never forget that you are finite and fallible.

2. Remember the proverb, "Let no one seek his own, but each one the other's well-being." It's perfectly healthy to look out for your own well-being, but deliberately seek the interest of others as well.

3. Openly admit when you've made a mistake. Recognize that you often learn more from your failures than you do from your successes.



4. Show others that you are not a “know-it-all.” Ask them to share their opinions and teach you what they know. Allow others to disagree with you. Remind your team, “We all should learn from each other; none of us is as smart as all of us!”

5. Ask more questions concerning what is important to others and take a genuine interest in their answers. Let them know that what they think, how they feel, and what they have to say is very important to you. (Remember **MMFI**: People want you to “Make Me Feel Important!”)

6. Always practice proactive listening skills. Demonstrate that you esteem others more highly than yourself by not interrupting them.

7. Remember to treat every person with dignity, respect, and honor.

8. Create performance management systems for reinforcing and rewarding humility and for exposing and expelling hubris.

9. Consistently ask others to lovingly show you your blind spots.

10. Remember that every person possesses the same exalted dignity, worth, and potential. Therefore, don’t come across as anyone’s superior; you are not “more human” than anyone else.

11. Stop being the official fault-finder and judge of everyone’s life. Be more gracious, more understanding, and more patient with everyone!

12. Don’t get caught up in gossiping about other people. Remember you, too, are *far* from perfect! You are under construction like everyone else.

Leaders should keep these statements at the forefront of their consciousness and measure their behavior against them every day.

A Living Example of Humility

Let me introduce you to one of the most trusted members of my team. PJ Bouchard is our Executive Vice President of Cultural Transformation and Organizational Development. PJ could trumpet her very impressive resume,

which includes serving as VP of Human Resources for a Fortune 500 company with offices in more than 50 countries; she never does. PJ could boast about her accomplishments as a published author; she never mentions them. She could pontificate about her vast knowledge of organizational development theory and practice; she would rather listen to others and celebrate their gifts than talk about her own. And yet PJ is absolutely unflinching when it comes to telling me, a coworker, or a client about their blind spots. She is a master of tact and she speaks the truth in love out of a *huge* heart that beats with modesty and love for others, but I trust her to tell me the truth, no matter how painful, and so do my clients.

I watch PJ and listen to her and I learn about humility and authenticity. She honors others, brings out the best in others, and makes them feel important. She exemplifies the balance of humility and self-assurance that is the hallmark of great leadership. PJ’s knowledge, accomplishment, and experience are enormously impressive; but her genuine humility is her most inspirational and influential character trait. PJ Bouchard helps me grow, and she promotes an attitude of humility within our organization.

The Economics of Humility

One final question: I hope that you are willing to acknowledge that it is humility, not hubris, which reflects a life lived at its highest and best. I further hope that you believe that a humble leader is the one who will release the untapped potential that lies waiting to explode in his or her organization. But, as many of my clients have asked me, what is the bottom line? Can I point to examples of humility making a contribution to net income?

I’m so glad they asked! I point to one flourishing organization, Nurse Next Door, a Canadian firm that is rapidly expanding into the United States. When Nurse Next Door makes a mistake, the customer who has been impacted receives a fresh-baked pie—“a humble pie,” as co-founder John

²³Ariella Brown, “The ROI of Humble Pie,” The CMO Site, 9/21/2011 http://www.thecmosite.com/author.asp?section_id=1167&doc_id=233605 Viewed 7/29/2014.



DeHart calls it. DeHart estimates that Nurse Next Door spends about \$1,500 each year on baking pies ... but saves about \$100,000 in sales by doing so.²³ A little humility can go a long way!

The unique “humble pie” approach employed by Nurse Next Door underscores the economic benefits that are just waiting to be realized by organizations that emphasize the power of humility. Humble leadership creates the cooperation and innovation that will make your organization the purple tile on the gray wall. Moving from a “Me” mindset to a “We” mindset creates an openness of mind in leaders and instills a willingness to receive differing ideas and opinions from others. Humility allows leaders to engage in the collaborative conversations and robust debate that give birth to dramatic improvements.

“Me” is short-term thinking, whereas a “We” mentality is a healthier organizational growth

perspective, because it includes everyone in a long-term view of personal and professional development. When we shift from “Me” to “We,” the possibilities are boundless! When I remove the blinders from my own eyes and can truly see others—their contributions and their ideas—I’ve started down the path of sustainable profitability.

The ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu wrote, “I have three precious things which I hold fast and prize. The first is gentleness; the second is frugality; the third is humility, which keeps me from putting myself before others. Be gentle and you can be bold; be frugal and you can be liberal; avoid putting yourself before others and you can become a leader among men.” It is my hope that this paper will help you to recognize the importance of the economics of humility in leading your organization to sustainable success. 🍷



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