



Following is an excerpt from "The Imperfect Leader: A story about discovering the not-so-secret secrets of transformational leadership", a manuscript for publication by Davis Taylor.

Chapter 13

I believe that the first test of a truly great man is his humility. I don't mean by humility, doubt of his power. But really great men have a curious feeling that the greatness is not of them, but through them. John Ruskin

Several days later, comfortably seated in a quiet corner at Bucks Beanery, George and Josh found themselves immersed in the topic of humility. So far, the conversation had centered on research each had done on the topic in preparation for this meeting.

Continuing the dialogue Josh remarked: "Actually, it amazes me how seldom humility is referenced in current best-selling books on leadership. With the notable exception of Jim Collins,¹⁴ the topic receives at best, only honorable mention – how can something so critical to truly transformational leadership be virtually absent from current writings?"

"I found the same to be true," said George, "very little is to be found on the topic of humility in modern texts on leadership. Perhaps it is because the topic is so misunderstood – perhaps it is because the value itself is so illusive to the current state of mankind. What I found interesting is that that humility's antonym, pride, is frequently referenced"

"Exactly," interrupted Josh, "and pride is frequently mentioned as a good thing, almost as an end unto itself. Isn't it good to have pride? Isn't pride a positive attribute and motivator?"

"It probably depends on which aspect of pride to which you are referring," replied George.

"What do you mean *which aspect*?" asked Josh.

"Well," said George, "I have come to realize there are two distinct approaches to how one might address the concept of pride. The first is in the more positive sense when one says he or she is proud of someone else. For example, parents may say they are proud of a child: What they really mean is that they have admiration for, or kind-hearted feelings toward the child. It is primarily a word used to suggest affirmation and acceptance of the individual.

When we consider pride as an antonym to humility, the meaning is altogether different, and I believe more accurate to the way pride is observable in most human beings. Webster defines this aspect of pride as: *Inordinate self-esteem; an unreasonable conceit of one's own superiority in talents, beauty, wealth, accomplishments, rank or elevation in office, which manifests itself in lofty airs, distance, reserve, and often in contempt of others.*¹⁶ This is pride that is arrogant and

destructive. In fact, I would go so far to suggest that it is *this* pride that is the primary cause of most injustice, societal ills and suffering in the world today.”

“That’s a fairly damning statement,” suggested Josh.

“Perhaps,” George replied, “but let us examine the facts. When you arise in the morning and are greeted by newspaper articles lamenting the escapades of corporate chieftains who have set themselves above the law, above acceptable standards of behavior – those who act as if their corporations exist solely for their benefit, their prestige, their personal convenience, and their advancement – to what vice might you attribute their attitudes and actions?”

“I guess you could say, by definition, that pride causes them to act that way,” Josh said.

“And when government officials faithlessly execute their duties in favor of their own recognition and reward, subjugating the common good with which they are charged for their own acclamation and advancement?” asked George.

“Again, pride is probably the motivation,” answered Josh.

Or, to bring the matter home, if you and Libby were to engage in heated debate over difference of opinion, or if either of you steadfastly refused to relinquish control over a seemingly insignificant matter, what do you believe might be the primary cause?”

“Pride,” Josh replied somewhat meekly, remembering a recent argument with Libby that he had been determined to win.

“Yes Josh, the tragedy of pride is that pride is all about *Me* ... it is about what *I* think, it is about what *I* want, what *I* need. *Me* is a most ungracious individual, demanding control, exacting compliance, desiring recognition, insisting on respect, compelling acquiescence, expecting rewards. The person called *Me* seeks the best position and literally fights for control ... and ironically, feels mistreated and abused if its demands are not met.¹⁵ Think about it Josh, most disagreements among people arise from the clamoring of this narcissist *Me*. And, on a larger scale, most quarrels between communities or nations are instigated by the collective self-focus of a society of *Me*’s.”

“And certainly, as you suggested, the negative impact of pride causes other problems,” added Josh. “Think in terms of the big picture ... think about all the things wrong in the world today – the fact that people are in a desperate search for lives of purpose and meaning, the general lack of compassion and lack of respect between individuals and among various people groups, the inequitable distribution of healthcare, wide-spread poverty, even starvation and famine – all seem to trace their source back to an unhealthy preoccupation with self – back to the issue of pride.”

“An interesting thought,” affirmed George, “tell me more.”

“Well,” continued Josh, “it seems to me that while leaders clearly impact the wellbeing of their organizations, they also profoundly impact the welfare of society as a whole. If a leader, even unwittingly, is fueled by pride and is therefore focused on *self*, inevitably he will fail to create an environment that provides for professional growth and a sense of significance on the part of followers, resulting in followers who merely exist to endure an environment devoid of hope and meaning. Followers will feel their contributions and efforts are all about the leader and won’t be energized and engaged to achieve a higher purpose. The followers then return to their homes with an attitude of apathy, complacency and dissatisfaction which, in turn, infects their families and everyone with whom they come in contact. The repercussions are immense.

And, as I’ve too frequently observed in my own career, self-focused leaders fail to demonstrate sincere compassion and respect. They predictably establish cultures where care and concern for other people is an after-thought and where there’s a general lack of respect for people as individuals. This behavior extends to the way employees treat customers and suppliers and to the way people within the organization relate to co-workers with different points of view, different beliefs, cultures or ethnic groups.”

“I agree with your point,” said George. “And it then becomes clear how pride perpetuates the problems in society today. Pride drives leaders toward self-focus, causing them to concentrate their efforts on ‘what is in it for them.’ As a result, those outside the leader’s circle of self-interest are left to forge for themselves. And when significant numbers of leaders adopt a pride-driven, me-first mentality the result is – despite a world of plenty – a sea of humanity outside the collective leaders’ self-interest is left wanting for even the most basic human needs.”

Josh interjected: “So ultimately, the numerous ills that plague humanity could be resolved if the issue of pride is eradicated! A transformation can occur if the destructive nature of

pride is understood and the secret of humility embraced." Then, more solemnly he added: "If humility is so unappreciated and misunderstood, is there any hope?"

"I honestly do not know," replied George. "What I do know, is that the solution must start with me ... with us. As someone once said, 'we must *be* the change we hope to see in the world.' Perhaps we should start with what we *do* understand about humility – what it is *and* what it is not."

"Why focus on what it isn't?" asked Josh.

"Because," responded George "I believe that if we can address misconceptions about humility, its positive attributes may be more readily embraced."

"I can just imagine asking a confident, self-sufficient, successful group of my prior bosses to define humility," mused Josh. "What they'd probably tell me is that humility has to do with false modesty, poor self image, meekness, self abasement, subjugation, humiliation, or even weakness. Obviously these traits are less than desirable."

"If leaders understand humility in relation to those attributes, is there any wonder it would be avoided at all costs?" suggested George.

"Probably not."

Continuing George said: "And if leaders embrace these incorrect notions of humility – rather than grasp the truth of the concept – does it not stand to reason, they would naturally embrace the false positive of pride?"

"Yes, I can see where they would."

"So then," George elaborated, "given the destructive power of pride, it behooves us to understand and articulate the truth of humility ... thereby providing a powerful and effective alternative to pride."

"What do you see as the power in humility?" asked Josh.

"Well, to begin with," answered George, "it seems to me that humility is not false modesty. Rather, it is a full appreciation of our talents coupled with the realization that our abilities are gifts ... and that these gifts are given for the benefit of others. When others observe us using our talent and ability for their benefit, they naturally respond with loyalty and with their best efforts for mutual achievement. Neither is humility poor self-image. Instead, humility illuminates *counterfeit* aspects of our lives so that we may live authentically to the full extent of our capabilities and effectiveness. True humility enables us to be comfortable with ourselves ... to actually *be* ourselves."

"Continuing with your train of thought," added Josh, "I can see where humility is neither meekness nor weakness. I remember you once stated the Hebrew definition describing humility as *the voluntary descent from rank, dignity or just claims; submission to others in granting requests or performing acts which strict justice does not require.*¹⁷ Given this interpretation of the word, humility is far from weakness – it indicates great strength and confidence on the part of the leader."

"And just think of the impact on others," offered George. "If a leader voluntarily steps aside from position, stature and privilege, the result is not personal diminishment, but rather the opposite: He or she will receive increased respect and admiration as well as increased commitment and sacrifice on the part of the followers."

"So I guess it also stands to reason that humility is not *involuntary* subjugation or humiliation," said Josh. "If I appreciate my talents, live authentically, and voluntarily step-aside for the sake of others, there is no subjugation or humiliation because *I* made the choice – it was not imposed on me."

"Exactly," concluded George, "and, albeit counter intuitive, voluntary submission to humility results in increased leadership effectiveness and superior results – all of which fly in the face of conventional wisdom. Far from being diminishing or dehumanizing, sincere humility enhances the worth of the individual. It also boosts leadership effectiveness and enables operational excellence through improved efficiency, productivity and execution. Ultimately humility enhances the quality of life and provides a platform to positively transform the human condition."

"So," Josh asked, "if humility is the key to organizational excellence and even world transformation, how does a leader know – or how do I know, for that matter – when humility is achieved?"

"In my research I came across a quote by C.S. Lewis," George replied. "Speaking of pride he said: 'There is one vice of which no man in the world is free; which every one in the world loathes when he sees it in someone else; and of which hardly any people ... ever imagine they are guilty of themselves.'¹⁷ In short Josh, one must breach the barrier of self-absorption and embrace certain attributes in order to achieve some semblance of humility.

I believe truly humble leaders are honest with themselves about their abilities, disposition and motives; they are not ambitious for personal achievement, nor are they arrogant or boastful; they are genuinely caring and respectful of others; they are serious in their commitment to better the lives of others; they persevere with a positive, uplifting attitude, even in the face of trials and hardships; they take responsibility for their performance and do not lay blame on others for their failures; and they genuinely appreciate and acknowledge the contributions of others."

"What you're suggesting," deduced Josh, "is that humility greatly impacts the other six values espoused by a Values-based Leader."

Affirming, George stated: "Interestingly, humility has a direct impact. Personal honesty reflects the value of *integrity*; forsaking personal ambition and refusing arrogance correspond to an aspect of *humility*; demonstrating care and respect suggest *compassion*; serious commitment to selfless goals reflect *purpose driven* behavior; perseverance in the face of hardships requires *courage*; personal responsibility equates to *accountability*; and one who genuinely appreciates others demonstrates *gratitude*."

"And obviously," concluded Josh, "it is for this reason that humility, in its full definition, is the indispensable value of a Values-based Leader."

"Yes Josh, Values-based Leaders understand the critical importance of humility," said George. "They understand humility is a vital truth that connects them to others. It is what makes them approachable and allows their dependency on others ... a dependency that causes them to rely on the abilities of others. Humility is the power of understanding that *I can't*, but *we can*. For the follower it actualizes the collective power in community. For the leader it is manifested in the power of the team ... the power of *us*.

While leaders may create strategy, strategy is executed at the base levels of an organization. It is humility that enables the leader to connect with the lowest level of an organization to ensure appropriate execution and achieve desired results. When all is said, it remains true that the one indispensable value of an effective leader is humility."

"And it seems to me," commented Josh, "that if it is genuine, humility is a slow and deliberate process that could take a lifetime."

"How true," agreed George, "how true indeed."



Davis Taylor leads TAI Incorporated, a consulting firm specializing in Values-based Leadership, a leadership philosophy proven to deliver sustainable and extraordinary organizational results. To learn more, or to reserve copies of *The Imperfect Leader* please contact mail@taiinc.com.

Footnotes:

- 14 Collins, Jim *Good to Great* (United States of America: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001).
- 15 Webster, Noah, "Definition of humility," *Webster's Dictionary of American English*, 1828.
- 16 Murray, Andrew *Humility* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2001), Page 163.
- 17 Lewis, C.S., *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1958), Page 94.