**Leaders are More Powerful When They’re Humble, New Research Shows.**

By Ashley Merryman - December 8, 2016 at 6:00 AM



*Whither humility?*

For years now, social critics (myself included) have decried a rising tide of American narcissism. We’ve warned against an overpraised, entitled, privileged culture. Get those participation trophies off my lawn! Yet, with the costs of narcissism well-known, some researchers are shifting their focus to narcissism’s antithesis–*humility*. These scientists want to discover if there are benefits to being humble. For instance, does humility improve academics or relationships or company bottom lines? Earlier this year, on [*Face the Nation*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tQkiawW6B9I), President-Elect Donald Trump said he was more humble than people knew, but he chose not to show it as a business strategy. Are humble leaders less successful? How might humility affect moral character? What might we lose, living in a less humble world?

Though there’s much research to be done, what scholars have already learned is enough for us to pause on our selfie-sticks and reflect.

Dictionaries often describe humility as low self-esteem, self-degradation and meekness. [In a 2016 College of Charleston survey](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17439760.2016.1167940), 56% of 5th and 6th graders said that the humble are embarrassed, sad, lonely or shy. When adults are asked to recount an experience of humility, they often tell a story about a time when they were publicly humiliated.

The most humble rarely describe themselves as humble (that seems arrogant to them), but studies have shown that they aren’t embarrassed, humiliated or ashamed. No, they’re secure in their identity and higher in well-being. The humble are [doing just great](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17439760.2016.1167940), thank you very much.

True humility, scientists have learned, is when someone has an *accurate* assessment of both his strengths and weaknesses, and he sees all this in the context of the larger whole. He’s a part of something far greater than he. He knows he isn’t the center of the universe. And he’s both grounded and liberated by this knowledge. Recognizing his abilities, he asks how he can contribute. Recognizing his flaws, he asks how he can grow.

Humility’s benefits turn out to be surprisingly concrete.

In July 2016’s [*Personality and Individual Differences*](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0191886916301489)*,* Duke University researchers reported on a study conducted with 155 participants. At the experiment’s onset, some people conceded their opinions weren’t always right, and–with new evidence–they’d change their views. The researchers considered them as intellectually humble. Still others were intellectually arrogant: they insisted they were rarely wrong, and they never changed their mind.

During the experiment, everyone completed three tasks. First, they read a list of 40 statements on a range of controversial topics–everything from the military’s use of drone strikes, common core curricula in schools, to same-sex marriage. Then they took a survey, measuring how familiar they were with topics such as Susan B. Anthony or Mount Rushmore. Though there was a catch. A third of the topics were bogus–for example, there was a fictitious “Hamrick’s Rebellion.” Finally, participants read another list of 60 statements. They were to determine which statements were on the first list and which were new. And they reported their confidence in each decision.

The intellectually humble took longer to read the first controversial statements–especially if the information ran counter to their beliefs. At the experiment’s end, they were better at identifying new statements, and, when wrong, they had a gut feeling about the mistake.

Meanwhile, the intellectually arrogant skimmed through the reading. They were less accurate at identifying statements as new, and they were sure their wrong responses were correct. And the intellectually arrogant were more susceptible to the fake news items: they didn’t know what they didn’t know.

[In previous studies](http://aps.psychologicalscience.org/convention/program_2014/search/viewProgram.cfm?Abstract_ID=29723&AbType=&AbAuthor=283516&Subject_ID=&Day_ID=all&keyword=), researchers observed that the intellectually humble have a constant desire to learn and improve. They embrace ambiguity and the unknown. They like getting new information. They even enjoy finding out when they’re wrong. And when in trouble, they’re more willing to accept help. Humble college students have been found to be higher in academic achievement. They improved more over the course of a semester, and they got better grades.

The intellectually arrogant are convinced they have the right answers, certain they’ve heard it all before. They’re even threatened by new information. They perceive new facts not as facts, but as a passive-aggressive statement that you think they’re ignorant.

[Studies have shown](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S019188691100571X) that those low in humility overreact during conflicts. They double-down and retrench. They strike out when angered, they plot their revenge. If they’re the actual wrongdoers, they [refuse to apologize](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0191886915000963) or accept responsibility. Instead, they blame their victims.

The humble, on the other hand, are [more pro-social](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17439760.2011.626787). They build connections. They’re more helpful, tolerant, sensitive and accepting of differences. [Researchers](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17439760.2012.671348) went to an Ohio shopping mall to give 197 people five dollars–along with a choice of pocketing the cash or giving it to charities. Those higher in humility gave away more of the money. [Other research](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0092656609000282) has confirmed that the humble are consistently more fair and generous.

In the romantic context, the humble are rated as [more attractive date-potential](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17439760.2014.898317). The humble are [less likely to use sex](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0191886913012749) as a tool of manipulation, and they have lower rates of infidelity. And because they’re willing to address their shortcomings, their partners are more forgiving and understanding. All of which add up to longer lasting relationships.

At work, studies have shown that humble employees behave more ethically. They’re more honest during negotiations. They’re less likely to do anything to sabotage the work environment.

Humility continues to be an asset at the [executive-level](http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10551-014-2311-8). Humble leaders prioritize the organization’s success ahead of their own. In [a *Journal of Management study*](http://jom.sagepub.com/content/early/2015/09/21/0149206315604187.abstract) of 105 computer software and hardware firms, humble CEOs were found to have reduced pay disparity between themselves and their staff. They dispersed their power. They hired more diverse management teams, and they give staff the ability to lead and innovate. Humble leaders have less employee turnover, higher employee satisfaction, and they improve the company’s overall performance.

Researchers Bradley Owens and David Hekman have done groundbreaking research studying humble leadership–from the military to manufacturing to ministry. Through [interviews](http://amj.aom.org/content/55/4/787.short), [field research and lab experiments](http://amj.aom.org/content/59/3/1088.abstract), they’ve concluded that the hallmark of a humble leader is his willingness to admit his mistakes and limitations.

Driven to improve, the humble leader doesn’t believe success is inevitable. Therefore, he constantly tests his progress. He revises and updates plans, in light of new situations and information. Acknowledging he doesn’t have all the answers, he solicits feedback. He encourages subordinates to take initiative. He prefers to celebrate others’ accomplishments over his own.

Importantly, humility doesn’t weaken leaders’ authority. It gives them more flexibility in how they use their power. For example, a Navy commanding officer might be egalitarian while planning an operation, encouraging junior officers to contribute ideas. However, during the mission, he is more authoritarian. The danger of the mission calls for a single, sure voice. But afterwards, during debrief, he once again asks peers and subordinates for their opinions on how everything went. He’ll make sure to highlight that their contributions were essential to the operation’s success.

Because of all this, the humble leader’s followers are more motivated and work harder. They know their leader is counting on them–and their input matters–so they rise to the occasion.

Owens and Hekman found that, by contrast, non-humble leaders get their strength from a position of certainty. The non-humble leader promises that he *does* have all the answers, and he knows exactly what to do. He ignores information that might cause him to re-think his strategy.

A non-humble leader concentrates his power. He removes others with strong abilities, perceiving them to be a threat. He alone gets credit for success, and he never makes mistakes. (Someone else is to blame.) Followers carry out edicts rather than contribute new insight.

When people are afraid and searching for security, Owens and Hekman consider if there’s a visceral appeal to the non-humble leader. Perhaps his certitude comforts and inspires.

It just better work. Because he can’t deviate from his chosen path. To do so, would mean admitting he’d been wrong all along.

Another lesson learned from the research: both arrogance and humility are contagious. Both can be taught and caught.

When our leaders act arrogantly–when they dismiss the value of learning and development, when they only pay attention to information that confirms their views, when they refuse to apologize–they encourage us to think narrowly. They teach us that the most important thing we need do is protect our ego. They encourage us to be selfish.

When leaders are humble and focus on growth, so do we.

As Owens and Hekman wrote in [*Academy of Management Journal*](http://amj.aom.org/content/early/2015/04/30/amj.2013.0660.short), “Our findings suggest that humility appears to embolden individuals to aspire to their highest potential and enables them to make the incremental improvements necessary to progress toward that potential.”

It isn’t empty false praise or inflated self-esteem or tearing others down that pushes us to work to become our best selves. It’s humility.

Humility *emboldens.*

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