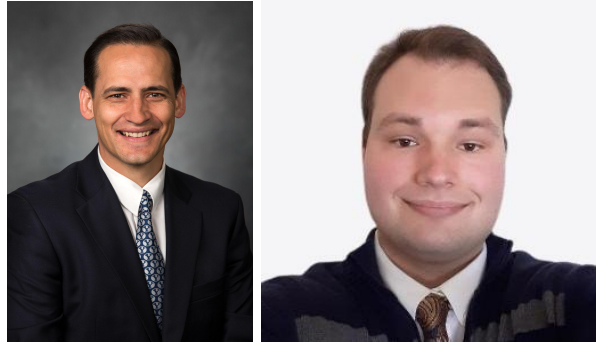


Humble Leadership



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Introduction

Humility is the cornerstone of leadership. John G. Miller, 2012

Have you ever been given an assignment for which you felt totally unprepared? US Navy submarine captain David Marquet certainly did. Marquet spent a year preparing and training to captain the USS Olympia and had become an expert in all of its workings. However, when he arrived at his new post, he was greeted with the unexpected news that he had been reassigned to captain the USS Santa Fe; a submarine he knew nothing about, and also one of the lowest rated submarines in the fleet. Marquet only had two weeks to prepare for his new role. In a matter of moments, all of Marquet's hard-won technical knowledge became virtually useless (Marquet, 2012).

Equipped with little to no knowledge of his submarine and given an underperforming crew, Marquet took control of the USS Santa Fe. Traditional military leadership (in which Marquet had been trained) viewed the captain as the primary problem solver and decision maker. The crew existed to fulfill the captain's orders. With this leadership paradigm, Marquet began giving orders, only to learn that his orders were putting him and his crew in mortal danger. When he asked one of the crewman why he carried out a potentially dangerous order, the crewman responded, "because you told me to." In that pivotal moment, Marquet realized his precarious situation. "We had a crew that was trained for compliance, and a captain that was trained for the wrong ship. And that was a deadly combination. We were going to die if we didn't fix it."

And fix it they did. Realizing that his old leadership paradigm of command and control would not be effective, Marquet embraced a new form of leadership which unleashed the best in each crew member and opened the door to innovation and excellence. Over the space of a few years, the USS Santa Fe went from among lowest to the highest rated submarines in the entire US Navy. What was Marquet's secret? Humble leadership.

Why Humble Leadership?

The leaders... who are making the most progress... are the ones who confess honestly that they don't know what to do and try to get help. Richard Elmore, 2004, p. 234

Leader humility has been linked to improved individual performance, team performance, moral self-efficacy, and psychological safety (Owens et al., 2013; Owens et al., 2016). The LRN consulting group found that leaders who demonstrate humility are eighteen times more likely to inspire colleagues than leaders who don't demonstrate humility (Covey, 2022). In studying what distinguished more and less effective teams, Google found that on effective teams the formal leader of the team did not dominate, but "each person on the team spoke just about equally and everyone felt safe sharing their ideas" (Achor, 2018, p. 37). Thus in the healthiest schools principals are equal partners that share and contribute, but also encourage others to do the same. Pennebaker (2011) studied the use of personal pronouns in organizations and suggests that if we as leaders use the words *I*, *me*, and *my* more than we use the words *we*, *us*, and *our*, perhaps we think too highly of our own genius, abilities, vision, and efforts and undervalue others. Boren and colleagues (2021) found that more effective school leaders talked about their work with a much greater we-us focus, while less effective leaders predominantly held an I-me focus.

According to recent scholarship by Dr. Brad Owens, humble leaders personify three traits.

- They have an objective view of themselves and their own strengths and weaknesses.
- They see and recognize others with deep appreciation.
- They are open to new information and learning new things.

Let's examine how we as school leaders might further develop these three traits in our own leadership.

See Ourselves More Objectively

He was often wrong but never in doubt. Stephen M. R. Covey, 2022, p. 247

Marquet's first step towards greater leadership began with acknowledging his limitations. He had no idea how the USS Santa Fe functioned and he knew that his crew would have unique insights into the submarine's operation. Significantly, Marquet was able to relinquish the temptation to act as if he were the most knowledgeable person on board. Shortly after his failed attempt to give dangerous orders he met with his crew to honestly discuss their situation and his lack of knowledge. This conversation was one of the many turning points from failure to success. Looking back on his experience, Marquet said, "I now think that these words 'I don't know' are the most important words any leader can say because those are the words that open the door to learning... and when the leader says 'I don't know' it makes it safe for the whole team to say 'I don't know.'"

As an assistant principal, I (David) worked with a newer elementary principal that had spent the first several years of his career as a high school teacher and jr. high assistant principal. While his experience at the secondary level could have blinded him to the subtleties of his new role, he

humbly acknowledged his limitations and relied heavily on his faculty's expertise. He sought honest feedback from his team members, gladly acknowledged when others were more proficient, and admitted when he didn't know something. However, he was not a doormat or jellyfish, allowing anything and everything; he expressed his own ideas, shared fresh perspectives, provided needed insights, and brought his unique talents as an equal team member in his unique role. This principal's willingness to set aside personal pride and see himself more objectively allowed our school to make tremendous strides that could not have happened if he had come in with a know-it-all, command-and-control, power struggle leadership approach. Reflect on these statements:

- *I seek and act on feedback from others, even if it is critical.*
- *I admit when I don't know how to do something or make a mistake.*
- *I acknowledge when others have more knowledge and skills than me.*

See Others More Appreciatively

As a leader, you have to constantly shut off your own reel and watch all the movies playing around you. Reid Hoffman, co-founder of LinkedIn

Marquet experienced a fundamental shift in how he saw his crew. Instead of being cogs in a clock which Marquet was responsible for winding, each crew member possessed invaluable knowledge and experience. This paradigm shift led to seeing the crew with greater appreciation. With a we're-all-in-this-together mindset, Marquet humbly recognized his crew's personal strengths and limitations and relied heavily on them as equal partners (Knight, 2016). Humble leaders recognize that their formal position does not magically make their opinions, views, and expertise superior to anyone else's. This is not a forced or feigned humility; rather, "we truly hear people, we see them as human beings who count, whose ideas, heart, and soul matter" (Knight, 2016, p. 56). Unfortunately, when many different types of professionals were asked how much their opinions mattered to their supervisors, educators ranked toward the bottom of the list, with teachers feeling like principals didn't really care about their opinions (Knight, 2016).

Like many newly assigned principals, I (David) spent significant time interviewing each of my teachers. One teacher entered the interview with a bit of a chip on her shoulder stating, "I have been teaching at this school longer than you've been alive!" With a bit of snark I thought, "Actually, you've been teaching ten years longer than I've been alive!" I felt a little challenged and my pride was pricked. I was determined to show this outdated teacher that despite my young age, I knew what I was doing, and would take the school in an updated and improved direction. Challenge accepted. I initially viewed this teacher as a rival and roadblock; yet as the days and weeks passed, I came to appreciate and celebrate her experience, insight, passion, and pushback. She was a staunch, passionate advocate for the school community and was willing to ask hard questions and offer alternative perspectives. While our relationship was never super warm and fuzzy, we both recognized each other's unique strengths and grew from competitors to collaborators. Reflect on these statements:

- *I take notice of my strengths and others' strengths.*
- *I often compliment others on their strengths and accomplishments.*

- *I show appreciation for the unique contributions of others.*

See New Information More Openly

The best leaders want critical feedback so they can improve. They do not fear it but crave it!
Kirtman & Fullan, 2016, p. 59

Marquet was highly teachable. His ability to see himself objectively combined with his deep appreciation for others allowed him to see new information and new situations with a great degree of possibility and openness. Marquet was willing to let new evidence and information inform his views even when that evidence was not personally favorable. Rather than being “constrained by certainty,” humble leaders care much more about what is right than who is right or who gets the credit, and are willing to take an honest look at data, evidence, and information for the ultimate benefit of the organization (as cited in Shein and Shein, 2018, p. 109).

I (David) worked hard with one PLC team that initially struggled to share and learn from each other during team meetings. Rather than openly and vulnerably discussing their classroom struggles, they were determined to impress each other by showing only their successes. During one PLC team meeting the team leader, a very experienced, very accomplished teacher finally broke down and said to her team, “Can we look at some writing samples from my students? I have worked and worked and worked with them, and they just aren’t getting it. I’ve just never been a strong writing teacher and I need your help to teach writing better!” That was a defining moment for the team. This courageous team leader, whose students always scored high on state and district assessments, was humble enough to seek new information, which was a tremendous benefit to her students, her team members, and herself. Modeling humility compelled the team to share new and authentic information; a stark contrast to their previous superficial and self-promoting dialogue that perpetuated the status quo. Reflect on these statements:

- *I am willing to learn from others.*
- *I am open to exploring alternative explanations and different directions.*
- *I am willing to objectively examine new information and evidence.*

Conclusion

We come nearest to the great when we are great in humility. Rabindranath Tagore

Engaging in humble leadership can be particularly challenging when our formal authority is questioned, when we are unjustly blamed, or when others are just plain rude. I (David) had a frequent flyer parent that called the school several times a month to yell, complain, blame, and rant at the office staff. He was so difficult that I told my office staff to send his phone calls straight to me. One day I answered the phone and was greeted by a barrage of complaints and threats. As he prattled on I thought, “This guy is such an idiot! Doesn’t he have anything better to do than to incessantly call the school? What a loser!” For whatever reason, right in the middle of his rant the following quote came to my mind: “Even when we encounter mean-spirited criticism from persons who have little regard or love for us, it can be helpful to exercise enough meekness to weigh it and sift out anything that might benefit us”

(Christofferson, 2011, pp. 99-100). While I had far more formal education than this parent, I decided to shift my approach and really listen and empathize. As I relinquished my ego, looked past his clumsy and inappropriate delivery, and gave him the benefit of the doubt, I started to appreciate that he expressed valid concerns and offered some really good possible solutions. As I listened and responded with humility the conversation became more civil, and my perspective grew. I thanked him for sharing his concerns, and we actually used some of his feedback to improve our procedures. This parent never became an office favorite, but as we treated him with more humility and respect, he calmed down, treated us with more respect, and continued to share ideas. Everyone was better and happier for it.

Nearly all leaders face the same issue, whether they are captain of a nuclear submarine, CEO of an international business, or principal of a school: pride precludes access to the collective intelligence and talent of their followers. Because schools are highly complex organizations, we as school leaders face problems that are beyond the knowledge and capacity of any individual, regardless of our intelligence, talent, and experience. Top-down management is an appealing antidote to complexity. Yet, it will not result in an open, collaborative, respectful, problem-solving culture which is the hallmark of joyful and effective schools. Let us learn to embrace the beautiful complexity of schools by exemplifying humility. As humble leaders, let's strive to:

- See our strengths and weaknesses more objectively;
- See and recognize others with deep appreciation; and
- Stay open to new information and to learning new things.

A special thanks to Kim Jones, Joe Jensen, Sam Rencher, Becky Gerber, Alex Judd, Vallen Thomas, and Sherrie Boren for their helpful review of this article. We have greatly benefited from their inspiring insights and humble leadership.

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