

# Why being humble can make you a better leader

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When we consider how leaders get to the top, we might think of somebody like Jordan Belfort, the millionaire stockbroker portrayed by Leonardo DiCaprio in the *Wolf of Wall Street*. And humility is probably

not the word that comes to mind.

However, Belfort's rise was followed by a fall (he ended up in jail). For those who want to reach the top and stay there, it may be best to stay humble.

[Humble leaders](#) express their humility in three dimensions. They view themselves accurately and acknowledge their limitations. They show appreciation for their followers' contributions. They are also open to ideas and feedback. When leaders show all three attributes, they are considered to be humble.

So how can humility help those who want to reach the top? [We studied](#) how humble leaders can become more promotable and found that they accomplish that by growing others in what is known as a "humility route."

[Human capital theory](#) suggests that employees' value can be enhanced by investing in their knowledge, skills and abilities. It's not only important for employees, it also creates value for [organizations](#).

Using human capital theory, our research shows that humble leaders focus on the learning and growth of their followers. By doing so, they also create human capital value for themselves in the process.

Humble leaders tend to engage in more [informal mentoring](#), and through that they gain influence and power in terms of promotability. They provide [career guidance](#) to their proteges and help them to prosper.

But at the same time, their engagement in learning also boosts their own human capital. In such a developmental relationship, humble leaders gain [respect, prestige and prominence](#), and they gather a group of followers with high human capital.

This enhances their [status](#) in the organization. It's a win-win for leaders, their followers and the organizations they work for.

[Our study](#) used [survey data](#) from a sample of 610 leaders who worked in 18 industries and across 21 job functions. The leaders' direct followers, peers, immediate bosses and superiors reported back on the leaders.

The measures in the survey included the leader's humility, informal mentoring, status and promotability. We found that humble leaders earn higher status and enhanced promotability through engaging in mentoring behaviors.

So if you want to be more promotable, it may pay to stay humble.

## **A more sustainable path to the top**

But [why are some leaders so arrogant](#) if there is a "humility route" to success? A great deal of evidence shows that humble leaders [outperform arrogant leaders](#). And yet, many leaders at every level have a hard time admitting mistakes, praising followers' strengths and being teachable.

The arrogant, narcissistic, bullying and dominating Wolf of Wall Street stereotype may be the [most common and immediate route to the top](#). After all, this sort of behavior can lead to quick wins which are easily noticed and glamorized, reinforcing the stereotype in popular culture and media.

But while this path can offer short-term gains, it often lacks stability. Even the famed Renaissance Italian political theorist [Niccolo Machiavelli](#)—a well-known figure of dominance strategy—ended up being tortured, imprisoned and then exiled.

In contrast, humility offers a [more stable and less visible route to success](#)

. Humble leaders typically achieve their status through fostering growth in others, engaging in mentoring, and creating a network of highly capable, loyal and enthusiastic followers.

This network in turn provides the humble leader with high status, leading to them being viewed favorably by superiors. But such an approach may not grab attention or fit the dramatic narratives preferred by media, making it less visible to the public.

The key difference lies in the nature of success each approach brings. Dominance may lead to a rapid ascent but is often accompanied by volatility.

Humility, on the other hand, cultivates a foundation of strong relationships and a positive reputation, leading to a more stable and enduring success. This explains why the Wolf of Wall Street stereotype persists, despite the proven benefits of humility in achieving long-term leadership success.

## **How to foster humility**

Expressing humility helps leaders earn career success as they increase human capital, which is vital to organizations. In recent years there has been a [growing interest in humility](#) in the workplace, particularly among leaders. It's time to re-evaluate perceptions about the value of humility in leadership.

You can show more humility as you lead. You can evaluate your own limitations and be sensitive to them. You can try to admit them by saying, "This is something I could do better."

You can also put your focus on the followers, acknowledge what they have done well and give them positive feedback. You can also be more

open to feedback yourself and consider your followers' ideas more.

There are a few ways that organizations can cultivate humility. They can build the perception that expressing humility is valued. They can also organize training programs that develop humility in leaders and consider including humility as part of performance evaluations.

And lastly, they can encourage feedback on humble behaviors, promote informal mentoring and foster a culture of humility that centers on [learning](#). That way, they can develop groups of employees who focus on the "[humility](#) route" to career success.

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