

Humble Managers Improve Business Performance

And yes, humility can be learned.

By Brian O'Connell
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The best workplace managers are often described as confident, charismatic and highly persuasive.

Yet a recent study points out that humility is also a critical leadership trait for cultivating high-performing employees.

The study (<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0018726720968135?journalCode=huma&>) from the University of South Australia Centre for Workplace Excellence tracked 120 workplace teams comprising a total of 495 team members. Researchers concluded that “leaders who demonstrate humility—through self-awareness, praising others’ strengths and contributions, and being open to feedback”—can achieve positive workplace outcomes and curb negative influences.

Humility is characterized by having self-awareness, showing an appreciation of others and emphasizing a culture of learning.

“In humble leaders, this is demonstrated through open communications, listening well, praising a job well done, valuing the skills of each team member and realizing that they, as leaders, are not infallible,” says Chad Chiu, lead researcher for the study.

Making Humble Work

Are the researchers on to something? Business management experts think so.

“Research proves humble leadership works,” says Melody Wilding, an executive coach who teaches graduate-level human behavior and psychology classes at the Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College. “Not only are self-aware leaders more effective, but they also impact the bottom line. Companies with self-aware leaders tend to have stronger financial performance.”

High levels of trust also translate into better engagement. When leaders trust their employees and give them more control over their work, their teams tend to report 75 percent less stress, 50 percent higher productivity and 40 percent less burnout, according to research (<https://hbr.org/2017/01/the-neuroscience-of-trust>) by Paul J. Zak, a professor of economic sciences, psychology and management at Claremont Graduate University.

Meanwhile, researchers from the University of Singapore and Arizona State University found that humble CEOs (<https://createvalue.org/wp-content/uploads/Do-Humble-CEOs-Matter.pdf>) are more likely to have better-performing management teams and stronger company performance.

Among myriad other changes, the pandemic and the shift to remote work highlighted the need for humility in leadership.

“In an age of disconnection, higher workloads and rising burnout, it’s essential we have leaders who display empathy and have a pulse on team morale,” Wilding says. “We also need leaders at the helm who admit they don’t have all the answers and they sometimes make mistakes.”

Antonia Hock, global head of the Ritz-Carlton Leadership Center, a business consultancy in Washington, D.C., advises managers to ask themselves these questions after leading meetings, having one-on-ones or sending group e-mails:

- Did I ask for feedback, ideas and opinions because I was really engaged or just as a token way to close?
- Were the concepts, ideas or processes that I presented first vetted with employees at various levels? “Leaders miss on this one all the time,” Hock says. “No one likes to be asked to buy into directives that they had no voice in forming.”
- Did I acknowledge the role that others played in creating, designing or driving my ideas or thoughts? “Great leadership does not exist in a vacuum, so actively [point out] who advised you, inspired you or contributed,” Hock adds. “If you don’t have anyone in this category, that’s a problem.”

Can Humility Be Taught?

Many workplace experts contend that humility can be learned, but with one caveat.

“Humility can definitely be taught to managers, but being self-aware is key,” says Todd Mosetter, vice president of content development at Building Champions, an executive coaching firm in Lake Oswego, Ore. “Getting feedback from your peers and outsiders can help you see what you’re missing.”

That’s just for starters. Other steps managers can take to develop humility at work include the following:

Stay in balance. Another way to define humility is “not thinking too much or too little of yourself,” according to Mosetter.

“Too much, and you come across as arrogant and lose [your] curiosity. Too little, and you can keep fear and doubt from allowing you to leverage your gifts and opportunities,” he says. “Great leaders find that sweet spot between both sides and are able to confidently leverage their gifts while staying curious and always looking for ways to grow and improve.”

Commit to your employees. Andrew Carnegie, one of the most successful U.S. business leaders, made it a point to remember all of his employees’ names. “The simple act of remembering names was enough to convince him that every employee had an important part

to play in his company,” says Jim Pendergast, senior vice president at AltLINE Sobanco, a Birmingham, Ala.-based financial services company.

Admit your mistakes. Managers who make amends on the job aren’t common, but maybe they should be.

“Businesses thrive on the humility of their leaders,” Pendergast says. “Both employees and clients look for [leaders who] are confident in their actions but willing to admit mistakes and make concessions when they’re wrong. The people who are most willing to learn from both their mistakes and [the mistakes of] those they work with and for will rise to the top before anyone else.”

Entertain fresh outlooks. “When our management team launches a recruitment drive, we make it clear to candidates from the outset which gaps exist” in the organization, says Craig Brown, chief marketing manager at Dora Wirth (Languages) Ltd., a life sciences company in London. “This encourages new starters to express themselves and come up with solutions for us. Acting with humility means that we see fresh expertise not as a threat but as an opportunity to grow.”

Be a team player. Can a manager blend the traditional traits of a confident boss with the modern-day traits of a humble leader that appeal to today’s workforce? Yes—and the ability to do so often involves working alongside your team members.

An example of a leader who did this during the pandemic is Hint Water founder and CEO Kara Goldin, says Deborah Sweeney, CEO of MyCorporation.com, an online business services company in Calabasas, Calif.

“Goldin stocked shelves of the company’s product at retail storefronts alongside her employees,” Sweeney says. “She didn’t need to do it, but she was able to create a deeper understanding of her market because she was out on the front lines seeing how customers shop and essentially conducting market research. An empathetic leader knows when team members need the help and rolls up their sleeves to get to work alongside their team.”

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