



## Leading with a Dab of Humility by Joel DiGirolamo

*"Sally, have you gone soft?" Fred blurted.  
"Never admit to a mistake. You want people to  
think you're weak?"*

*"But Fred, don't you understand? By  
admitting a mistake you show the team that  
you're just like they are, that you're one of them.  
They'll respect you more that way," she retorted.*

Here we see two divergent, yet common viewpoints on the issue of humility. Which view is correct? Let's dig in and find out.

### **Humility**

In 2007 much discussion took place in Lexington Kentucky around the Alltech FEI World Equestrian Games that would be held there in 2010. This was to be the first time this world-class event would be held outside of Europe.

Dr. Pearse Lyons, the president of the title sponsor, Alltech also announced a concurrent multi-day music festival and his hopes for big-name entertainment such as U2 or Paul McCartney. Unfortunately, over time it became apparent that no big-name groups would arrive. As reported in the August 29th, 2010 edition of the Lexington Herald-Leader newspaper, Dr. Lyons did not shy from the issue:

*"I am going to be the first to say that I made a mistake," said Alltech founder and president Pearse Lyons, who initially got music lovers salivating when he floated those and other names. "When I do something, I do it boldly and with passion, and at that time, I thought I could deliver that. But I could not deliver that."*

I asked Dr. Lyons his perspective on humility's role in his leadership style and got this response, "I think the key to humility is that you are but part of the group; you are not the group. Never lose the common touch, whether you are the Janitor or President. By doing this you build trust and rapport with everyone in the group."

We often associate humility with piety or religion. However, humility is in fact a key component of outstanding leadership. Jim Collins, author of the book Good to Great led a research team analyzing 1,435 companies in a search for outstanding companies. Of those, they found many good ones, but only 11 great ones. The great ones had sustained growth above their industry average for over a decade.

As the researchers studied the differences between the great companies and others, two parameters became apparent: their leaders were both humble and fiercely determined to succeed. Forget the rock-star CEOs. These leaders gave credit to their teams and took the blame for any lapses. They also moved forward with steely determination to execute bold strategies, often taking flak from Wall Street analysts and the media in the process.

### **Ego**

On the flip side of humility lies ego. Ego is the sense of self we've created in conjunction with our environment and family of origin. I like to use a model illustrating the spectrum of ego involvement in our lives from humility to self-importance. In the middle of this spectrum we find a healthy ego.



Humility   Confidence   Pride   Self-Importance

### Healthy Ego Spectrum

A healthy ego propels us into the future. It provides confidence for us to lead and to execute bold initiatives.

Ego becomes a problem when we are no longer mindful of our actions and wander over into feeling self-important. It is at this point that a leader runs amok with lavish spending, exhortations, and an addiction to media devotion. Such actions frequently become the downfall of CEOs.

Take the example of Dennis Kozlowski, former CEO of Tyco and his now-famous \$6,000 shower curtain and \$2M birthday party for his wife. He's currently doing time in a New York state correctional facility. And then there's John Thain, head of Merrill Lynch as it struggled for survival in 2008. He spent well over \$1M redecorating his office in the company's Manhattan headquarters.

Individuals in these powerful positions generally do not begin their tenure with such an attitude. As their successes build they frequently feel entitled to excessive perks, justifying them based on the value they've brought to the organization.

The key to maintaining a healthy ego balance is mindfulness, the ability to objectively observe your emotions and reactions as difficult situations arise. If you are able to make realistic observations you should be able to analyze your actions and determine where you are on this spectrum.

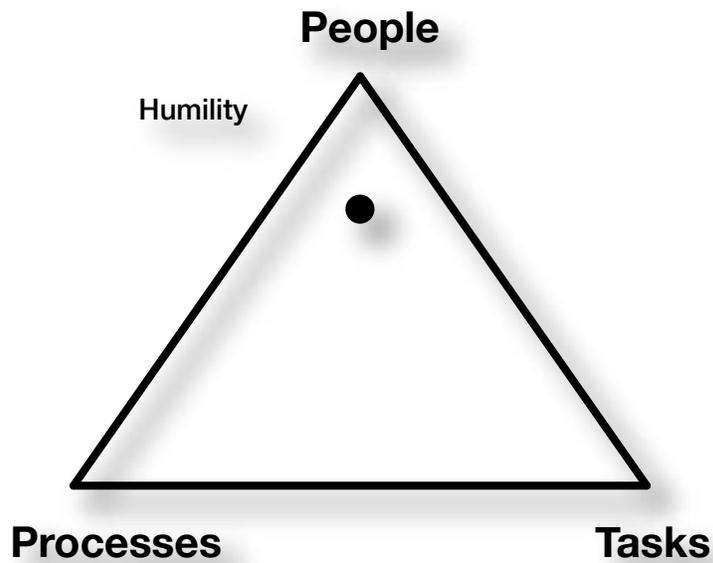
### Power

As our lead-in story illustrates, power plays a role here. Many forms of power exist, including positional power, the power to reward or punish, and influential power. At one extreme, Machiavellianism, or powerful, cynical leadership is the willingness to use force or any other means of coercion to achieve a goal. In this orientation absolute control is viewed as necessary no matter the cost.

On the opposite end of the scale lies influential, or personal power. In this case individuals may be influenced to execute a task based on a simple personal relationship or in deference to someone perceived as an expert.

In most organizations your role as a leader provides you what is called positional power with an attendant ability to reward and punish. When a decision is to be made in your organization it may sometimes be difficult to determine what type of power to use, if any. Empowering team members is always an option, however many leaders are fearful that empowerment will allow team members to make poor decisions which will reflect badly upon them.

As a leader you may face a constant struggle to decide how to influence your team members. Which end of the spectrum is most appropriate in the given circumstance? Several factors fall into play—the impact or importance of the decision as well as the timing of the decision.



### **People, Processes, and Tasks**

The issues of humility, ego, and power are clearly about people, however, your actions as a leader in this realm can greatly affect your team members' processes and tasks. For example, your willingness to empower your team members will allow them to develop their own processes and tasks within the guidelines you set.

Returning to Sally and Fred, it is clear that they are at opposite ends of the power spectrum as well as their orientation to humility. It is your job as a leader to make an assessment of your role in each situation. How much of a role is your ego playing? Are you open to the opinion of others? Are you willing to admit when you've made a mistake?

In the end, remember that you are the leader and your team will respect you more if they feel that you are one of them, another member of the team. The alternative, attempting to maintain an aura of infallibility only sets you upon a pedestal—with farther to fall.



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