

There's no paradox in being humble

Today I am sharing my insights on why being humble is so important to you as a leader and I explain why there's no paradox in being humble.

This is particularly true with the challenges leaders face today. And especially when it comes to taking people with you in times of uncertainty, rapid change and stringency. Being humble is a key attribute required to meet these challenges. So, what does humility mean? Allow me to elaborate.

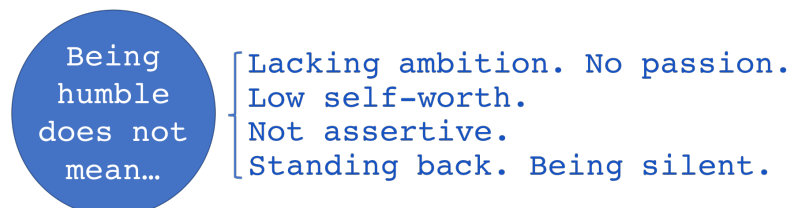
To be humble is to be real, to be human, to be fallible. To see yourself in the context of the wider, larger whole or universe. To recognise fully, accept and work with interdependencies. To do all this you need to risk being vulnerable.

In one of her **best TED Talks** **Dr Brené Brown** teaches us about the power of vulnerability (1). Being seen to be vulnerable makes you authentic in others' eyes and, in turn, authenticity leads to human connectedness and trustworthiness. "*Our willingness to own and engage with our vulnerability determines the depth of our courage and the clarity of our purpose*" writes Brené. Being humble takes courage; it's a sign of strength, not weakness.

Why is the trait of humility so important? The increasing complexity, pace and information explosion associated with change mean no one person can be across it all. Leaders need to work with and through others to succeed. The saying that a leader grows tall by the standing on the shoulders of giants was never more true.

What humility is not

Being humble does not mean being soft or an easy pushover. Or being weak and lacking in courage and conviction. Humility is not to be confused with low ambition or a dearth of passion. Or being timid and indecisive.



There is no paradox of humility. Great leaders are humble, tough, assertive, have a strong sense of self and are passionate about success – all at the same time. There is no contradiction or inconsistency in this statement.

Obstacles to becoming a humble leader

There are a number of things that get in the way of being humble. It's worth reflecting on the degree to which any of these affect you:

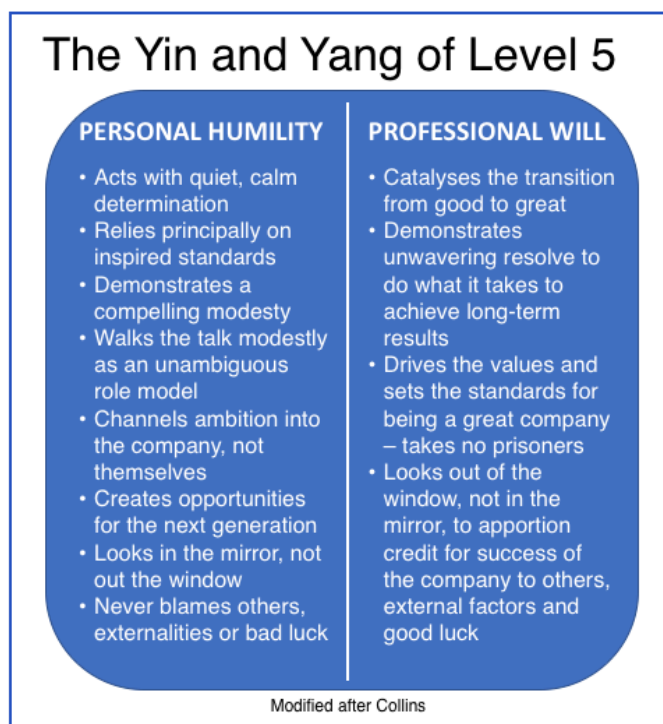
- Using positional power to exert influence, to take an 'I'm' right and therefore you are wrong position;
- Relying on past success to determine future actions: '*What got you here, isn't going to get you there*';
- Allowing ego to get in the way of values driven behaviours;
- Over-compensating for a sense of insecurity, lack of confidence or fear of failure; or
- Fearing being taken advantage of, losing out in some way;
- Living up to an outdated image.

Great leadership = Fierce resolve + Profound humility

Readers may remember the **good-to-great** work of Jim Collins in which he introduced the concept of Level 5 Leadership. 'Level 5' refers the highest tier in a hierarchy of executive capabilities.

Collins' research showed that companies blessed with Level 5 leaders sustainably out-perform all others, in other words they are 'great' and stay that way (at least during the 30 years of the research).

In a Harvard Business review [article](#) (2) Jim Collins published this memorable chart demonstrating there is no contradiction in personal humility and having a strong professional will.



How to be humble

These are ways to develop humility (3).

1. Your mindset: *"I can be humble and confident at the same time, all the time."* These are *not* two ends of a spectrum; there's no logical reason why they can't co-exist.
2. Expand your self-awareness and get your successes and failures into perspective. It's all too easy to over-estimate your role in success and under-estimate it in failure. With failure, look in the mirror. And with success, look out through the window; attribute it to others.
3. Get in touch with your own leadership purpose (see [my recent post](#) on leadership purpose and values). Reflect why you do what you do, and why it's important to you.
4. Boost organisational awareness of diverse contributions to thinking, decision-making and execution. Consult in ways that engage, motivate and empower others.
5. Become mindful. Be present whenever you are in conversation with individuals or in

meetings. Mindfulness helps you become a 'we' rather than a 'me' person.

6. Ask for help. *Not* asking for help is a sign of weakness, *not* strength. It takes courage and confidence to ask for help. It is a display of humility to which those whom you ask will warm and go the extra mile for you. Asking for help demonstrates you are vulnerable.
7. Understand that truly humble leaders do not need external affirmation. Confidence comes from within.

By embracing humility, through selfless generosity and genuine vulnerability you will work from a foundation of collaboration and trust.

True humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less.
– Rick Warren

Read more on this topic

1. Expand your knowledge on being vulnerable, read Brené Brown's book, *Daring Greatly*.
2. *Level 5 Leadership: The Triumph of Humility and Fierce Resolve* Jim Collins HBR July-August 2005 and click [here](#) for a very good video of Jim Collins speaking about Level 5 leadership
3. *The paradox of leadership: Displaying humility alongside confidence* Orly Maravankin, Forbes 8/8/17