

SIGMA

Leader Character Series



**Great Leaders
Act with Humility**



GREAT LEADERS ACT WITH HUMILITY

“Power is dangerous unless you have humility.

— Richard J. Daley

While it may not be the first trait that comes to mind when you think of what makes a successful leader, humility is an essential quality of great leadership. The great leaders you've previously worked with likely cared about your opinions, apologized when they made mistakes, and treated you as an equal – all behaviors demonstrating humility. Humble leaders let their accomplishments speak for themselves, acknowledge their limitations, understand the importance of self-reflection and embrace opportunities for personal growth and development. They don't consider themselves more important than others, they are respectful of others, and they recognize and appreciate others' strengths and contributions.

Humility is an important quality for leaders because it contributes to a host of favorable workplace outcomes. CEOs who demonstrate humility collaborate better with their executive teams, which enables better strategic decision-making and organizational performance.¹ Humble team leaders encourage their teams to be more creative by fostering an environment conducive to sharing information and ideas.² Finally, on an individual level, humble people tend to spend more time considering information that goes against their current opinions,³ which may help them stay open-minded.

In assessing your ability to be humble, ask yourself the following questions:

- Can I apologize to others when I'm wrong or have made a mistake?
- Do I appreciate the skills of my colleagues?
- Would I describe myself as a lifelong learner?
- Do I have good awareness of my strengths and weaknesses?

Ways to Improve Your Humility

Apologize effectively: One of the most important humility-related skills is the ability to admit when you're wrong and to be comfortable with apologizing to others. This can be an especially difficult skill for leaders to develop because it involves showing vulnerability in front of your team. However, you might find that admitting faults and mistakes will help your team trust and admire you more. When making an apology to others, ensure that you avoid saying "I'm sorry if you feel..." or "I'm sorry, but..." because "if" and "but" statements can sound like you aren't willing to take responsibility for the mistake. Instead, start with "I'm sorry *that* I..." and describe your mistake and how believe it affected others.

Acknowledge others' strengths: As the saying goes, "There's no 'I' in TEAM." It's a humbling practice to reflect on the skills that your colleagues bring to work, and to see how you rely on each others' complementary skills to achieve mutual success. Take a moment to reflect on the qualities you appreciate about your team members. For example, perhaps one person's attention to detail balances your preference for big-picture thinking. Next, ensure that you recognize others' strengths by giving "shout-outs." Finally, when you receive praise from someone else, make sure to thank colleagues who made the achievement possible.

Keep learning: Humble leaders recognize that they are not experts in everything. Adopting a curious, lifelong learning mindset can help you to cultivate your humility. During group meetings, try asking others for their input more often, and invite opinions from those who haven't spoken in a while. Try to keep an open mind if your team members introduce ideas that you don't initially agree with. Outside of group meetings, you can learn new skills in training sessions, conferences, or workshops. You can also use resources like [TED](#), [Harvard Business Review](#), and [LinkedIn Learning](#) to continue your professional development.

Consider These Tips to Moderate Your Humility

Effective leaders are able to balance the 11 leader character dimensions rather than focusing on just a few. As you develop your leader character, look for places where strengths may need to be moderated. If you scored a 4 or higher on humility, use the tips below to help you balance the expression of this character dimension.

Be your own cheerleader: Although bragging isn't conducive to strong leadership, excessive modesty isn't a virtue either. Others may not go out of their way to bring up your success, and that might reduce your chances of receiving due recognition or a promotion. If there is an accomplishment you are especially proud of, it is okay to be your own cheerleader. You can bring up your achievements during an update meeting or performance review.

Play to your strengths: Humble leaders know their limits, but they also appreciate their strengths. If your humility is unbalanced and you're overly focused on your limitations at work compared to others, try to play to your strengths by taking the lead on topics that you feel especially knowledgeable and comfortable with. Think about past experiences too where you have really been an asset for your team. These exercises may help you reaffirm your own abilities and identify areas where you can be an exemplary role model for others.

Be humble but decisive: Humility is often mistaken for a lack of self-confidence. Remember that in order to be humble, you do not need to be unassertive or indecisive. Although humble leaders ask for and respect others' input, leaders should also be able to rely on their own good judgment to make the final decision. Especially when time is a concern, or the decision involves a sensitive subject, it may be more appropriate to make decisions on your own without consulting others. Great leaders are decisive, and they can be decisive while still being humble as well.

Resources



[Why Humility Matters in Leadership](#)



[7 Reasons Humility is a Highly Desired Leadership Trait](#)



Develop your humility by taking advantage of SIGMA's [coaching services](#).

Contact SIGMA for more information about leader character.

SIGMA Assessment Systems, Inc.

Email: support@SigmaHR.com

Call: 800-265-1285

References

¹ Ou, A. Y., Waldman, D. A., & Peterson, S. J. (2018). Do humble CEOs matter? An examination of CEO humility and firm outcomes. *Journal of Management*, 44(3), 1147–1173.

² Hu, J., Erdogan, B., Jiang, K., Bauer, T. N., & Liu, S. (2018). Leader humility and team creativity: The role of team information sharing, psychological safety, and power distance. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 103(3), 313–323.

³ Deffler, S. A., Leary, M. R., & Hoyle, R. H. (2016). Knowing what you know: Intellectual humility and judgments of recognition memory. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 96, 255-259.