

# Humility is Key to Effective Leadership & High Performance

**By Michelle M. Smith, CPIM, CRP**  
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**H**umility may be a virtue, but it's also a competitive advantage. According to research from the University of Washington Foster School of Business, humble people are more likely to be high performers in individual and team settings and they also tend to make the most effective leaders. Yet the attribute of humility seems to be neglected in leadership development programs and it's often misunderstood.

The research team defined humility as a three-part personality trait consisting of an accurate view of the self, modeling teachability, and showcasing followers' strengths. They viewed these three behaviors as being powerful predictors of leaders' success, as well as the organization's growth.

"Humble leaders foster learning-oriented teams and engage employees. They also optimize job satisfaction and employee retention," says study co-author Michael Johnson. "Humility is an important component of effective leadership in modern organizations."

Two of the best predictors of performance on the job are intelligence and conscientiousness, and humility predicted performance better than both.

The best leaders are the people who are behind the scenes, guiding their employees and letting them shine. This quieter leadership approach—listening, being transparent, being aware of limitations, and appreciating employees' strengths and contributions—is also a highly effective way to engage employees. The researchers found that such leaders model how to effectively be human (rather than superhuman) and legitimize 'becoming' rather than 'pretending.'

The essence of leader humility also involves modeling to employees how to grow. Although growing and learning often involves failure and can be embarrassing, leaders who can overcome their fears and broadcast their feelings as they work through the messy internal growth process will be viewed more favorably by their followers. They also legitimize their employees' own professional development journeys and will have higher-performing organizations.

Leaders who embrace growth signal to followers that learning, growing, mistakes, uncertainty and false starts are normal and expected in the workplace, and this produces followers and entire organizations that constantly keep developing and improving. Which is why leader humility is associated with more learning-oriented teams, more engaged employees and lower voluntary employee turnover.

## **Cultivating Humility**

For organizations wanting to cultivate more humility in their leadership ranks, the research suggests shaping a formal leadership development program designed around six basic principles:

**Know what you don't know** – You may excel in many things, but as a leader, you must rely on those who have relevant qualifications and expertise. You need a degree of humility to see where your relative strengths are and where outside resources can help you get the right answers. You have to recognize skills in other people and blend the right team around them. Know when to defer or delegate.

**Resist falling for your own publicity** – We all tend to put the best spin on our success — and then frequently forget that reality wasn't as flawless. Basking in the glory of a triumph can be energizing, but too big a dose is intoxicating and it can blur our vision and impair judgment.

**Never underestimate the competition** – You may be brilliant, ambitious, and audacious, but the world is filled with other hard-working, highly intelligent, and creative professionals. Don't let your guard down and think that they and their innovations aren't a serious threat.

**Embrace and promote a spirit of service** – Employees (and customers) quickly figure out which leaders are dedicated to helping them succeed, and which are scrambling for personal success at their expense. You can't fake humility – you either genuinely want to serve and assist or you don't, and others will pick up on this.

**Listen to the weird ideas** – There's ample evidence the most imaginative and valuable ideas tend to come from left field, or perhaps from an employee who may seem a little offbeat or may not hold an exalted position in the organization.

**Be passionately curious** – Constantly welcome and seek out new knowledge, and insist on curiosity from those around you. There are correlations between curiosity and many positive leadership attributes, including emotional and social intelligence. Take it from Albert Einstein: "I have no special talent," he claimed, "I am only passionately curious."

## **Going from Good to Great**

Humility inspires loyalty, helps to build and sustain cohesive, productive team work, and decreases staff turnover. Jim Collins was a fan of CEOs he saw demonstrating modesty and leading quietly, not charismatically, in his bestseller *Good to Great*. He called these CEOs Level 5 executives.

Collins found Level 5 executives built enduring greatness through a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will. They channeled their egos away from themselves and into the larger goal of building a great company. At a deeper level, he found that for leaders to make something great, their ambition had to be for the greatness of the work and the company, rather than for themselves.

It's not that Level 5 leaders had no ego or self-interest. Indeed, they were incredibly ambitious – but their ambition was first and foremost for the institution, not themselves. They apportioned credit to factors outside themselves (mainly other members of their team) when things went well. At the same time, they took personal responsibility when things went poorly.

Collins' research found a direct relationship between the absence of CEO 'celebrity' and the presence of good-to-great results. At each decision point – at each of the critical junctures when Choice A would favor their ego and Choice B would favor the company and the work – time and again the good-to-great leaders picked Choice B.

Of course, not everyone is born humble. Nature and —especially in current times—nurture can work against it. But humility, like other virtues, can be developed. We can actually become more humble people if we focus on appreciating the strengths of others, on being teachable and admitting our mistakes.

Resolve to work on your own humility and you'll begin to notice and appreciate its power all around you. Don't be afraid to speak of your own failures, weaknesses, and blind spots, and how they have informed your learning and ultimate success. Doing so will make us all more effective leaders and better performers.

#### **About the Author**



*Named one of the most influential women in the incentive industry, Michelle M. Smith, CPIM, CRP, is an accomplished author and speaker, past-president of the FORUM at Northwestern University, president emeritus of the Incentive Marketing Association, vice-president of research for the Business Marketing Association, and vice-president of business development for O.C. Tanner. You can contact Michelle at [Michelle.Smith@octanner.com](mailto:Michelle.Smith@octanner.com).*



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### **Speaking Topics**

- 'Next Practices' in Leadership
- Employee Engagement (International & Domestic)
- Global Trends in Employee Motivation
- Recognition & Incentive Programs (Global & Domestic)
- Aligning External and Internal Branding Initiatives

### **Previous Speaking Engagements (sample)**

- The CEO Summit
- Corporate Executive Board Executive Insight Conference
- Northwestern University FORUM Think Tank
- The Motivation Show (United States, Spain, United Kingdom, Australia & Portugal)
- WorldAtWork Annual & State Conferences
- Incentive Marketing Association Executive Summit (United States, Canada & Europe)
- SITE International Conference (Hong Kong, Iceland, Mexico, Canada & United States)
- International Marketing Congress (Portugal)
- CIPD Reward Conference (United Kingdom)
- NHS Employers Conference (United Kingdom)
- National Incentive Show (United Kingdom)
- SHRM Annual, State and Regional Conferences
- Institute for Human Resources Rewards & Recognition
- Recognition Professionals International Annual Conferences and Fall Summits
- PPAI's Annual International and Brand Conferences
- Advertising Specialty Institute Conference
- PROMO Marketing Conference
- Incentive World Conference (United Kingdom)
- Promotional Marketing Conference (United Kingdom)

### **Published & Broadcast Media (sample)**

Fox Television, Business America Radio, Career Contentment Radio, *Fortune*, *Business Week*, *Inc.*, *Financial Review*, *Investment*, *Workforce*, *Marketing*, *Working Woman*, *Return on Performance*, and inclusions in "Bull Market" by Seth Godin, and "Contented Cows Still Give Better Milk" by Richard Hadden and Bill Catlette

### **Biography**

Named as one of the Ten Best and Brightest Women in the incentive industry, a Change Maker, and a President's Award winner, Michelle has worked in every facet of recognition and incentives, both domestically and internationally.

A highly rated international speaker, author, and consultant on performance improvement; Michelle is a respected authority on leadership, internal branding, and employee engagement. She's published and presented more than 700 articles and lectures and has advised many of the world's most successful organizations and the governments of the United Kingdom and the United States.

Michelle is President Emeritus of the Incentive Marketing Association and a Past President of the Board of Trustees of the FORUM at Northwestern University. She's Vice President, Research for the Business Marketing Association and serves on the Board of the Incentive Federation. She Chairs the Editorial Board of *Return on Performance Magazine*, is on the Executive Panel of *McKinsey Quarterly*, and the Advisory Board for the Institute for Human Resources Rewards & Recognition.

Michelle is also active in the Global Incentive Council, the Marketing Leadership Roundtable, WorldAtWork, Recognition Professionals International, the Performance Improvement Council, the Recognition Council, the CMO Council, and the Society for Incentive Travel Excellence.

**For more information:** Visit Michelle's profile on LinkedIn <http://www.linkedin.com/pub/michelle-m-smith-cpim-crp/5/b00/368> or her Blog <http://www.octanner.com/blog/author/michelle-smith/> or YouTube page <http://www.youtube.com/user/theMichelleMSmith>

**Fun Fact:** Michelle has appeared in a Glenn Frey music video, a major motion picture starring Al Pacino, and sang under the direction of the Conductor of the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra.

### **For speaking inquiries, please contact:**

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