

Use Humility to Improve Performance

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By John Baldoni

I've written before about the importance of **humility as a leadership trait**. But, as was recently pointed out to me, humility is an important trait in employees, too.

When people act humbly, they are acknowledging their limitations and accepting that they cannot go it alone. This mindset is valuable to a team because it serves as an invitation for others to help. Humility, however, is not an excuse for slacking. It also means having the willingness to help others do their jobs when the need arises. It is a means for allowing different personalities to coordinate with each other.

Rick Hensley, an executive with **Messer Construction**, reminded me of the importance of this trait in employees after I mentioned humility in keynote address I recently delivered at **Miami University**. Rick, a vice president for information technology, has developed a "personal humility index" that he uses when interviewing job candidates.

Among the things Rick looks for are self-awareness, a "strong sense of modesty," the "use of we and team versus I and me," and the candidate's desire to develop different levels of employees. Rick wants candidates to "see themselves as others see them." Trustworthiness, along with integrity and honesty, are essential.

Fostering humility at work requires leadership and putting what you believe into action. Here are some suggestions.

1. Look for signs of humility. You can spot hubris, the arrogant disregard of others and the opposite of humility, during job interviews. A job interview is the ideal time to talk about yourself, but arrogant employees will take credit for accomplishments while demonstrating a lack of awareness about what it takes to work with others. This shows up when you ask questions about failures; some may not know how to answer those questions because in their minds, mistakes were other employees' faults, not theirs. More humble employees will talk of the contributions of others, particularly when talking about how they solved challenges or dealt with problems. These candidates may make for stronger collaborators.
2. Show humility. If you expect your employees to be humble, lead by example and be humble yourself. Never ask the impossible. Support people with resources and manpower, and in crunch time, pitch in with the work load. Listen more than you speak, and actively encourage your employees to voice their ideas. Then, delegate authority and responsibility to them.
3. Insist on cooperation. Make it known that people on your team must work together to get things done. Cooperation requires respect for other people's abilities, that's easy. What's not so easy is an acknowledging that you may not be as good at a particular task as someone else. A good manager will find the right fit for your talents but you'll need to accept role and harmonize with others. Some of us have terrific presentation skills; others of us may be great with spreadsheets. Acknowledging that you lack a skill requires humility and facilitates cooperation. (Of course, as time goes on, you can seek to add new skills through training and development opportunities.)

Humility can be practiced by everyone in the workplace. Its presence makes for a more harmonious and collaborative work environment because people feel they can share their ideas without fear of being "one-upped" or put down.

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