

It's Not Hard to Be Humble: The Role of Humility in Leadership

Here's how to keep ego from getting in the way of effective teamwork.

Humility is not cited as often as some other character traits in the leadership literature, but many of us have either experienced or heard stories of egocentric, arrogant leaders who have soured company culture and driven valuable employees to underperform or leave. In health care, the ongoing evolution toward team-based care and quality measure-



ment calls for leaders who can attract and inspire followers, but a big, self-confident personality is not always a sign of real leadership. Sometimes a dose of humility is what's needed most.

I learned this firsthand when, after serving more than 20 years at a large integrated health system, I was asked to oversee its floundering central business office. The health system had declining cash flow and low employee morale. When I arrived, I discovered

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Charlotte Stith-Flood is program coordinator for the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Science at Oklahoma State University in Tulsa, Okla. Author disclosure: no relevant financial affiliations disclosed.

stacks of secondary claim forms several feet high that needed to be matched with their primary explanation of benefits forms and mailed to insurers. I rolled up my sleeves and started getting the claims out the door one at a time. Employees began to help me, initially out of guilt but soon because they knew the job had to get done. Two weeks later, as the claims began

Humble leaders are made, not born.

to get paid, the employees began to get excited. They had gotten their first taste of success, and they were willing to do whatever it took to get the job done. Three years later, with the same team, the system's cash flow was at an all-time high and claims processing times were low. Their pride had led to great accomplishments.

Boosted by this success, I felt I was ready to move to the next level. I took a job developing infrastructure for a newly formed primary care group, a position that included duties such as making capital purchases, leasing space, and hiring staff. I understood the basics of how to pay for these items, but the for-profit environment was new to me, and I failed to take the time to fully under-

KEY POINTS

- Humility is an important but under-discussed value of leadership.
- Humble leaders are considered more approachable, forgiving of mistakes, and willing to acknowledge others' work, which can motivate employees to share ideas and work harder.
- Humility becomes more important as a leader's responsibility increases.
- Cultivating humility as a leader requires knowing when to ask for help, using inclusive language when talking about work and accomplishments, and giving credit to others.

stand the funding process. Rather than asking questions, I started making decisions and signing purchase orders for expenditures that had been approved but not yet funded. Eighteen months later, I was let go.

I was ashamed and worried about my

career. While dining with a group of friends from my previous job, they consoled me but also made it very clear that my greatest success was achieved when I led with humility and my greatest downfall was when I allowed arrogance to control my decisions. Had I led with humility, I believe I would have been a stronger leader — and kept the job.

THE VALUE OF HUMILITY

Humility is an imperative leadership attribute for five reasons:¹

- **It gives you upside as a leader.**

Admitting that you don't know everything endears you to employees and shows you are willing to grow and acquire new skills and knowledge.

- **It makes you approachable.** Peers and team members find it easier to approach someone when they know they won't be met with arrogance. Not being approachable can rob leaders of potentially great ideas or suggestions.

- **It instills a sense of mission.** A leader who is willing to give team members credit and work side-by-side with them to reach common goals inspires others to do the same.

- **It makes you naturally empathetic.** Leaders who understand the suffering associated with failure can better understand when team members make mistakes. The team naturally becomes willing to push harder and strive for greater things when they know mistakes will be forgiven.

- **It allows you to influence others.** Influence yields great power. When team members believe you reflect the trait of humility, they are more willing to trust and follow you. In fact, a 2015 study found an inverse relationship between how leaders and employees view the leader's abilities, with leaders who underrated their abilities often being rated more effective by their teams.²

Despite its importance, humility is also one of the most misunderstood traits of leadership. It is not a sign of weakness. Being willing to set your ego aside actually requires great strength. It takes strength of character to admit when you've made a mistake and strength of will to ask for help when needed.³

Humility is not a lack of confidence.

Leaders who don't have to take full credit for success and are willing to share it with their team members are exhibiting confidence.

Humility becomes more important, not less, as a leader's responsibility increases. The larger your leadership role and the more experience you have in it, the more difficult it is to be authentically humble. As you experience success after success, it is easy to allow arrogance to replace self-confidence. When this happens, good leaders must have someone they trust to tell them they are becoming too arrogant to be influential. Once a leader loses his or her influence, it is extremely hard to guide a team or facilitate change.

HOW TO BE A HUMBLE LEADER

Humble leaders are made, not born, and once made, they can slip into arrogance if they are not careful. Here are three ways to develop and preserve humility:

- **Be a constant learner.** It is almost impossible to be egocentric when you remain fully aware of how much you don't know. When I moved to the for-profit role, I should have accepted that I didn't fully understand the new financial system and sought help.

- **Watch your pronouns.** If you often use first-person pronouns like "I," "me," "my," and "mine" when talking with your staff or others about your team's work, you

are showing immaturity as a leader. Team members may object if you claim ownership of their work or results. Get in the habit of using third-person pronouns such as "we," "our," and "us" instead.

- **Look for ways to give credit.** Your team will be willing to go the extra mile if they know you will acknowledge their hard work. Giving credit to others, even when you have done much of the work, motivates employees.

A good description of this process, and humble leaders in general, comes from author Rick Warren, who wrote, "Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it is thinking of yourself less."⁴ **FPM**

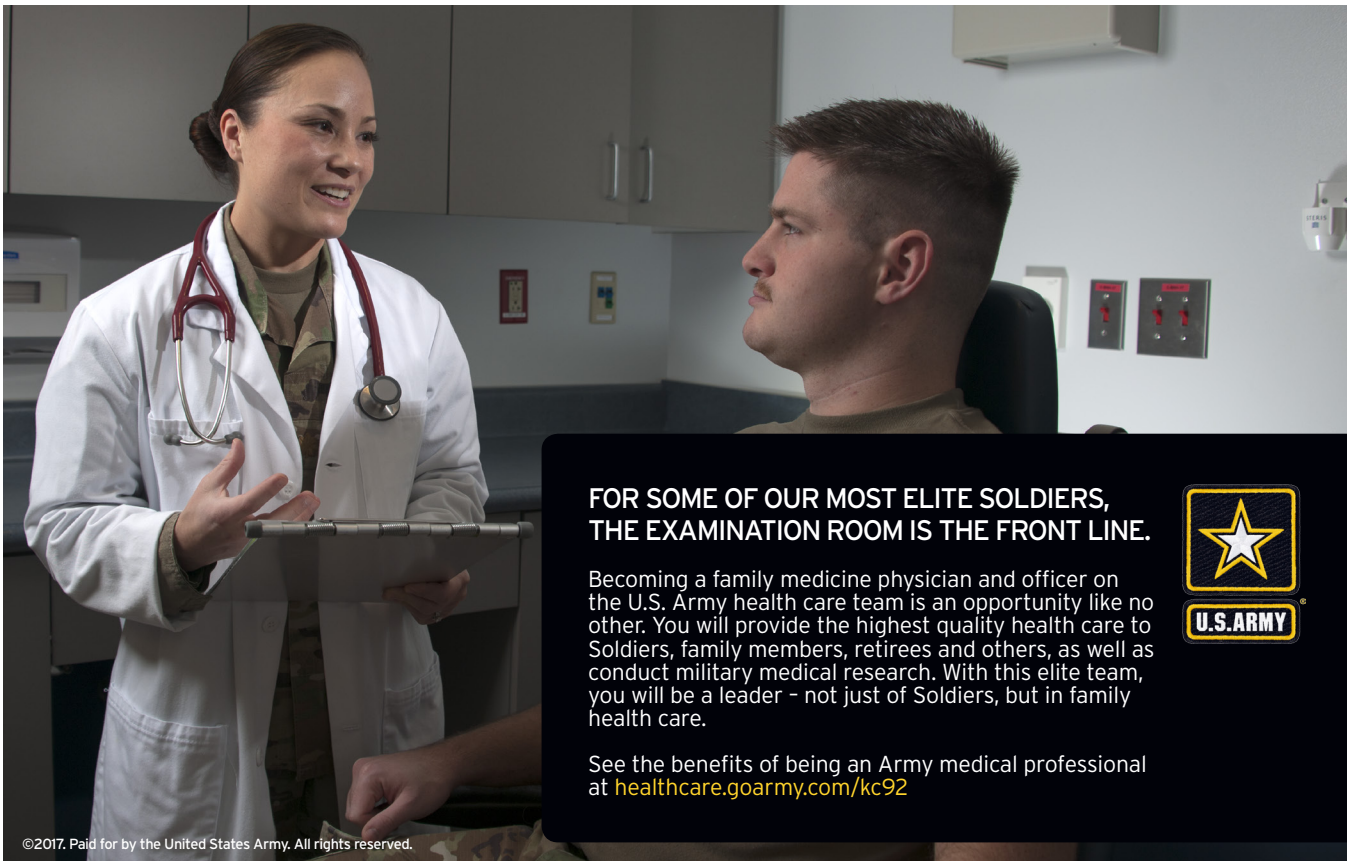
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