



## In Praise of Leadership Humility

The attribute of humility is not often celebrated in performance reviews, nor is it a part of leadership development programs. Maybe it should be.

We live in an era of self-celebration, and bravado announces our confidence. At work, ambitious people enthusiastically self-promote in order to be singled out for promotion and stretch positions.

Yet as professor of business psychology [Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic](#) says, “Bluster and the alpha instinct often get mistaken for ability and effectiveness.” We have a large volume of evidence about the perils of hubris and, consequently, leadership failures.

Hubris is extreme pride and arrogance, and it occurs when those in power lose their connection to reality and vastly overestimate their capabilities.

## The Nature of Arrogance

As with many personality shortcomings, arrogance can be expressed in subtle or blatant ways, and everything in between. Some behavior takes time to assess to see if it is attributed to arrogance. Other behavior screams arrogance from the outset, leaving no doubt about the nature of the leader’s style.

Lesser forms of arrogance come disguised as rudeness, inconsideration, or disrespect. Employees subject to subtle arrogance experience having their ideas or requests ignored, being left out of conversations, or having their work redone by someone else. These slights signal to the employee that they are not considered acceptable or good enough. The leader may be trying to put them in their place or indicate that they need to get on the bandwagon (or perhaps out the door).

### *A Message from Nancy...*

Let me ask you:

- Are the people on your team engaged and committed or just collecting a pay check?
- Do you have the right people in the right seats on the bus? Are *you* in the right seat?
- Is the high cost of turnover eating away your organization’s bottom-line?
- Are your processes and procedures (or lack thereof) delivering productive and efficient results?
- How comfortable are the members of your senior team managing and leading others?



In today’s highly competitive environment, it’s no surprise that “*what got you here may not get you there.*”

At **Proffitt Management Solutions** we are fully committed to providing a unique blend of team and individual development and executive coaching sessions where participants achieve more focus, a sense of purpose, and better results in their leadership roles.

Find out how services such as individual or team coaching and development, motivational and skills workshops, seminars may help you better answer those 5 questions and benefit you...

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Subtle arrogance can be general and not directed at anyone in particular. Small inconsiderations by a leader demonstrate a lack of appreciation—or even acknowledgement—in the value of others. Interrupting people as they're speaking, not returning a greeting, or seeking praise are all ways leaders arrogantly devalue those they lead.

Most employees can tolerate subtle arrogance, especially if it is directed at everyone. Though they don't like it, people often learn to adapt: they depersonalize it and accept it as one of the unfavorable aspects of their job—or their leader(s).

Blatant arrogance goes beyond rudeness to reach harsh and unbearable levels. Blatantly arrogant leaders yell at and insult people. They flaunt their power and don't consider the wreckage they leave behind.

Unlike subtle arrogance, the blatant form is intolerable for all employees save for those who are trapped and have nowhere else to go. These unfortunate souls are typically targets who receive "special" treatment.

## What Fuels Arrogance

Our culture has a large role in the development and encouragement of leadership arrogance. Human tendencies to desire power, prestige, perks, and privilege are fueled by a culture that values these things. We are trained from an early age to focus on what we can take from life rather than what we can give. This encourages the quest for the highest level of power to be in the best position to be takers.

Whether it is in business, politics, or social life, history shows that arrogance is often rewarded more than humility, at least from an observable standpoint. Prideful, forceful, outgoing, and brash behavior seem to permit greater levels of advancement than humility. Leaders with these traits are seen as more admired, revered, and feared due to their ability to take charge and get things done. The fallout behind the scenes, where people pay a high price, is generally overlooked. The big accomplishments drown out the detriments.

Arrogance is born from these influences, where leaders feel privileged and free to do as they wish. Because of their positions and accomplishments, they go unchallenged and unquestioned. A mindset develops that they operate under a different set of rules and can take liberties others cannot. Their behavior, especially with how they treat others, is often granted an exceptional status, where the ends justify the means.

Blatantly arrogant leaders don't just simply devalue their people, they hurt them. Temper, anger, audacity, egotism, and disloyalty are weapons in the blatantly arrogant leader's arsenal. They are self-focused on what their position of privilege allows them to do. Their high-handedness breaks the rules of conduct to get things done their way and in their time. Such contemptuousness wreaks fear, resentment, and outrage.

Arrogance at top corporate levels is statistically responsible for startlingly high failure rates in teamwork, efficiency, goal achievement, and profitability.

Its opposite—humility—inspires loyalty and productive team work.

Somewhere lies a disconnect between theory (which is generally accepted) and practice. Human nature plays a key role in this disconnect, but it doesn't have to be this way.

## Leadership Humility

In the perennial book, [\*Good to Great\*](#) (Harper Business, 2011) Jim Collins talks about remarkable CEOs who sustain success through leading quietly, not charismatically, and calls them Level 5 leaders.

A classic example of a Level 5 leader is an individual who blends extreme personal humility with intense professional will. According to Collins' research study, executives who possess this seemingly paradoxical combination of traits are catalysts for the statistically rare event of transforming a good company into a great one.

What does a leader do who acts with personal humility and intense professional will?

## Personal Humility:

- Demonstrates a compelling modesty, shunning public adulation; never boastful.
- Acts with quiet, calm determination; relies principally on inspired standards, not inspiring charisma, to motivate.
- Channels ambition into the company, not the self; sets up successors for even more greatness in the next generation.
- Looks in the mirror, not out the window, to apportion responsibility for poor results, never blaming other people, external factors, or bad luck.

## Professional Will:

- Creates superb results, a clear catalyst in the transition from good to great.
- Demonstrates an unwavering resolve to do whatever must be done to produce the best long-term results, no matter how difficult.
- Sets the standard for building an enduring great company; will settle for nothing less.
- Looks out the window, not in the mirror, to apportion credit for the success of the company—to other people, external factors, and good luck.

Humility has nothing to do with being meek, weak, or indecisiveness. It is not mere courtesy or an especially kind and friendly demeanor. Nor does it necessarily mean shunning publicity.

Effective leaders know how to express their authenticity and connect with others by showing their humanity. They aren't afraid to appear humble. And, as the research shows, humility contributes to leading others from good to great.

There are a lot of ways to develop leadership talents, but very few programs address how to develop humility. Humility isn't something you're born with, yet you can acquire it through practicing the right behaviors.

## Develop Leadership Humility

If you feel you could benefit from developing humility:

- **Ask for a 360 Review.**

Anonymous feedback from the people who surround you can be scary. But as Ann Landers wrote: "Don't accept your dog's admiration as conclusive evidence that you are wonderful." Find out how your self-perception differs from others'. It's the only way you can know how to make a growth and development plan. It's also valuable practice in receiving feedback and learning to handle criticism.

- **Get a Coach.**

You can't know what you don't know without someone to hold up the mirror. You have blind spots and weaknesses. The only real fault lies in not finding what they are and not learning how to manage them. Fast Company reports 43% of CEOs and 71% of senior executives say they've worked

with a coach. And 92% of leaders being coached say they plan to use a coach again.

- **Know what you don't know.**

Resist "master of the universe" impulses. You may yourself excel in an area, but as a leader you are, by definition, a generalist. Rely on those who have relevant qualifications and expertise. Know when to defer and delegate.

- **Resist falling for your own publicity.**

We all do it: whether we're writing a press release or a self-appraisal, we put the best spin on our success – and then conveniently forget that the reality wasn't as flawless.

- **Never underestimate the competition.**

You may be brilliant, ambitious, and audacious. But the world is filled with other hard-working, high-IQ, creative professionals.

- **Embrace and promote a spirit of service.**

Employees quickly figure out which leaders are dedicated to helping them succeed and which are scrambling for personal success at their expense.

- **Listen, even (no, especially) to the weird ideas.**

Only when you are not convinced that your idea is better than someone else's do you really open your mind. And there is ample evidence that you should: the most imaginative and valuable ideas tend to come from left field.

- **Be passionately curious.**

Constantly welcome and seek out new knowledge, and insist on curiosity from those around you. Take it from Einstein. "I have no special talent," he claimed. "I am only passionately curious."

Whether you plan to climb the leadership ladder or not, your career success depends to a degree on your personal growth and development. Resolve to work on your own humility and you will begin to notice and appreciate its effect all around you. A willingness to speak of your failures and career challenges will convince others that your self-confidence and wisdom are tempered with humility.



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