

Humility is essential to agile leadership. “Yet the attribute of humility seems to be neglected in leadership development programs. And to the extent it is considered by managers rising through the ranks, it is often misunderstood,” note John Dame and Jeffery Gedmin in the *Harvard Business Review*. How does humility contribute to your agility as a leader?



Want agility? Start by being humble

Based on “It’s Not About You. (It’s About Them)”, interview with **Ronald HEIFETZ** (NPR, November 2013), “The Most Important (and Common) Leadership Lesson of 2013” by **Les MCKEOWN**.

1 / TAKE THREE PRINCIPLES OF HUMILITY TO HEART¹

How does humility contribute to agile leadership? Taking the following three principles of humility to heart supports your ability to navigate uncertainty and stay in tune with the world around you.

You don’t know everything

“Resist ‘master of the universe’ impulses,” write John Dame and Jeffrey Gedmin in the *Harvard Business Review*. “You may yourself excel in an area, but as a leader you are, by definition a generalist.” Delegate and defer to the team members with the most relevant skills and experience for each given task.

Your ideas aren’t better than theirs

It’s natural to dismiss ideas that go against your own way of thinking. Your privy to your own reasons for thinking the way you do, but when other people propose ideas that conflict with your own, you don’t know where they’re coming from – until

you give them a chance to explain! Agile leaders intentionally suppress the natural tendency to assume their ideas are better than other people’s in order to support the emergence of diverging ideas and viewpoints within their organizations.

You are there to serve others

Agile leaders care more about the long-term success of their organization and all its stakeholders than their own personal glory and success. “Employees quickly figure out which leaders are dedicated to helping them succeed, and which are scrambling for personal success at their expense. Customers, do too,” write John Dame and Jeffrey Gedmin. This principle of humility to heart enables the following agile leadership behaviors:

- Empowering and relying on team members to solve problems rather than solving them your way
- Identifying and investing in the organization’s next generation of leaders
- Creating win-win outcomes for all stakeholders

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2 / LISTEN WITH MORE EMPATHY²

One reason so many leaders lack agility is because they talk too much and don't know how to listen to the people around them, says Harvard University's leadership expert Ronald Heifetz.³ This is a common difficulty because rising to positions of authority tends to promote talking more than listening. For the sake of agility, the leader's role is no longer to come up with *the* decisive direction: it's to enable *others* to identify multiple possibilities. This evolution shifts the emphasis for leaders from talking to listening.

Don't let your ego get in the way of listening

Professor of Management and *Harvard Business Review* contributor Christine M. Riordan identifies the common ways that ego tends to make leaders bad listeners:

- Seeking to take command and direct the conversation
- Talking too much
- Worrying about what they will say next instead of listening to what is being said by others
- Being too competitive
- Reacting too quickly
- Getting distracted during conversations, multitasking such as by reading emails or text messages

Don't just hear: use all your senses

Research suggests that the best listeners are empathetic listeners. The first behavior associated with empathetic listening is to listen with all the senses and not just the sense of hearing.

- Pay attention to all verbal and nonverbal cues: tone, facial expressions, and body language
- Acknowledge how the speaker is feeling — distressed, conflicted, confident — and try to understand where those feelings are coming from
- Identify the subtext: pay attention to what the speaker is not saying and probe deeper

Process and respond

The second behavior associated with empathetic listening is about your ability to understand and engage in the discussion.

- Keep track of points made
- Remember what is said
- Ask deep and clarifying questions
- Paraphrase points of agreement and disagreement, global themes, and key messages
- Give appropriate replies, including through non-verbal behaviors: eye contact, head nods, and body language

3 / MODEL LEARNING BEHAVIORS⁴

According to 55 in-depth interviews conducted by Bradley Owens of the University of Buffalo and David Hekman of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, modeling learning behaviors is a key behavior of humble leaders: "Although the leaders were from vastly different organizations—military, manufacturing, health care, financial services, retailing, and religious—they all agreed that the essence of leader humility involves modeling to followers how to grow."⁵

Be human rather than superhuman

According to the researchers, humble leaders model how to be human rather than superhuman and legitimize a state of 'becoming' rather than pretending to be all-knowing and in total control.⁶ As a leader, this means asking questions when you don't know something and admitting your mistakes.

You can't fake it

Agile leaders promote a learning / experimental mindset, one of the key tenets of agile leadership, by adopting that mindset themselves and broadcasting their own learning missteps, thereby signaling that "learning, growth, mistakes, uncertainty, and false starts are normal and expected in the workplace." The researchers' key piece of advice? You can't fake it. "You either genuinely want to grow and develop, or you don't," say the researchers. How can you tell the real deal from someone who only says he or she wants to learn? True learners are okay with making mistakes, which is where the humility comes in. ■

1. "Six Principles for Developing Humility as a Leader," by John Dame and Jeffrey Gedmin (*Harvard Business Review*, September, 2013).

2. "Three Ways Leaders Can Listen with More Empathy," by Christian M. Riordan (*Harvard Business Review*, January, 2014).

3. *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World*, by Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky (Harvard Business Press, 2009).

4. "Modeling how to grow: An inductive examination of humble leader behaviors, contingencies, and outcomes (*Academy of Management Journal*, vol.55, August 2012).

5. Bradley Owens, as quoted by Jacqueline Ghosen, in her article "Humility Key to Effective Leadership," University at Buffalo News Center, December 2011.

6. Idem.