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WORK & FAMILY | By Sue Shellenbarger

The Best Bosses Are Humble Bosses

After decades of screening potential leaders for charm and charisma, some employers are realizing they've been missing one of the most important traits of all: humility.

In an era when hubris is rewarded on social media and in business and politics, researchers and employment experts say turning the limelight on humble people might yield better results.

Humility is a core quality of leaders who inspire close teamwork, rapid learning and high performance in their teams, according to several studies in the past three years. Humble people tend to be aware of their own weaknesses, eager to improve themselves, appreciative of others' strengths and focused on goals beyond their own self-interest.

Among employees, it's linked to lower turnover and absenteeism. These strengths are often overlooked because humble people tend to fly under the radar, making outsiders think it's their teams doing all the work.

More companies are taking humility into account in making hiring and promotion decisions. Researchers are developing new methods of tracking this low-key trait.

Hogan Assessments, a leading maker of workplace personality tests, plans to unveil a new 20-item scale early in 2019 designed to measure humility in job seekers and candidates for leadership posts, says Ryne Sherman, chief science officer for the Tulsa, Okla., company. The scale will prompt people to agree or disagree with such statements as, "I appreciate other people's advice at work," or "I'm entitled to more respect than the average person."

"Most of the thinking suggests leaders should be charismatic, attention-seeking and persuasive," Dr. Sherman says. "Yet such leaders tend to ruin their companies because they take on more than they can handle, are overconfident and don't listen to feedback from others," he says.

Humble leaders can also be highly competitive and ambitious. But they tend to avoid the spotlight and give credit to their teams, Dr. Sherman says. They also ask for help and listen to feedback from others, setting an example that causes subordinates to do the same.

More employers are also screen-



ing entry-level recruits for humility. That's partly because it predicts ethical behavior and longer tenure on the job, says Adam Miller, chief executive of Cornerstone OnDemand, a Santa Monica, Calif., provider of talent-management software.

The apparel company Patagonia begins scrutinizing job applicants for humility as soon as they walk through the door for interviews. Managers screening new recruits follow up by asking receptionists, "How did they engage at the front desk?" says Dean Carter, global head of human resources for the Ventura, Calif.-based company.

If staff members report disrespectful or self-absorbed behavior, "that can be a deal killer," he says. Fostering humility makes employees at all levels feel free to suggest ideas, Mr. Carter says. Humble employees also are more likely to support the company's mission of helping solve environmental problems.

In interviews, he asks applicants to tell him about a time when they experienced a major failure. "If they say, 'Wow, let me think about this, because there are a lot of times when I've messed things up,' that says a lot," he says. "If they have to pick among a lot of humble learning moments, that's good."

Indian Hotels, operator of the luxury Taj Hotels in the U.S. and else-

where, uses Hogan's assessments, among others, to screen potential leaders. "Humility is an emotional skill leaders need to have," says P.V. Ramana Murthy, global head of human resources for the Mumbai-based company. Humility gives rise to deep listening, respect for diverse views and a willingness to hear suggestions and feedback, he says.

The company also tries to instill humility in senior executives through coaching and a nine-month training program.

If you think you know which of your colleagues are humble, you could easily be wrong. Humble people don't flaunt it. And many workers, including arrogant ones, try to be seen as humble and helpful to make a good impression, says Kibeom Lee, a psychology professor at the University of Calgary in Alberta.

Hogan's new humility scale is based in part on research by Dr. Lee and Michael Ashton, a psychology professor at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ontario. After reviewing personality research in several languages years ago, they identified a combination of humility and honesty, or what they called the H factor, as a stable personality trait.

It's marked by a cluster of attributes that appear consistently in some people, including sincerity, modesty, fairness, truthfulness and

unpretentiousness. The same people tend to avoid manipulating others, bending the rules or behaving in greedy or hypocritical ways. The H factor is included in a free online personality inventory they developed.

Workplace researchers often rely on subordinates' reports to assess leaders' level of humility. In a 2015 study of 326 employees working on 77 teams at a health-care company, researchers asked team members to assess their managers' humility, based on a scale including their willingness to learn from others or admit when they don't know how to do something. Team members also assessed their teams' attitudes and performance.

Teams with humble leaders performed better and did higher-quality work than teams whose leaders exhibited less humility, according to lead researcher Bradley P. Owens, an associate professor of business ethics at Brigham Young University.

The performance gains held up independently of how much team leaders exhibited other positive leadership qualities unrelated to humility.

Some challenges may call for a different leadership style. For example, employees facing extreme threats or intense time pressure might perform better when a leader takes a more authoritative, top-down approach, Dr. Owens says.

Humility Viewed Through History

'It is fatal to pretend. I prefer to do anything on the quiet rather than boast about it.'

Indira Gandhi

'After crosses and losses, men grow humbler and wiser.'

Benjamin Franklin

'The greater thou art, the more humble thyself.'

The Apocrypha

'Where there is patience and humility, there is neither anger nor vexation.'

St. Francis of Assisi

However, companies with humble chief executives are more likely than others to have upper-management teams that work smoothly together, help each other and share decision-making, according to a study of 105 computer hardware and software firms published in the *Journal of Management*.

Such companies also are likely to have smaller pay gaps between the CEO and other senior executives. These factors predict closer collaboration among all senior executives, which in turn leads to greater company-wide efficiency, innovation and profitability, researchers found.

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