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Career Compass No. 76: Humble Leaders Get Results

Humble leaders are ambitious for the people and the organizations they serve, not themselves.

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ICMA | coaching program

I am deputy director of a Community Development Department in a mid-western city, overseeing long-term policy, particularly at the intersection of housing and transportation. I have a vision of how the city needs to encourage more compact urban development and promote transit and a more walkable and bicycle-friendly community. To do my job, I need to work with current planning, advance planning, economic development, and building safety staff groups in the department plus other stakeholder groups like the Public Works Department and business and neighborhood groups.



I have promoted my vision and tried to educate internal and external stakeholders, but they do not seem to get the bigger picture for a better future.

I am passionate about smart growth and am known as an excellent presenter of ideas and a hard-driver. I want to move forward, but I am not getting much traction. Internal groups are just focused on immediate demands like current development projects. External groups seem protective of the status quo, even though the current state of affairs poses a grave risk for our community.

By achieving some tangible smart growth results, I can hopefully also gain some professional visibility and advance in my career.

So I'm frustrated by the lack of cooperation and even opposition to my ideas. What do I start?

I congratulate you for being ambitious for the community and yourself.

However, you are being blocked because others do not share your purpose and ideas.

What is lacking is a bit of humility. As a younger local government manager, I was somewhat arrogant. It was only later in my career did I fully appreciate the importance of humility as a leader.

Humble and Ambitious

Jim Collins, in his book *Good to Great*, found that great leaders who build organizations and achieve organizational success are humble *and* ambitious. These leaders are humble, not particularly charismatic, and often introverts.

Most importantly, they are committed to the organization, its mission, and values. According to Bill Taylor (“[If Humility is So Important, Why Are Leaders So Arrogant?](#),” *hbr.org*, October 15, 2018), humble leaders are in fact ambitious for the people and the organizations they serve, not themselves.

So, the question is: How can you become more humble even as you maintain your ambitions?

Humility Defined

Humility is a modest view of our own importance. Humility acknowledges that leaders are dependent on others to generate good ideas and different perspectives, as well as to achieve good results.

Humility assumes that we, as leaders, do not have all the answers or know the one path forward.

Arrogance vs. Confidence

Arrogance as a leader is displayed when you:

- Express certainty about the future.
- Know it all.
- Seek to educate others.
- Have the answers and can't understand why others don't get it.
- Tell and direct others what to do.
- Blame others for mistakes or failure.

This arrogance or overconfidence is exhibited when we leaders have excessive faith in ourselves, our abilities, our ideas, and our judgment. This overconfidence is especially dangerous in the messy, uncertain world of local government.

As a leader, you must avoid arrogance. At the same time, you must have the confidence to acknowledge the uncertainty, the roadblocks, the risks involved in leading change for the better, and still act anyway. You must be confident that you and your team will make a positive difference, but not arrogant that people must follow you or that you can somehow control the outcome.

Humility and the Need to Adapt

Your city faces a lot of uncertainty and “messiness.” Smart growth is a classic adaptive (not technical) challenge, which must involve over time many stakeholder groups, having their own values and preferred solutions. With an adaptive challenge, there are no right or wrong answers accepted by all, even though you may be convinced of the rightness of your ideas.

Adaptive challenges require humility. To move forward on smart growth, you need to learn with others, not educate others. You must create a shared vision with others and be open to incorporating views other than your own. You must be open to the twists and turns of the journey and learn from mistakes.

Humble leaders are clear about the direction but flexible about how to get there.

Overcoming Our Cognitive Blindspots

We all have cognitive blind spots that make it challenging to address adaptive challenges. Traffic congestion, environmental sustainability, the opioid epidemic, and homelessness are all adaptive problems because there are no right or wrong answers. What you believe is the correct path may be wrong.

To confront these adaptive challenges, you must have “intellectual humility.” To promote intellectual humility, Daniel Pink, in his [Pinkcast 3.09](#) (August 13, 2019) cited four questions posed by Warren Berger in *The Book of Beautiful Questions*. Berger suggested asking yourself:

1. Do I think more like a soldier (defending territory) or a scout (exploring new territory)?
2. Would I rather be right, or would I rather understand?
3. Do I routinely solicit and seek out opposing views?
4. Do I enjoy the pleasant surprise of discovering that I’m mistaken?

Becoming Better Leaders

Humility allows us to grow into authentic leadership by:

- Being self-aware and self-critical.
- Sharing ourselves and connecting with others.
- Learning from others.
- Flexing our behaviors given the demands of the situation.
- Compensating for our weaknesses.
- Acknowledging and incorporating other perspectives and ideas.
- Partnering with other stakeholders and being influenced by our partners.
- Showing vulnerability and engendering trust.

Bringing Out the Best in Others

As Dan Cable indicates in his article “[How Humble Leadership Really Works](#),” (*hbr.org*, April 23, 2018), leaders are “merely overhead unless we are bringing out the best in employees.”

Humble leaders are other-centered, not me-centered. In the words of Liz Wiseman, humble leaders are not “diminishers” who know-it-all, tell employees what to do, test them to ensure that they do what they are told, and thereby diminish the capabilities and contributions of employees. Instead, effective leaders practice humility and serve as “multipliers” who stretch and support employees, thus growing their skills and capabilities. (See Liz Wiseman, [Multipliers](#).)

Multipliers are servant leaders. Servant leaders understand that their primary role is to grow more leaders.

According to Cable, “servant leaders have the humility, courage, and insight to acknowledge they can benefit from the expertise of those with less authority. They seek out the ideas and contributions of others they serve. They create a culture of learning.”

The Nine Practices of Humble Leaders

To become more humble (and effective) as a leader, consider these nine practices:

1. Ask questions with a curious mind

We all have cognitive blind spots. Therefore, to combat overconfidence and arrogance, engage employees and stakeholder group members in conversation and ask questions. For instance, ask yourself and others:

- Why do we believe that?
- How do we know that?
- What is our evidence?

- What are our assumptions?
- What are the problems and concerns that others will have about our preferred solution?
- What is an entirely different approach?
- How might we...?
- What would be one step forward that we can agree on?

(See Constance Dierickx, "[Why Sticking To Your Strategy Might Be a Bad Idea](#)," *forbes.com*, June 26, 2019.)

2. Listen to others as you engage in conversation

Humble leaders engage team members and other stakeholders in conversation and acknowledge what they hear. They are open to the discussion and where it may lead.

Humble leaders are "yes and," not "yes but" people. They listen to the views of others and incorporate where possible their ideas or otherwise respond to their concerns. (Gustavo Razzetti, "[Intellectual Humility Can Make You a Better Leader](#)," TLNT newsletter, July 18, 2019.)

As Dan Rockwell advised, "transformation begins with listening" ("[The Big Mouth](#)," *Leadership Freak* blog, July 29, 2019).

3. Share yourself with others

For people to follow, they must feel connected to you. You can connect by sharing yourself (including some of your personal or family life, your interests, and passions) and encouraging others to do the same. Humble leaders show a keen interest in others.

There are many ways to "get personal." You can share an anecdote about your weekend and ask an employee about their weekend when you walk around the office at the beginning or end of the day or the start of a 1:1 meeting. Alternatively, you can formalize the practice by starting a staff meeting with a "Take 5" segment, during which team members can share a personal experience or interest.

"Humility connects. Arrogance stands aloof." (Dan Rockwell, "[The Four Children of Humility](#)," *Leadership Freak* blog, June 7, 2018.)

4. Practice a growth mindset

Humble leaders avoid a fixed mindset. Those with a fixed mindset believe that their talents and capabilities are fixed. Therefore, they avoid mistakes and failures and are content to do the same things over and over again as a way to reinforce their sense of competence.

Those with a growth mindset believe that their talents can grow over time. They seek out opportunities to take on new challenges and lead change and view mistakes as opportunities to learn and develop themselves. They understand that learning and growth require some discomfort. (See Carol Dweck, [Mindset: The New Psychology of Success](#))

5. Demonstrate vulnerability

Demonstrating vulnerability as a leader creates connection and promotes trust. People are more likely to follow you if they connect with you.

You can show vulnerability in the workplace by acknowledging to others:

- “I made a mistake.”
- “I screwed up.”
- “I don’t know what to do.”
- “I need your help.”

(See [Career Compass #32 “The Power of Vulnerability.”](#))

6. Practice self-reflection and self-criticism

As Bill George suggests in his book *True North—Discover Your Authentic Leadership*, leadership starts with self-awareness. Leaders need humility to be aware of their behaviors and the impact of those behaviors on others. Humility is also required if leaders are to practice self-criticism and take steps to “flex” their behaviors and self-correct.

To promote self-awareness and self-criticism, you can do some of the following:

- Write in a personal or work journal about your leadership experiences and what you are learning.
- Debrief each and every work experience by yourself and with your team (What went well? What did not go so well? What have we learned for future practice?)
- Use a professional coach or informal peer coach as a sounding board.
- Review past performance evaluations to identify areas of strength and opportunities to improve or further develop.
- Take a leadership assessment and consider ways to flex your leadership behaviors.

7. Learn as you go

In the face of uncertainty, a humble leader is a learn-it-all, not a know-it-all.

A good leader helps the team try out a few new approaches, acknowledge mistakes, fix things up, and learn as they go. “Arrogance knows. Humility knows that there is more to know.” (Dan Rockwell, “[Why Humility Delivers More Results Than Arrogance](#),” *Leadership Freak* blog, June 15, 2018.)

To promote continuous learning, leaders can involve themselves and their team members in a variety of learning activities, such as:

- Stretch assignments or acting positions.
- Reading the literature and research studies.
- Review of best practices.
- Site visits.
- Experiments, pilot projects or beta tests.
- Debriefing or post-action reports.
- Classroom education or training.
- Coaching.

As John F. Kennedy famously stated, “Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other.”

8. Pick up the trash

Ray Kroc, the founder of McDonald's, used to visit franchises and was intent on picking up the trash during each visit. He demonstrated that no job was too menial and thus modeled humility and positive behavior. Kroc would not tell people to pick up the trash; he did it himself. (See Dan Rockwell, “[How to Lead with the Power of Humility](#),” *Leadership Freak* blog, May 15, 2018.)

9. Show gratitude

Humble leaders know that great things are accomplished by engaging others who contribute their ideas and energies and do most of the actual work. Therefore, leaders actively celebrate the contributions of others and are genuinely grateful for those contributions.

Again, humble leaders are other-centered, not me-centered. “Ego celebrates self. Humility honors others.” (Dan Rockwell, “[10 Practices of Humility for Egotistical Leaders](#),” *Leadership Freak* blog, March 30, 2018.)

Getting Results

Great leaders demonstrate humility, ambition, and a passionate drive. The ambition and drive are centered on the achievement of the team, the organization, the community, not the leader.

In your situation, you are driven to achieve tangible results to attain smarter growth. If you were humble as well as ambitious, success might involve:

- Engaging people in a lot of meaningful conversations about the current state of the community and opportunities to change things for the better.
- Creating a shared vision by incorporating the views and ideas of others.
- Identifying some new ways of evaluating current development proposals.
- Debriefing and critiquing ongoing housing and transit efforts.
- Taking a few steps forward, starting a pilot project or two, and learning as you go.

As Bill Taylor states in his article “[If Humility Is So Important, Why Are Leaders So Arrogant?](#)” ([hbr.org](#), October 15, 2018), “ego gets attention, humility gets results.”



Sponsored by the ICMA Coaching Program, *Career Compass* is a monthly column focused on leadership and career development issues for local government professional staff. Dr. Frank Benest is ICMA’s liaison for Next Generation Initiatives and resides in Palo Alto, California. If you have a leadership or career question you would like addressed in a future Career Compass, e-mail careers@icma.org or contact Frank directly at frank@frankbenest.com

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