

HUMILITY: THE CORE SPIRITUAL ATTRIBUTE IN CREATING A HEALTHY WORK ENVIRONMENT

ABSTRACT

Spiritual leadership is a new term used to describe leaders who rely on and develop within themselves moral and ethical values. These spiritual values include humility, integrity, trustworthiness, and reliability, leading to behaviors like respect and attentive listening. When leaders practice such values, they are not proselytizing; they are making a difference in the work environment. These leaders are successful because they are “able to motivate followers, create a positive ethical climate, inspire trust, promote positive work relationships, and achieve organizational goals. These spiritual values and practices . . . allow leaders to achieve organizational goals such as increased productivity, lowered rates of turnover, greater sustainability, and improved employee health” (Reave, 2005, p. 656). They improve the work environment and create trust amongst followers.

INTRODUCTION

When one thinks of spirituality, they often link it to religion. Although spirituality and religion are interdependent, spirituality is not religiosity. Someone can be spiritually minded without believing in a deity or a religion. Zinnbauer, Pargament, and Scott (1999) found many perceived definitions based on a survey they conducted. One perceived definition was that “religiousness was predominantly associated with formal/organizational religion, and spirituality was more often associated with closeness with God and feelings of interconnectedness with the world and living things” (p. 896). In other words, spirituality is personal, not global, and it reflects the morals and ethics of the individual. As I see it, interconnectedness with deity is an individual’s own spiritual journey, and only they determine how they feel that. Religion is formal and organizational in facilitating personal connection to deity.

Although there are many philosophers who questioned whether moral values are made “acceptable” by those in power, society commonly believes that being “good” comes from internal and intrinsic values that are developed in each individual. Most people would agree, that a good person lives up to, and strives to have, moral values such as humility, respect, and reliability. However, an individual has their own ethical values. Seeking spirituality is as simple as being in-tune with one’s own core values. Through the lens of spiritual leadership, we can integrate character, behavior, and effect on followers as a measurable indication of a humble leader (Reave 2005, p. 660). In this essay, I will focus on spiritual leadership and how it relates to the skills and attributes of being a humble leader.

Because spirituality is personal, it can be implemented in the workspace as spiritual leadership. Leadership and spirituality are not as separated, at least outside of clergy, as one

often thinks. Laura Reave (2005) researched the correlation of the two. After conducting her literature review on spiritual leadership, she wrote,

There is a clear consistency between the values (in the sense of established ideals) and practices emphasized in many different spiritual teachings, and the values and practices of leaders who are able to motivate followers, create a positive ethical climate, inspire trust, promote positive work relationships, and achieve organizational goals. These spiritual values and practices also allow leaders to achieve organizational goals such as increased productivity, lowered rates of turnover, greater sustainability, and improved employee health. (p. 656)

As Reave points out, there is a correlation between spiritual leadership and the ability to achieve organizational goals; this comes from the implementation of spirituality in the workplace.

Spiritual leadership does not mean to be a leader of a congregation, but to be a leader who uses their core moral values to lead. Spirituality develops moral values including integrity, humility, trustworthiness, and reliability. These attributes create a healthy environment for followers, and as Reave indicated, increases productivity and employee (follower) health (p. 656).

A leader can cultivate a spiritual workplace by practicing moral attributes. Workplace spirituality as defined by philosophers Robert A. Giacalone and Carol L. Jurkiewicz (2004) is “a framework of organizational values evidenced in the culture that promotes employees’ experience of transcendence through the work process, facilitating their sense of being connected in a way that provides feelings of compassion and joy” (p. 13). Spirituality in the workplace is not proselytizing, nor is it invasive. It is important to note the distinction between religion and spirituality because of the potential of legal ramifications (Reave, 2005, p. 656). In fact, those who claim they are not religious or spiritual still want to be in a healthy work environment. To

have a healthy work environment, there needs to be workplace spirituality. Leaders who possess the spiritual attribute of humility will encourage workplace spirituality, one that is not connected to religion. To further this, I argue that humility is required to fully encourage workplace spirituality, ultimately bringing success to the team or company. When a person is humble, they will show the crucial leadership skills of “showing respect, demonstrating fair treatment, expressing care and concern, listening responsively, recognizing the contributions of others, and engaging in reflective practice” (Reave, 2005, p. 655). I will demonstrate this by providing an example of humble leadership, a definition of humility, the foundation of humility, and the measured effectiveness of humility in leadership.

THE EXAMPLE

Recently I was at the St. George Marathon watching the racers at the Finish Line. It was an incredible spectacle. I observed runners cross the finish line with happy faces; I’m sure they were happy the race was over and/or that they had met their goals. With about 150 yards to go, a girl running with the three-hour pacing group collapsed, her legs refusing to work. She started bawling out of pain and frustration. One of the girls running in the pacing group stopped to pick her up encouraging her to finish. Together, they struggled to get back up. Finally, they both stood and started to walk forward, albeit wobbly and unsteady. By stopping to help, this racer sacrificed qualifying for the renowned Boston Marathon to help her competitor. A few moments later, the girl fell over again. Her helper struggled to lift her back up. Suddenly, a male runner came from behind and grabbed the runner’s other arm and lifted her back up to her feet. With one person on each side, they were able to find stability and strength. Together, all three of them slowly started running to the finish, arms linked, and eyes determined. They made it under three hours by mere seconds. These runners could have left her, thinking, “I have my own goals, she’ll

be fine.” Instead, these two humble racers forgot themselves and their individual wants to help a fellow racer. What is even more impressive is that they all still accomplished their goals: finishing the race below three hours. This is an example that spiritual leadership is effective. These racers exemplified humility, showing that humble actions go a long way. All of them were able to accomplish their individual goals while striving to accomplish the group goal to just finish. This experience was burned into my mind and taught me that true leadership comes from the humble, not the proud.

This example rings true to what Laura Reave (2005) states, “Spiritual leadership . . . occur[s] when a person in a leadership position embodies spiritual values such as integrity, honesty, and humility, creating the self as an example of someone who can be trusted, relied upon, and admired” (p. 663). A leader who embodies spiritual leadership, such as the attribute of humility, creates a feeling of trust, allowing others to rely on them. Spiritual leadership, as stated before, is not the practice of religion, but the practice of developed moral and ethical values and attributes. As shown by this example above, humility allows others to find stability in a leader; they find they can lean on and depend on, like the runner did with these unexpected friends. There was no fear that she was alone. Instead the other runners stooped to pick her up and help her legs start moving until they could do it on their own, until they reached the end together. Although this is a heartwarming story, and these runners were not superiorers to this girl, they still exemplified humility. They showed leadership.

DEFINITION

Humility comes from the Latin word *humilis*, which means “low” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Another explanation states that humility’s origin is also from the Latin word “humus,”

which means “the earth beneath us” (Argandona, 2015, p. 63). These Latin origins define humility as being lowly, yet strong and stable as the “earth beneath us.” However, I want to emphasize that humility does not mean being submissive or docile; it means knowing your limits and capabilities. Antonio Argandona (2015) recognizes that at its core humility is self-knowledge. He states,

The core of humility is self-knowledge. The humble person is aware of her status, knowledge, capabilities, strengths and weaknesses, her assets, virtues, realizations and successes; her mistakes and limitations. This self-knowledge enables her to make an impartial judgment about herself and a correct self-evaluation or comprehension of the truth about herself. (p. 64)

To be humble is to truly know yourself, neither inflating nor deflating the self. We often think that humility is either submissiveness or self-deprecation; that is simply not correct. It is important to note also that those who are humble disregard the narcissistic thinking of “my way or the highway,” and instead, ask for the help, opinions, and strengths of others. Humility is not manipulative but altruistic. It is important to know what one can learn, improve, and overcome. These skills are necessary to be a humble leader and to create an environment of sincerity and trust.

Accountability

A humble person has standards to compare themselves with, almost like goals. They are not meant to be discouraging, but to encourage and inspire. A role model can act as a healthy form of comparison. A role model is someone from whom an individual draws inspiration, a person they aspire to be like. Those who are humble have models and goals to compare how they are doing and if they need to re-evaluate-the encouragement of self-examination, a form of

accountability. Concerning accountability, Argandona (2015) said, “The humble person develops the knowledge she has of herself through an active, continuous disposition to examine herself and her actions and to listen to others when they can give her information about herself” (p. 64). In other words, someone who is humble practices self-examination and seeks the help and opinion of others to complete the examination process. Most importantly, they listen carefully to the information given. It may be painful to hear someone’s accurate and sobering opinion about oneself, but the information they share can poignantly point to how one can change for the better. It is important to be accountable with others by trusting them to give honest, critical feedback when following up on one’s goals. It is vital to keep a healthy perspective and vision. These standards are given to provide encouragement to the humble, not to deceive them into believing they are too good or not good enough.

THE FOUNDATION OF HUMILITY

Now that humility has been defined, it is clear that the foundation of a humble leader starts in the way they think. Once this mindset is accomplished, leaders will be effective in creating an environment of trust. Leaders with humility strive to understand their followers. They may not always agree, but they seek to understand from a place of sincerity. They encourage, take responsibility, and are genuine and kind. These seem like simple actions, and they are, but simple does not mean easy. The mindset of the truly humble is the root of the action, as is personal spirituality. As Reave (2005) poignantly posits, “Many leadership theories emphasize the need for the leader to articulate an inspiring vision, but what is important is not so much words but rather actions: the level of ethics demonstrated, the respect and compassion shown to others” (p. 6 57). These simple acts of humility can help an organization be successful.

MEASURED EFFECTIVENESS

Recently, Bradley P. Owens and David R. Hekman (2012) observed, “Leadership writers have argued that leader humility is important to organizational growth and survival” (p. 789). Many studies have been published to argue and articulate the importance of humility, an attribute of personal spirituality. People write about humility because of the success and effectiveness that companies and organizations have in individual teams or as a whole. Tombaugh & Tombaugh (2009) recognize “the growing realization that business must embrace the broad concept of personal spirituality” (p. 95). The reason they must do so is because “Personal spirituality impacts the leader's moral stability by contributing to strength of character, reducing egoistic needs, providing means and motivation for true moral choices and actions, and creating a strong moral identity” (p. 95). Leaders who embrace personal spirituality will find that it develops a strong character and helps them be more altruistic. The ability to reduce “egoistic needs” is critical for a leader to be successful among subordinates. Egoistic behaviors block a healthy work environment. When one’s need is perceived as greater than another's it causes disruption and invalidation. It is vital for a leader to develop their own personal spirituality to provide themselves with a moral compass and strength of character. The example they set in their environment will increase the likeliness of people following. Usually, it is easier to follow someone who is sincere, altruistic, kind, humble, attentive, and moral.

To some, effectiveness may seem trivial and unmeasurable, but there is no doubt that effectiveness is a goal of any organization or company. A leader’s spiritual values and practices contribute to leadership effectiveness. Trust in leadership is a success of personal spirituality. A study on the effects of apologizing conducted by Basford, Offermann, and Behrend (2014) shows, “...followers who viewed their leader as trustworthy or caring before a leader wrongdoing were more likely to perceive their leader's apology to be sincere, as compared to

followers who previously doubted their leader's trustworthiness and caring” (p. 99). The outcome shows that leaders who are trustworthy and sincere will be better received when taking responsibility for an action through the method of apologizing. Those who have never received the trust of their employees have a harder time, and potentially, a higher turnover. It is difficult to accept the apology of someone who doesn't seem sincere and has never been sincere to an employee. Basford, Offermann, and Behrend, (2014) also found,

Attributions of apology sincerity affected follower reactions, with followers perceiving sincere apologies reporting greater trust in leadership, satisfaction with supervision, leader-member exchange quality, affective organizational commitment, and forgiveness than those reporting insincere or no apologies. A mediation model was supported, showing that attributions of apology sincerity fostered perceptions of humility, which enhanced perceptions of transformational leadership, and consequently garnered more positive follower reaction. (p. 99)

This study demonstrates that leaders who are perceived as humble and sincere garner a positive follower reaction. These followers trust their leader and have fostered a positive relationship. Positive follower reaction is the success of spiritual leadership, especially the core attribute of humility. A leader does not have to fix everything wrong in their followers' lives, but if they seek to create a healthy environment for their followers, the result would be an organization that works collectively, smoothly, and efficiently. Trust is instrumental and fickle. Humble leaders know this and treat their followers' trust with care.

It is still difficult to measure the effectiveness of a humble leader, however, Reave (2005) came to this conclusion,

Leadership effectiveness has been measured in many ways: by subjective evaluations from followers, peers, and superiors; by effect on followers; or by achievement of organizational goals such as profit and productivity. A holistic view of leadership looks at both the leader's effect on followers and achievement of goals. (p. 657)

To sum up, measuring effectiveness comes from response of peers, effect on followers, or even progress with reaching organizational goals. These combinations can measure how well or poor the leader is doing. Reave also mentioned to accurately measure "effect on followers" to poll "follower satisfaction with the leader, follower retention, follower ethics and ethical behavior, and finally, organizational citizenship behavior (p. 657)." Although all of these methods still do not fully define what success as a leader looks like, it is still an efficient way to measure a leader's effectiveness.

It is important to note that according to Reave, measured effectiveness does not come from the leader's ethical behavior, but their followers. This measurement implies a truly effective leader inspires ethical behavior by how they model it. Some might say this is misguided, arguing a leader is not defined as successful by their followers' actions. Reave (2005) analyzes that "Many experts expect strategy, intelligence, even ruthlessness to be marks of a successful leader" (p. 657). However, these are not the marks of a successful leader. What Reave found in her literature review is that "spiritual values such as integrity, honesty, and humility have been repeatedly found to be key elements of leadership success" (p. 657).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, personal spirituality is a foundational key to inspiring success and effectiveness. A leader must have already developed within themselves a personal moral code on

which to act. My point with this paper was to demonstrate that the core spiritual attribute to achieving success as a leader is the attribute of humility. When one is humble, they will show the crucial leadership skills of “showing respect for others, demonstrating fair treatment, expressing caring and concern, listening responsively, recognizing the contributions of others, and engaging in reflective practice” (Reave, 2005, p. 655). I demonstrated this by providing an example of humble leadership—the runners in the Saint George Marathon, a definition of humility and the foundation needed to act with humility, and lastly, the effectiveness of humility in the workplace by applying the study Basford, Offermann, and Behrend (2014) conducted on leaders apologizing with sincerity. It is clear that humility starts with one’s mindset, leading to actions like treating others kindly, being fair, listening, expressing appreciation and gratitude, and demonstrating respect to all. Humility is a key spiritual attribute in demonstrating moral values. When a leader is humble, they see themselves as equals to everyone. There is no overarching hierarchy and ruthlessness, but simply respect and care for others. This simple action gains trust and respect of followers leading to a measurable success.

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