False Humility: the plague of genuine leadership

"The self does not lie passively in wait for us to discover it"
John Kaag,   Hiking with Nietzsche

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I.   Introduction

Patrick Lencioni's best-selling book, *"The Ideal Team Player,"* describes three essential virtues for an ideal employee; they should be humble, hungry, and smart (1).   This combination, he claims, is a necessary framework for any organization seeking to identify, hire and develop ideal team players, build high-performing teams, or create a culture of teamwork. Lencioni adds that with time, patience, and mentoring; almost anyone can become an ideal and invaluable team player. They just need to be willing to conform.

Employees in many organizations are taught to, and regularly feel the need to conform. Not questioning the status quo is perpetuated. We hear about the need to be able to bring our full selves to work every day. If achieved, this would contribute to a truly inclusive workplace. Unfortunately, organizations consciously or unconsciously urge employees to check a good chunk of their real selves at the door. The price is decreased engagement, productivity, and innovation. These are "the perils of conformity" (2). An underlying unspoken component is that we bring OUR selves to work, not a manipulated, photo-shopped version that we think others want to see. This means being genuine. If you are humble, express your true humility. If you are not, just be yourself - avoid the plague of false humility.

II.   Humble – Humility

Humble individuals display humility. They have a modest opinion of themselves and their relative importance within the organization. They do not have big egos and are not concerned with status. They allow their colleagues to shine, sharing credit and pointing out the contributions and success of others over seeking attention or recognition for themselves. While they appreciate their own accomplishments, they do not esteem themselves above others. When acknowledging the skills and talents they bring to their team, they do so without boasting.

They actively listen to others so as to understand, rather than simply waiting to respond. They recognize they are not the smartest in the room and freely admit they do not have all the answers.

What happens if someone is humble, but without also being hungry and smart? Lencioni worries that these individuals might be too "nice," and so may be prone to not getting much done. On the other hand, he adds, if you are hungry and smart, but not humble, you know how to present yourself as a well-intentioned colleague; all the while looking out only for your own needs. Then, by the time the team figures it out, people have already been manipulated.

Generally speaking, organizations seek to hire and promote those who lead effectively, but do not seek the spotlight (3). Yet, simply hiring for humility limits development of diverse groups; necessary for optimal performance to solve complex problems. We need people around that will challenge us; people who think differently than us and force us to consider different viewpoints. We need new people, from new places; people that can bring new perspectives (4). Being humble is a great virtue, but creative and innovative employees with fresh ideas are what make organizations truly special.

There is, of course, a limit to the range of tolerable and acceptable workplace behaviors, especially in the healthcare setting. Toxic employees and toxic workplace behaviors will erode the "customer" experience (5). In fact, in many cases, it may only take one such person to create a noticeable negative impact (6). Humble leaders have been shown to create healthier and more effective organizational cultures, do better at developing their employees, help boost team morale, and improve job satisfaction and performance. They also decrease the frequency of counterproductive, toxic, and destructive behavior (7).

With these potential consequences of a bad decision, search committees struggle to prospectively identify who will do a good job, and who may not. As is the situation in so many organizations these days, search committees tend to make the conservative choice - they simply hire from within (8). This "in-breeding" will further erode efforts at creating a diverse team.

III. False humility

True humility displayed by humble employees is a noble endeavor for building a dynamic team. However, in an effort to keep a big ego in check so as not to appear egotistical, one can easily overcompensate. We are left with false humility; a socially acceptable way to indirectly express our ego. This is pride, and a belief of superiority to others, but in disguise. It is intentionally devaluing one's self and one's contributions in

order to appear humble. By deflecting the praise that we think we deserve, we search for compliments to draw attention to ourselves. We falsely portray helplessness or lack of power to gain sympathy and support. Self-deprecating and belittling comments and humor is another tactic. To appear humble, we draw attention to ourselves through false humility and false modesty to garner accolades, praise, and admiration (9) (10).

IV.   To Combat False Humility

The first step in combatting false humility is to have the presence of mind and the self-awareness to realize that you are guilty of false humility. Next, try to simply express genuine thanks for the people and the circumstances that contributed to your success. Acknowledge those that inspired you and helped you achieve your goals (10). Generally speaking, people do not rise to the pinnacles of their careers without the help of others. Accept praise graciously and authentically --- simply say "thank you, I appreciate the recognition." Do not be overly concerned with what others might think of your accomplishments. Rather, focus on others, and the recognition will come (9).

V.   Conclusions

Genuine or not, humility seems to be universally regarded as a desirable leadership quality. Humility enables leaders to understand their limitations, account for others' opinions, acknowledge mistakes, be self-critical, change, and get better. And yet, it often seems many leaders exude arrogance rather than modesty or humbleness. While we value humility, we are at the same time seduced by confidence, and blinded by charisma. We equate arrogance with strength, competence, and ultimately - leadership.

It is challenging to evaluate qualifications, expertise, experience, and soft skills if you are not yourself an expert in the given field. The result - we select leaders based on confidence rather than competence. We do not get humble leaders and when leaders lack humility, they are more prone to blaming others and to overestimating their own talents (7).

History is replete with extraordinarily successful people; many not necessarily known for their humility. They challenged the system, they disrupted the status quo, and they achieved greatness. They probably made some enemies along the way. Some would argue - that is the cost of doing business. After all, they say that you cannot make an omelet without cracking a few eggs.

Of course, in the healthcare setting, patients are not overly concerned with whether we are humble, express humility, or have a big ego. The priorities for engaged patients is being cared for by creative,

innovative, superbly trained, highly skilled, compassionate, and empathetic providers. These are the characteristics that should be prioritized when recruiting and developing a healthcare team. These are the employees that will ensure the best patient outcomes, the greatest competitive advantage, and a sustainable business model for your organization.

False humility is a deceptive, dishonest, manipulative, self-serving façade. It masks narcissism and arrogance. Having power while at the same denying it, or insisting it is inconsequential, is itself an expression of power. In these circumstances, the enactment of humility becomes more important than the true embodiment of it (10).   One of French author and classicist, Francois de La Rochefoucauld's prescient maxims includes; "Humility is often a false front we employ to gain power over others (11).

Leaders must combat the competing demands of a culture and society that values humility, and the perceived need to engage in self-promotion and managing impressions in order to achieve career advancement. Discussing your accomplishments, value, and skills while avoiding arrogance is a daunting challenge (12). Delicately balancing this dichotomy is an art form that must be mastered by genuine, honest, transparent leaders; leaders guided by integrity. As British scholar of classics, Professor Edith Hall describes in *Aristotle's Way;* "becoming conscious of our skills, talents, and aptitudes (dynamis) and then using our resources to make the most of them (energeia) is the foundation of living a good life (13).

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