

Want to show authority? Try a bit of humble pie

Humility leads to success at personal and professional levels, believes IESE Prof. Antonio Argandoña, and it would be a mistake to write it off.

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The moral dimension of the financial crisis has led to renewed interest in the ethics of executives, governments and regulatory bodies.

Of all the virtues expected of an executive or government official, humility is especially important, and yet it has been largely overlooked in the realm of economics.

This is probably due to an incomplete or misguided notion of what it means to be humble, why it's important, and how [being modest contributes to the success and reputation of the organization as well as the leader](#).

IESE Prof. [Antonio Argandoña](#) aims to set the record straight, offering ideas for reflection on this essential virtue.

Greater moral authority

People often think that humility is incompatible with showing the authority necessary for being a leader.

That couldn't be farther from the truth: A leader who is truly humble, and is perceived as being so by others, will ultimately have far more authority than an arrogant leader.

Self-knowledge is the first and foremost expression of humility. People who are humble neither overestimate their virtues nor disparage themselves. Having high self-esteem does

not make them pretentious. They constantly evaluate themselves and realize they are not infallible.

This self-awareness includes recognizing what they owe to others: Humble individuals do not take credit for all of their strengths and achievements; instead, they value and appreciate the help they receive from others.

Another quality associated with humility is a sense of transcendence, the tendency to act according to an ambitious ideal. That is why being humble also entails being demanding of oneself.

Humility often goes hand in hand with other virtues, such as objectivity, simplicity, the desire to learn and patience with others.

Traits of humble leaders

Humble leaders won't boast about their strengths, but they won't deny or conceal them either. Nor will they hide their shortcomings, deficiencies and mistakes.

As such, they do not seek praise from others or feel hurt by criticism. They are grateful to discover how others perceive them, since it can raise their self-awareness.

When it comes to evaluating others, humble individuals are aware that everyone else is probably better than they are in some way, so they tend to judge others less strictly than they would judge themselves.

Humble leaders also tend to avoid comparing their qualities, merits, knowledge and achievements with those of others. If forced to do so, they try not to rate themselves as superior. They pass judgment if necessary, but look for the silver lining whenever possible.

This openness gives way to additional virtues associated with humility, such as generosity, respect and a spirit of service. In particular, they will acknowledge the merits of their peers. They will request, accept and acknowledge their ideas, suggestions and tips. They will never be envious of the successes and qualities of others.

Successful leadership qualities

Why should a humble leader be put at the helm of an organization?

- They tend to make fewer mistakes. Their natural inclination for introspection and

their willingness to accept outside criticism generally give them a good idea of what their limitations and capabilities are.

- Their interpersonal relationships tend to be more genuine and simple, since they do not crave flattery.
- They tend to be sincere in both their criticism and praise, highlighting the positive aspects of the other person's behavior, without skipping over the negative ones, which can help them improve.
- They tend to seek collaboration, to offset their shortcomings and capitalize on the standout qualities of fellow team members.
- They will likely pay more attention to the common good of the organization than to their own self-interests.
- Acknowledging their limitations drives them toward the active pursuit of excellence.

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