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Humility's Unexpected Benefits

by Tom Mallory
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Always acknowledge a fault. This will throw those in authority off their guard and give you an opportunity to commit more.

— MARK TWAIN

If I only had a little humility, I'd be perfect.

— TED TURNER

Can humility help us in business?

Maybe there's a place for being humble but it couldn't be in the competitive, driving, and sometimes cut throat world of the workplace. Strength and determination win on this battleground. Besides, isn't being humble perceived as being weak? Do I want my competitors and, worse, my potential clients believing I'm weak?

In addition, don't we all secretly strive to be flattered, recognized by our peers (and hopefully our bosses), and ultimately honored in large public ceremonies? Sure we do.

So where's the business benefit from being humble?

Humility Analyzed

Mention the name Lee Iacocca and most people think "great leader." After all, he brought Chrysler back from disaster, raised its stock price far above his competitors, wrote a successful business book, had adoring fans worldwide, and even was urged to run for president. But according to Jim Collins in his book *Good to Great*, Iacocca's business success was in the first half of his tenure before "he diverted attention to making himself one of the most celebrated CEOs in American business history." As Collins elaborates, he appeared regularly on talk shows, starred in over 80 commercials, and widely promoted his autobiography. At one point, Iacocca stated, "Running Chrysler has been a bigger job than running the country...I could handle the national economy in six months." The second half of his tenure was different. "Chrysler's stock fell 31 behind the general market. He postponed his retirement so many times that insiders joked that Iacocca meant I Am Chairman of Chrysler Corporation Always." Then after his retirement, he launched a hostile takeover bid for Chrysler with Kirk Kerkorian which failed.

Lee Iacocca is just one example of business leaders who let pride foil their "enduring greatness." Others, as Collins points out, were Al Dunlop at Scott Paper, Stanley Gault at Rubbermaid, and

CEOs from many name brand companies such as R.J. Reynolds, Teledyne, Eckerd, and Bank of America. In fact, in over two thirds of the comparison cases Collins' team studied, "the presence of a gargantuan personal ego contributed to the demise or continued mediocrity of the company." Thus, the common characteristic that lacked in these potentially great business leaders was humility. In contrast Darwin Smith of Kimberly-Clark, Colman Mockler of Gillette, and George Cain of Abbott Laboratories rose to being great leaders because of a "paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will." Ever heard of these great men? That's the point. They shunned attention of themselves, were modest, and gave credit to others. They had tremendous inner strength to repress their ego and focus on the larger goal of building a great company.

Humility and Success through the years

Success through humility is not a new concept.

Perhaps one of the earliest humble businessmen was Benjamin Franklin who described himself as a "humble inquirer." According to Walter Isaacson in *Benjamin Franklin, An American Life*, Franklin began developing this style around age 20 after reading about Socrates' method of building an argument through "gentle queries." Uniquely disarming to his opponents, this style won many friends starting with the Governor of Pennsylvania after Franklin ran away from Boston to Philadelphia at age 17. He used his humble style along with wit, an astounding literary grasp, patience, and determination throughout his multiple careers. Although Franklin referred to himself as simply a "printer," Isaacson believes that he was "America's best scientist, inventor, diplomat, writer, printer, and business strategist" during his 84-year life.

George Washington is described by many authors as always moderate, always modest. As Willard Randall in *George Washington: A Life* describes, just prior to resigning as commander in chief after the British surrendered, "his mortal enemy, King George III, has said that if George Washington could give up power, he would indeed be the greatest man of the eighteenth century." Washington avoided the spotlight literally by being stealthy and elusive in battle (hence the English called him The Fox) but also by giving others the credit. His military officers loved him for this and cried along with him at Fraunces Tavern in New York on November 25, 1783 when he bid his officers a final farewell. He did not seek higher status or title even though the country begged for this, and he tried numerous times to return to his life as simply a "planter." On his last day as President at the inauguration of John Adams, he "wore a plain black suit as he walked alone to Congress Hall while Adams in a lavish new suit rode in a new resplendent carriage of state."

Abraham Lincoln never let his ego get in the way of his primary ambition for the larger cause of keeping the nation together. As James McPherson writes in *Battle Cry of Freedom*, he was humble: shy, awkward in manner, and modest. He acknowledged his failures in numerous conspicuous ways, received suffocating amounts of criticism without seeking revenge, and felt more at home with common folks. "Common looking people are the best in the world: that is the reason the Lord makes so many of them," he once wrote. A line in his Gettysburg Address sums up his humility: "The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here."

Colin Powell and Jimmy Blanchard are example of current leaders who excel because of their humility. Powell "grew up poor but rich in spirit and values," as he says in his book *My American Journey*. Among his 13 "Rules of Life" are being kind, sharing credit, and letting go of your ego.

Like Franklin's humble self description as "printer," Powell sums up his unprecedented military career as simply being "a soldier." Jimmy Blanchard, CEO of Georgia based Synovus, always displays humility in his business and community life. His company, which was started by "a single act of kindness in helping a female mill worker," continues to "treat folks right by doing the right thing." Fortune Magazine in 1999 rated it the #1 place to work in America.

Becoming Humble

Jim Collins writes, "Humility + Will = the Enduring Level 5 Executive." But how much humility is needed to go from a "Level 4 Efficient Leader" to Level 5? Certainly Iacocca had the "will" as exhibited by his "ferocious resolve." But did he need a little or a lot of humility to achieve greatness? Is it worth investing our time towards better understanding and perhaps becoming at least a little more humble?

Alfred Ells, a senior therapist with New Life Clinic and founder of House of Hope Counseling, suggests 10 ways towards becoming humble.

1. **Choose to serve others.** Doing so reduces our focus on ourselves and builds up others. But when serving others costs us nothing, we should question whether or not we are really serving.
2. **Receive correction and feedback graciously.** Look for the kernel of truth in what people offer you, even if it comes from a dubious source. Ask yourself, "What is being shown to me that I can't see?"
3. **Take wrong patiently.** When something is unjust, we instinctively want to strike back and rectify it. However, patiently responding to unjust accusations and actions of others builds and displays our strength and character.
4. **Acknowledge your mistakes and weaknesses to others.** It's ironic that it is so difficult to admit our mistakes and weaknesses even to ourselves since through these failures we learn. But the true test of humility is acknowledging our faults to others. Wisdom, however, dictates that we do so with those we trust.
5. **Actively submit to authority.** Our culture does not value submission; rather it promotes confrontation and individualism. Submitting to those in authority, particularly if we disagree with them, reveals your strength.
6. **Accept a lowly place.** If you find yourself wanting to sit at the head of the table, desiring to be recognized for your accomplishments, or becoming offended when others are honored, then pride is present. Support others being recognized rather than you. Look for and accept the lowly place; it is the place of humility.
7. **Purposely associate with people of lower state than you.** Society is status conscious and people naturally want to socialize upward. Resist the temptation of being partial to those with status or wealth.
8. **Be quick to forgive.** Forgiveness is possibly one of the greatest acts of humility. To forgive is to acknowledge a wrong that has been done to us and to release our right of repayment for the wrong. Forgiveness is denial of self. Forgiveness is not insisting on our way and our justice.
9. **Cultivate a grateful heart.** The more we develop an attitude of gratitude for the gifts we constantly receive in life, the more we realize our successes have been gifts earned from giving.
10. **Purpose to speak well of others.** Saying negative things about others puts them "one down" and us "one up." Speaking well of others builds them up instead of us. "I will speak ill of no man, and speak all the good I know of everybody," said Ben Franklin.

It's ironic that one of the ways to be humble is by acknowledging our weaknesses and mistakes to others. However, to do this and other humble acts takes tremendous inner strength and confidence – the kind of strength and confidence that leads to enduring leadership.

So humility is not what business would perceive it to be: weakness. Humility allows weakness, which we all have, to be transformed into strength. Being humble also reveals this strength to others, and this strength continues to build within us if we practice humility. Ultimately, humility lifts others and in doing so lifts you. But watch out. It's even more difficult to be humble from a higher position.

*The closest we ever come to perfection is
when we write our resumes.*

— EXECUTIVE SEARCH CONSULTANT

*The superior man is modest in his speech,
but exceeds in his actions.*

— CONFUCIUS

*It is unwise to be too sure of one's own wisdom.
It is healthy to be reminded that the strongest
might weaken and the wisest might err.*

— MOHANDAS GANDHI

I am not the lion, but it fell to me to give the lion's roar.

— WINSTON CHURCHILL

*You can accomplish anything in life, provided
that you do not mind who gets the credit.*

— HARRY TRUMAN

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