

4 reasons humble managers rule

Does humility have a place in the upper echelons of business management? New research explores this often crucially overlooked quality and its ramifications for leadership.

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"Pride comes before a fall": the saying may hold true in the business world, as well. In fact, IESE's [Antonio Argandoña](#) lists pride, arrogance and hubris among the causes of the 2008 global financial crisis in his [essay](#) for the 2016 book, *The Global Financial Crisis and Its Aftermath*. In this [article for the Journal of Business Ethics](#), Argandoña suggests an antidote: some humility.

Prized by classical and pre-modern philosophers from Aristotle to Aquinas, the concept of humility "lost its luster in the modern era, probably because it was confused with a disposition not worthy of an individual's worth and self-reliance," writes Argandoña. "Humility is not a highly rated attitude in advanced Western societies," he sums up.

So, is there a place for humility in business management, where bold decision-making is key? Does humility square with the "vision of the leader as a heroic, charismatic being with exceptional qualities" who acts independently and decisively to achieve exceptional results? If there's something American president-elect Donald Trump is *not*, it's humble.

However, Argandoña is resolute: "The humble leader is precisely the person who is best qualified to transform his firm into a profitable, successful, and respected organization," he assures. There are four main reasons why humility can significantly aid a manager:

1. Humble managers know themselves and their company. Management decisions begin with knowledge of the internal and external environments, including specific strengths and weaknesses of the organizations and the actors within them. A self-aware, humble

manager is less likely to make mistakes and more willing to accept and learn from them. Simply put, managers in the know are better positioned as decision-makers.

2. Humble managers are stable and reliable. A humble manager will have a steadier character. Confident, but not overly so, in her capacities, she won't overreach or be excessively cautious in her actions: no dastardly overlords or doubting Thomases here! No: a humble leader is equanimous, and her decisions will remain consistent over time.

3. Humble managers never stop improving. Armed with self-knowledge, willing to ask for help and accept criticism, a humble manager is in a better place to correct his course and make up for his shortcomings. He won't find knowing his flaws depressing, but empowering: rather than lowering his ambitions and settling for what has already been achieved, he will use this knowledge as a tool to improve.

4. Humble managers help their teams — and organization — improve. Seeking to improve will inspire others to improve as well. Concretely, humility helps remove barriers and build trust, so that colleagues feel comfortable offering their genuine opinions. They know their leader will carefully listen to and consider their thoughts, even if they conflict with her own. (For more on the value of employee voice, see "[How Employee Voice Helps Community Engagement](#).")

When employees know they are being heard it can inspire them to do their best work. They know they will receive proper credit for their efforts, because a humble leader shares successes and doesn't scapegoat others for her failures.

A manager's humility especially enhances teamwork. By acknowledging people's experience and merits, and awarding them responsibility and autonomy accordingly, a humble manager helps develop team members. He enlists the whole team's collaboration to pursue the organization's goals, which he places before his own. Decisions are entrusted to those with proper expertise, boosting creativity, cooperation, and ultimately the adaptability needed to survive in today's rapidly changing markets.

A modest proposal

You may be thinking that this is all fine in theory, but where does that leave non-humble leaders? Is it possible to learn humility (particularly when working within a hierarchical firm and society that rewards individual achievement)?

It's true that an understanding of humility is usually intuitive and non-formalized, writes

Argandoña. But it can be learned by example. Humility can also be self-starting: equipped with a firm grasp of the value and principles of humility (e.g., "do unto others..." and respect for individual dignity), a manager can then decide the course required by humility in each situation.

Actions — such as, taking responsibility and asking for advice — must be deliberate, voluntary, and genuine — and, most importantly, repeated. Practice, and more practice, is key: it will get easier, but the path to true humility is never complete.

In other words, if you want to excel as a manager, it may be time to pause, swallow your pride, and try a piece of humble pie.

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