

# The leadership principle that makes CEOs cry

*Or cringe. The fortunate ones get how powerful the principle of genuine humility can be.*

BY HARRY KRAEMER

Some cringe, a few roll their eyes, and more than a few cry. These are the typical reactions to the values-based leadership principle that, based on more than 500 presentations I've made over the past five years, evokes the strongest emotional response — genuine humility.

At first glance, this principle appears so benign — a reminder that everyone deserves respect and, regardless of your title or level in your organization, you can't become too busy to help someone else. Then comes the emotional gotcha. Genuine humility yanks you back to where you came from.

Thirty-five years ago, I started out as a junior analyst working in a cubicle I affectionately called “the cube.” (For some people, their “cube” was a call center, a lab desk, or even a car on a sales route.) Back then, I was aware of two types of people. The first were the helpful folks who showed me the ropes and made me feel welcome. The second were those guys (a gender-neutral term) who were so busy trying to be important they didn't have time for anyone else. Back then, I vowed that if I ever became a manager or even a vice president (never dreaming I'd eventually become a CEO), I'd always “remember the cube.” I'd never become one of those guys who didn't have time for anyone else.

Over the years, I've come to know many values-based leaders who exemplify genuine humility. Among them is Rick Lenny, former CEO of Hershey Co. and current chairman of Chicago-based IRI, which provides consumer and retail market data and analyt-

ics. After my speech on values-based leadership to 1,500 executives at the IRI Marketing Summit this spring, I was approached by Rick. “I've never forgotten ‘the cube,’ Harry. Thank you for reminding me why I never should.” He had tears in his eyes.

That's not always the reaction. At Fortune 500 companies and other leading organizations — from Ernst & Young to Aon and AT&T, just to name a few — I've seen some eye rolls from middle managers and executives who equate genuine humility with something “cute” or “nice to do.” Their facial expressions broadcast skepticism that in today's complex and highly competitive world nobody has time for all this “lend a helping hand” stuff.

But they're wrong. Genuine humility is a powerful principle that elevates your leadership and builds teams. For CEOs and board members who are addressing leadership development and succession planning, genuine humility is a valuable criterion for evaluating candidates for their overall leadership potential.

Genuine humility takes the focus off “me” and puts it on “we” as credit is shared with the team instead of hoarding it for oneself. Still, some don't get it, like the mid-level executive who told me, “If I don't take credit for what I do, I'm afraid it will go unacknowledged, and then I won't be given opportunities to take on bigger responsibilities that will lead to promotions and better assignments.” As he saw it, genuine humility would undermine his ambition and hurt his career.

The truth is, you can't be a leader if you don't have followers. And, if

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you are one of those guys who is too self-absorbed to focus on others, no one will want to follow you. Genuine humility allows others to relate to you, because they know you haven't forgotten where you came from.

When I ask executives how they got to where they are today, the two most common responses are “I work very hard” and “I have certain skill sets.” I would argue there are other factors, including luck and timing. In addition, from “the cube” to the C-suite I worked with talented teams without which I would not have achieved success. I also acknowledge a spiritual component, seeing my talents and opportunities as gifts given to me.

Genuine humility, when taken to heart, can be a sobering wake-up call. An executive vice president of a Fortune 100 company was clearly emotional when he admitted to me, “I have not taken the time to remember where I came from. Long ago, that was something I promised myself I would never do.”

Whether it makes you cringe over what you've forgotten or cry about what you remember, genuine humility will enhance your ability to relate better to others. With greater self-awareness and self-knowledge, you will be better able to lead yourself first and then lead others. ■

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