



# Positive Leadership

## Chapter 3 : Humility

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*“Humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less” - Rick Warren*

## An Introduction to Humility



**Let's start with a key takeaway:** Humility is one of the most underrated yet essential traits of effective leadership.

While traditional leadership models have often emphasized authority, confidence, and decisiveness, research suggests that humility is a key factor in driving leadership success in multiple important areas<sup>1</sup>. Renowned positive psychologists Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman defined humility as the willingness to accept new perspectives “without feeling that the self has been obliterated or damaged<sup>2</sup>.”

In an ambitious and groundbreaking study that extended this work, Bradley Owens identified several defining features of humble leaders, which include:

- **An accurate self-view<sup>3</sup>:** Contrary to popular opinion, humility is not about weakness or self-deprecation. Humble leaders recognize their strengths while also appreciating their weaknesses. This ensures arrogance or overconfidence does not derail their impact or effectiveness.
- **Taking responsibility for their actions:** Humble leaders admit when they are wrong and [model personal accountability](#). Rather than throwing others “under the bus,” humble leaders are the first to be counted.
- **Exemplars of continuous learning:** Humble leaders routinely seek out feedback on their performance from their team members and other stakeholders. They consistently want to know how they can improve. Humble leaders also champion the expression of diverse perspectives and encourage their ideas to be challenged by others. They devote significant time and energy to listening rather than speaking. This creates a psychologically safe and inclusive environment where innovation can flourish.

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<sup>1</sup> Kelemen, T. K., Matthews, S. H., Matthews, M. J., and Henry, S. E. (2023). [Humble leadership: A review and synthesis of leader expressed humility](#), *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, Wiley Online Library.

<sup>2</sup> Peterson, Christopher and Martin E. P. Seligman (2004). *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*, American Psychological Association.

<sup>3</sup> Humility is a special extension of self-awareness, which was covered in the opening chapter. Readers can see the powerful interdependency of these attributes.

- **Shine the spotlight on others:** As opposed to narcissistic or arrogant leaders who crave attention and praise directed towards themselves, humble leaders go out of their way to acknowledge their teams.



Humble leaders go out of their way to acknowledge the strengths, contributions, unique skills, and knowledge of their team members and colleagues. They celebrate the accomplishments of others. In doing so, humble leaders foster teams that are highly engaged and motivated to perform.

In the context of public service, humility is particularly relevant. Public sector executives operate in complex environments with multiple stakeholders, high accountability, and public scrutiny. Therefore, it is essential for public sector executives to be open to feedback, eager to learn from both experts and citizens, and willing to admit what they don't know – behaviours that align with core values of the public service. Ultimately, humility empowers public sector executives to:

- Collaborate more effectively
- Make balanced decisions
- Uphold the public interest

## The Business Case for Humble Leadership

Considerable research highlights the benefits of humble leadership. Humble leadership can:

### 1. Ignite (leadership) ambition in others

While the idea of humility may not seem naturally linked with high ambition, compelling evidence suggests that humble leaders inspire their team members to take on more responsibility, particularly when it comes to leadership<sup>4</sup>. Interestingly, this stems from employees feeling respected and valued within the organization, which in turn, supports the interdependency of these positive leadership behaviours<sup>5</sup>.

### 2. Increase innovation

Humble leaders also spark innovation at an individual<sup>6</sup> and team<sup>7</sup> level. In the study examining the impacts of humble leadership on innovation at the individual level, while the effect was positive for everyone, it was especially amplified when direct reports possessed lower levels of self-confidence.

<sup>4</sup> Lin, X., Tse, H. H. M., Shao, B., and Duan, J. (2024). How do humble leaders unleash followers' leadership potential? The roles of workplace status and individualistic orientation, Journal of Organizational Behavior.

<sup>5</sup> Recall that self-awareness is also tied to humility.

<sup>6</sup> Wang, G., Saher, L., Hao, T. et al. (2024). Unlocking employee innovative behavior: the role of humble leadership, core self-evaluation, and leader-member exchange.

<sup>7</sup> Lei X, Liu W, Su T and Shan Z (2022). Humble Leadership and Team Innovation: The Mediating Role of Team Reflexivity and the Moderating Role of Expertise Diversity in Teams.

Given the profound need for innovation within the federal public service, this finding cannot be understated.

### 3. Heighten levels of employee engagement

Multiple studies have uncovered the strong relationship between leader humility and employee engagement<sup>8</sup>.

### 4. Increase overall leadership effectiveness

A recent meta-analytic investigation<sup>9</sup> into the power of humility showcased multiple important benefits on top of those explored above, including significantly higher levels of:

- Affective commitment
- Affective trust
- Job satisfaction
- Organizational identification
- Psychological empowerment
- Self-efficacy
- Task performance
- Employee voice and speaking up

What makes the results from this meta-analysis especially compelling is that humble leadership independently explains these results and is not indirectly or directly intertwined with another leadership construct (e.g., servant leadership).

## Practical Strategies to Demonstrate Humble Leadership

### 1. Embrace a growth mindset

Through her research, Carol Dweck, one of the most highly respected psychologists in the world, discovered that human beings occupy one of two mindsets at any given moment: fixed or growth. The fundamental difference between these mindsets is their prevailing belief about the possibility of change. As the name suggests, individuals with a fixed mindset believe that their potential and ability are set in stone. If we can't do something today, we will not be able to do it tomorrow, regardless of our efforts.

A growth mindset, on the other hand, looks at our potential through a much more dynamic lens. With focus and practice, anyone can improve, regardless of their starting point. My performance today

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<sup>8</sup> Ma, C., Wu, C.-H., Chen, Z. X., Jiang, X., et Wei, W. (2019). Why and when leader humility promotes constructive voice: a crossover of energy perspective, doi: 10.1108/pr-02-2019-0049; Li, X., Xue, J., et Liu, J. (2021). Linking leader humility to employee creative performance: work engagement as a mediator, doi: 10.2224/sbp.10358.

<sup>9</sup> A meta-analysis involves aggregating the findings across a large sample of independent studies.

does not determine my performance tomorrow. Simply put, with a fixed mindset, we can't get off the ground. With a growth mindset, the sky is the limit.

Not surprisingly, our mindsets have direct implications when it comes to how we respond to various situations. Figure 1 outlines some common examples.

**Figure 1: Summary of fixed versus growth mindset reactions**

	<b>Fixed</b>	<b>Growth</b>
<b>Challenges</b>	Avoid	Embrace
<b>Setbacks</b>	Give up	Persevere
<b>Effort</b>	Pointless	Work hard
<b>Critical Feedback</b>	Deflect/ignore/lash out	Welcome/learn
<b>Success of others</b>	Threat/ignore	Learn/celebrate

In reviewing the chart, it is easy to see the powerful benefits of adopting a growth mindset. It is also readily apparent how several of the characteristics of a growth mindset fall perfectly in line with humble leadership (e.g., welcome and learn from feedback and learn from and celebrate the success of others).

There are several concrete steps executives can take to adopt a growth mindset.

- **Identify our triggers**

Dweck discovered that our mindsets are fluid (e.g., even when we are in a growth mindset, we can easily fall back into a fixed mindset). One of the most effective ways to maximize the time we spend in a growth mindset is to be aware of our triggers.

How to effectively identify your triggers:

1. Write down the people and situations that trigger your fixed mindset.
2. Look for any parallels between the people and situations on your list.
3. Are there similarities in terms of the personality, communication style, etc. of the individuals on your list?
4. Are there any patterns in the situations? Chances are, there will be a common thread.

The next step? Develop strategies for how to deal with these specific individuals and situations in the future.

Ask yourself:

1. How can I guard against falling into a fixed mindset when I encounter these triggers?
2. When I fall into a fixed mindset, how can I course correct?

The heightened awareness and intentionality we can gain from this reflection maximizes our ability to avoid the potential trap of falling into a fixed mindset. This reflection exercise not only enables us to more effectively deal with the people and situations we identified in our immediate environment, but it also empowers us to be more effective when we encounter similar people and situations who trigger us in the future.

- **Recognize our “fixed mindset voice”**

Our fixed mindset voice represents unhelpful statements or stories we tell ourselves about our inability to influence a situation. Not surprisingly, this limits our motivation and desire to take action.

Here’s a practical exercise to better understand your unique fixed mindset voice.

1. Write down the self-statements you most commonly use to express it. Be as specific as possible.
2. Once you have written down each of these statements, think about how you can challenge yourself and reframe them from a growth-mindset. For each statement, ask, "how do I reframe this situation with growth?"

Looking for an example? Rather than saying, “I made a mistake. I am a failure. How could I have missed something so obvious?” reframing from a growth mindset can look like this: “I made a mistake. I am human. What can I learn from this, and what steps can I take to prevent this from happening in the future?”

The more personal we are when capturing our fixed mindset statements, the more likely it is that we will be able to catch them in real time. When they pop into our minds, we can recognize them quickly and change course. Use the counterbalances you identified above to shift your mindset in the moment you hear your fixed mindset voice getting louder. When we recognize and reframe our fixed mindset voice, we discover something exciting. [We have a choice](#). We’re not stuck. We can move forward.

## 2. Reframe failure

Much has been made about the importance of psychological safety, not the least of which is because of its profound connection to fostering an inclusive environment. Amy Edmondson’s groundbreaking work and bestselling book, *The Right Kind of Wrong*, details powerful steps leaders can take to accomplish this.

Although failure is an inevitable part of innovation and growth, it remains one of the most feared and unsettling experiences for many leaders. This can cause people to fake or hide the truth in conversations with their peers and supervisors. Not surprisingly, these errors of omission can cause considerable problems because these issues are left unaddressed.

Garry Ridge, the highly celebrated and respected Chairman Emeritus and former CEO of WD40 Company recognized the perils of a fear-based culture. In particular, he wanted to root out the negative associations and perceived consequences of mistakes. Instead, he reframed them as “learning moments.”

Ridges notes: “A learning moment is a positive or negative outcome of any situation that needs to be openly and freely shared with all people so everyone can benefit from that experience. That’s why I call it a learning moment. It’s a place of freedom.”

Another powerful practice is to remember the acronyms for fail: “First Attempt In Learning” or “From Action I Learn.” These representations are quite beneficial as they remind us that failure is a necessary part of innovation. Nobody does it perfectly the first (or even the third) time. The goal is to continue to learn and embrace the knowledge that comes from the experience, which is key for humble leadership.

### 3. Actively seek and act on feedback

Ken Blanchard famously noted that “feedback is the breakfast of champions.” Feedback is truly a hallmark of humble leadership. A compelling study conducted by Zenger Folkman revealed that leaders who asked for and acted on feedback were rated as significantly more effective in their roles than their counterparts who did not engage in this powerful practice<sup>10</sup>.

Scientific and anecdotal evidence suggests leaders can implement multiple strategies to maximize the chances they will receive valuable feedback.

- **Start with the “why”**

While we may feel this is an unnecessary exercise in stating the obvious, this is not as simple as it seems. In fact, it is an often overlooked and essential success strategy. If we do not clarify the reason behind our asking for feedback, the recipient is left to come up with our unstated motivations. People may wonder if there will be consequences if they are “honest”. They may also wonder if their feedback be held against them. These are all legitimate questions that we would ask ourselves if the situation were reversed (e.g., our supervisor asked us for feedback without providing any context).

Explicitly stating why you want feedback is especially important if you have not (routinely) asked for feedback in the past. If it comes ‘out of the blue,’ your team members/peers may be even more skeptical or concerned about the repercussions.

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<sup>10</sup> Zenger, Jack (2019). Developing Strengths or Weaknesses, Zenger Folkman.

- Here's a potential script you can use to set the stage to receive valuable feedback:

*As part of my leadership journey, I will be asking you for more feedback. In particular, I am asking for your observations on areas where I am doing well and areas where I could make improvements. As a valued team member/colleague, I really respect you and your insights.*

*In order for me to be at my best, I need an outside perspective and to hear from people who experience my behaviour in different ways.*

*So, if in any meeting, project, or conversation, you see something where you feel I am doing a great job or, better yet, can improve, please let me know.*

- **Follow with the “how”**

Even when people know the reasons why we want feedback, they may not know the best way to deliver it. For example, some people prefer to ‘come straight out with it,’ and not ‘beat around the bush.’ Others prefer a more gentle entry point, where you start with something positive before moving into areas for improvement. This ambiguity may prevent people from sharing their observations with you. No matter your preference, let people know how you wish to receive feedback to maximize the chances they will take you up on your offer.

- **Be specific**

In my coaching practice, executives routinely share with me that when they ask for feedback, they often receive blank stares or silence. People respond by saying “everything’s great” or “nothing I can think of at the moment.” They express frustration that, despite their best efforts, they can’t get the feedback they desire.

As we explore how they ask for feedback, I notice that they often ask rhetorical questions such as “Is everything OK?” The challenge with questions like this is that they can encourage a one-word answer. One-word answers are path of least resistance and are the safest option.

Vague and general questions including “How’s everything going?” are also often reported. This question is so broad that it can be paralyzing. It can leave team members and colleagues asking themselves: What should I touch on? Will they be surprised? What if I tell them something they don’t agree with? When overwhelmed by choice, the safest option, once again, will likely be to say “everything’s fine.”



**The most effective questions to ask to receive feedback are open-ended and specific.**

A practical example: At the end of a team meeting, ask “How well did I manage the agenda? To what extent are we clear on the action items?” This asks people to provide details in a specific area.

When it comes to personal feedback, most people have a sense of their potential challenge areas. For example, you may wonder whether you interrupt people in meetings and shut down the conversation. Here's how you can use that to your advantage. Rather than asking "Do you have any feedback for me?" you can share "When I get excited about things, I can jump in and interrupt people. What have you seen?"

Framing the question in this way accomplishes a couple of things. First, as discussed earlier, it focuses attention on a specific area. Equally, if not more importantly, it signals to the other person that you are already aware of this. Answering your question more directly is perceived as less risky.

- **Be more curious when it hurts**

Asking for feedback is a courageous exercise. We open ourselves up to potentially uncomfortable truths about the impacts of our behaviour. This is especially true when the person shares observations that directly oppose how we see ourselves. When outside feedback contradicts our self-view, we can act defensively and respond aggressively. Unfortunately, when we react this way, the chances that someone will share any type of feedback with us in the future is significantly reduced, if not eliminated.

Although it is not easy, the most effective thing we can do when we find feedback difficult to hear is to ramp up, rather than ramp down, our curiosity<sup>11</sup>. Our strong reaction may represent a potential blind spot. For example, thought-provoking research shows that people who are the most confident that they do not have bias are likely to be the most biased. Our refusal to question whether bias can affect us impedes our ability to see where bias could be operating. The same mechanism applies here.

Another major obstacle is that a lot of feedback tends to be wrapped up in labels. My clients often share with me how strongly they react to labels. Imagine for a moment you were called a "micromanager" or "unapproachable." Most people I know would feel quite triggered by that accusation.

Rather than reacting strongly or dismissing the label, approach it like a detective. Ask clarification questions and explore what specific message the person is trying to convey. In the specific examples above, you could ask probing questions like: "Can you give me some recent examples of when I was unapproachable?" or "What behaviours have you seen where I come across as micromanaging?"

- **Seek feedback from multiple sources – especially from people you disagree with**

It is important to actively solicit input from a wide range of people – not just your direct reports and supervisor. Also include your peers, support staff, as well as internal and external stakeholders.

To fully benefit from this exercise, seek out the people with whom you find it most challenging to connect. Often, we ask people who we get along with or like to provide us with feedback because it's safer. The most valuable feedback may come from those who we find it most difficult to work with, as

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<sup>11</sup> An important caveat. This does not apply with mean-spirited, personal attacks that are not related to our words or behaviours.

they may shine a light on challenge areas for us that we do not see because they get reinforced by people similar to us.

#### 4. Shine the spotlight on your team

Humble leaders are not threatened by the success of their team members and colleagues. On the contrary, they celebrate it as if it were their own. They proudly put their team members in the spotlight.

There are numerous ways we can do this in practice. For example, rotate the chair of meetings from time to time. This provides everyone an opportunity to flex their leadership muscles as well as to put their stamp on a meeting or project. Additionally, when a member of the team succeeds, make sure to promote this accomplishment both within the group and throughout the organization.

If team members are subject matter experts or provide important contributions to projects, bring them along to internal senior executive meetings or to meetings with key external stakeholders and let them present their work. When speaking with teams across the federal public service, I have noted that this practice is seen as incredibly valuable and appreciated.

#### 5. Acknowledge mistakes and limitations

Embrace your fallibility and be willing to say the words “I was wrong.” Rather than projecting an image of perfection, humble leaders openly own up to errors and knowledge gaps. When something goes wrong, take responsibility for your part in it – don’t shift blame.

If you don’t have expertise in a certain area, admit it and defer to subject matter experts on your team. Executives often feel pressure to appear competent in everything, but counterintuitively, admitting limitations can enhance credibility. It signals honesty and a focus on the organization’s best interests over one’s pride. [Get more comfortable saying “I don’t know.”](#)

#### 6. Foster a learning culture

Create an environment in which continuous learning is encouraged and celebrated. Leaders can set the tone by demonstrating curiosity and encouraging their teams to develop these skills. For example, support employees’ professional development, and show that you are also investing in your own development. This can include attending trainings, reading widely, or seeking mentorship.

Practical strategies for fostering a learning culture include:

- Host “lunch and learn” sessions – bringing guest speakers or cross-train staff in different roles<sup>12</sup>. Executives could ask their team members which training topics they are interested in.

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<sup>12</sup> Executives may benefit from looking at scheduling training and development when their team is in the office. This reinforces the purpose of in-person work while also allowing team members to interact with and learn from each other. These shared experiences go a long way to creating engagement and connection.

- Ask team members to hold internal learning sessions, where they share a skill or insight with the broader team. Form a book club or watch a series of curated TED talks.
- Ask team members to form a Training and Development Committee.

Each of these intentional actions reinforce the idea of a culture of learning.

## Humility: the quiet strength behind positive leadership

In today's complex and rapidly evolving public sector landscape, humility is not a weakness – it is a **critical leadership strength**. Humility allows us **to lead with clarity, connection, and credibility**.

As senior leaders, your influence extends far beyond your immediate decisions; it shapes the tone, trust, and trajectory of entire teams and departments. Practicing humility doesn't mean lowering your standards or stepping back from bold leadership – it means being open to feedback, sharing credit, owning your missteps, and staying relentlessly committed to learning.



**Key takeaway:** Creating cultures that empower people to speak up, innovate, and serve with excellence, it starts with how we show up at the top. The strongest leaders aren't those who claim to have all the answers – they're the ones courageous enough to keep asking better questions.

For more resources on Positive Leadership, access the full [APEX Positive Leadership Toolkit](#).