

Humility key to effective leadership

8 December 2011

Humble leaders are more effective and better liked, according to a study forthcoming in the *Academy of Management Journal*.

"Leaders of all ranks view admitting mistakes, spotlighting follower strengths and modeling teachability as being at the core of humble leadership," says Bradley Owens, assistant professor of organization and human resources at the University at Buffalo School of Management. "And they view these three behaviors as being powerful predictors of their own as well as the organization's growth."

Owens and co-author David Hekman, assistant professor of management at the Lubar School of Business, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, asked 16 CEOs, 20 mid-level leaders and 19 front-line leaders to describe in detail how humble leaders operate in the workplace and how a humble leader behaves differently than a non-humble leader.

Although the leaders were from vastly different organizations -- military, manufacturing, health care, financial services, retailing and religious -- they all agreed that the essence of leader humility involves modeling to followers how to grow.

"Growing and learning often involves failure and can be embarrassing," says Owens. "But 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 will legitimize their followers' own growth journeys and will have higher-performing organizations."

The researchers found that such leaders model how to be effectively human rather than superhuman and legitimize "becoming" rather than "pretending."

But some humble leaders were more effective than others, according to the study.

Humble leaders who were young, nonwhite or female were reported as having to constantly prove their competence to followers, making their humble behaviors both more expected and less valued. However, humble leaders who were experienced white males were reported as reaping large benefits from humbly admitting mistakes, praising followers and trying to learn.

In contrast, female leaders often feel they are expected to show more humility than their male counterparts, but then they have their competence called into question when they do show humility.

"Our results suggest that female leaders often experience a 'double bind,'" Owens says. "They are expected to be strong leaders and humble females at the same time."

Owens and Hekman offer straightforward advice to leaders. You can't fake humility. You either genuinely want to grow and develop, or you don't, and followers pick up on this.

Leaders who want to grow signal to followers that learning, growth, mistakes, uncertainty and false starts are normal and expected in the workplace, and this produces followers and entire organizations that constantly keep growing and improving.

A follow-up study that is forthcoming in *Organization Science* using data from more than 700 employees and 218 leaders confirmed that leader humility is associated with more learning-oriented teams, more engaged employees and lower voluntary employee turnover.

Provided by University at Buffalo

APA citation: Humility key to effective leadership (2011, December 8) retrieved 17 April 2021 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-12-humility-key-effective-leadership.html>

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