

“LUCKY MUD”



Arrogance is the #1 factor in failed change initiatives. Humility is increasingly seen as key to change leadership, not only for what it unleashes in others but also for the way it benefits the leader. Giving up the need to be “the one” helps leaders become “the one who gets things done.”

Basking in the afterglow of an awards banquet, a Southern California financial services firm has seen high employee morale for nearly a year. What made that particular program memorable was not the size of the bonus checks or a high heaping of other perks. Rather, it was the fact that during the dinner the executives acted as waiters – bringing coffee, iced tea, water to the rank-and-file. Giving texture to the idea of “servant leadership.” Directly demonstrating a trait sometimes misunderstood or even scorned in business: humility.

“Sometimes humility can get misread,” notes one of our colleagues. “I have had the chance to coach one magnificent man whose humility had others in his organization thinking that he didn’t have enough of a voice. He was downsized because, I believe, there weren’t enough listeners around him to see his brilliance. The good news is that he got an even better job than he had ever imagined in another organization.

“On the other hand, one of my clients had such humility that he was able to build bridges, admit mistakes, stroke egos and, in so doing, create lines of communication in an organization with years and years of nasty history of bickering and blaming,” our colleague adds. “His lack of need to be ‘the one’ made him the one who could get things done. People trusted him because they knew he didn’t have an agenda for himself; for him, it was all about the good of the organization. I have also noticed that with humble leaders, the teams they lead are very productive, curious and willing to engage to solve problems.”

Over the past few years, humility has actually garnered some pretty impressive champions. Such as bestselling author Jim Collins, who highlighted “Personal Humility” as an attribute as important as “Professional Will” in leaders who make their companies great. “The great irony is that the animus and personal ambition that often drive people to positions of power stand at odds with the humility required,” Collins wrote, “(and) boards of directors frequently operate under the false belief that they need to hire a larger-than-life, egocentric leader to make an organization great....” (*Good To Great*, pp. 36-37)

Perhaps necessity is the mother of new kinds of interventions: some troubled firms are tapping leaders with a more inclusive approach than the old “hero-on-the-white-horse” CEO. For example, after Diebold’s entire executive team left last fall under a cloud that included a 47% profit slide, fraud investigations and shareholder litigation, the board tapped a 10 year-veteran who reminded them that he had no manufacturing

expertise or experience leading a company. As one Diebold customer told the Associated Press, new CEO Thomas Swidarski “has no chip on his shoulder.”

Indeed, Swidarski devoted his first weeks as CEO to meetings with customers and employees, listening to their perceptions of Diebold. He stressed candid communication. And, as the overseer of Diebold’s global customer-satisfaction program told *The Wall Street Journal* (May 8, 2006), he reminded executives “to make sure associates know the work they do is important, whatever their title.”

Swidarski has a way to go to restore the fortunes of Diebold. But noteworthy results have already been scored at Xerox Corp. whose board made a non-conventional decision in promoting Anne Mulcahy to the CEO spot in 2001. At the time, the once-dominant company was on the brink of bankruptcy. Mulcahy is now lauded for having led one of the most extraordinary turnarounds in business history. Yet in interview after interview, she points out that she wasn’t groomed and didn’t expect to lead the firm; she spent her early months in the CEO seat listening to and learning from others, saying there was no time for “false pride.” The articles lauding Mulcahy point to key practices in humility that pay dividends:

- **Admit mistakes, with compassion** for self and others. Mulcahy had launched a desktop division; but in June 2001, it had to be shut down. As she told *Fortune* (June 9, 2003): “I hung out, walked the halls, and told (the employees) I was sorry.”
- **Keep perspective, and a sense of humor.** Jim Firestone, president of Xerox North America, was quoted in *CRN*, online trade media, last November: “Even though we’re in serious situations with serious business opportunities, at the end of the day she doesn’t take herself too seriously.”
- **Above all, listen.** In an April 24, 2006, interview in the *Wall Street Journal*, Mulcahy summed up her advice for other old-line companies trying to adapt: “...developing that humility to really look at what your customers are saying and what your competitors are doing is hugely important.”

That’s the thing about humility. It lubricates a key talent of the leader: the ability to listen and learn – to stay open and curious so that assumptions don’t become blind spots, and so that continuous learning is not only possible, but a way of being. The cost of not listening – of not being humble – plays out in headlines. Carly Fiorina fired by H-P; among her failings, say some experts, was turning a deaf ear to feedback. General Motors flirting with bankruptcy; years of skidding market share are blamed on an arrogant disconnection from stakeholders.

But arrogance is an insidious kind of habit; it can infect and affect an organization through subtle signals. How many phone calls have you hurried to, only to wait for the boss? How many training programs have you attended where the senior people are no-shows, or where they sit in the back checking emails while the program goes on for the people who “really need to learn” something? How many marketing programs continue long after the folks on the ground know that they’re not working because the boss “doesn’t want to hear bad news” or give up his cherished idea?

As a matter of fact, arrogance is the #1 culprit in change efforts that fail because it is the root cause behind such mistakes as:

- Didn’t talk to customers and other key stakeholders
- Ignored important relationships

- Let critical people walk out the door
- Failed to consider multiple perspectives in making decisions
- Settled on quick fixes rather than delving into issues

Perhaps the problem is that humility has gotten a bad rap – often thought of as submission or self-abasement; “humble” is seen as lowly, retiring, or self-conscious – character traits that often stand in the way of prompt decisions and bold action. But these so-called synonyms actually point to low self-esteem, to insecurity. True humility is something else altogether.

The words humble and humility actually come from the Latin, “humus.” Which means, simply, earth or ground. In other words, to be humble is to be grounded. With our feet firmly on the ground, we are balanced and have great resilience. Whatever comes up, we can access helpful resources – common sense, insight, creativity, intuition – in ourselves, and in others. We have confidence in our head, our heart, and our gut. Dropping the impulse to defend an image, we have maximum energy for the work of the moment. We are open – to learn, to adapt, to connect to others, to support and be supported.

Grounding is not the privilege of an elite few. Rather, it is a natural part of being human; it is special, but humble. Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., captured the feeling in his widely-read novel, *Cat’s Cradle*:

“God made mud.
God got lonesome.
So God said to some of the mud, "Sit up!"
‘See all I’ve made,’ said God, ‘the hills, the sea, the sky, the stars.’
And I was some of the mud that got to sit up and look around.
Lucky me, lucky mud.”

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