

Humility Is a Good Thing

Leaders need to stay humble or else they begin to breathe their own exhaust fumes. Left to their own devices most leaders struggle with being humble. I know I do. Fortunately, I have a wife, daughter and a cat that serve to let me know that I am not nearly as cool as I think. Thank heavens for the dog who adores me regardless of how messed up I am. If you run into a leader that appears to be humble, rest assured there is a spouse and/or cat lurking somewhere in the background. We are not that humble on our own. Also there is that occasional humbling moment of just doing something really stupid. I had one of those recently.

In 2003 I was inducted as an engineering fellow at the University of Alabama. This is a cool honor and the induction banquets are black-tie affairs. I am cheap so purchasing a tux that I am only going to wear once per year is not in the cards; therefore, I rent one. I am also lazy and do not want to go trucking off to some clothing store to be refitted each year so I just ask my daughter, who lives in Alabama, to “get me the same size as last year.” This is an annual ritual. Each year Leigh says, “Hey Dad, are you sure this is going to fit?” And each year I respond, “Yep.” I have been gradually losing some weight since 2003 so each year the tux is getting a little looser. This year Leigh was more emphatic-- “Hey Dad, are you SURE the tux is going to fit this year? You’ve lost some weight.” Of course, I’m sure--Dad’s are always sure.

Well the pants were a tad loose and I probably should have taken some sort of corrective action, but I figured that I could get by one more time before getting refitted. Linda had the good sense to stay in Maryland for this event, so Leigh was my escort. When we parked the car I realized that I needed to off-load additional weight that

might cause a problem, so I asked Leigh to put the car keys in her purse. Here is Leigh’s description of the event as reported to Penny Gladwell, the Chesapeake Chaos Wench (an official title at our company).

“The evening starts with a reception that lasts about an hour. Then we all sit down for dinner, followed by the induction of the new fellows. After that, there are a couple of awards that are given to exceptional faculty and volunteers. The man, who was given the award for his volunteer time, passed away last spring and accepting the award was his widow. It is only appropriate to give her a standing ovation. However, it is only appropriate if your pants fit. Yep, Dad stands up, and pants promptly fall down. I am the only one who witnessed this since we were in the back of the room. But, seeing him bend down to his knees, yank his pants back up, and then look at me like “oh %\$#@&^*” is a priceless moment. It was a very inappropriate time for this to happen as I am truly dying of laughter. I was practically crawling under the table with a napkin in my mouth to stop the laughter. Within five minutes Dad had several people congratulating him on his weight loss as well as a question from the Dean’s wife: “boxers or briefs?” That should be my dose of humble pie for a year or so. It is hard to be cocky and arrogant with your pants down around your knees.

So why is this important? Shouldn’t leaders charge out there with all the confidence in the world and slay dragons? Well it is important that the dragons get slain. Let’s ponder for a moment the best way to do that.

In our model of leadership we state that there are three behaviors plus renewal that leaders should be engaged in. They are disrupting, aligning and honoring. Honoring not only means honoring



others but also honoring purpose. Excellent leaders disrupt and align through honoring. It is difficult to honor others and honor purpose if you are wrapped up around your own ego.

If you are not humble, you are a crappy leader. If crappy leaders are not currently experiencing bad things, then they just haven't been in charge long enough. Many crappy leaders are so clueless they fail to recognize that things are bad. The latter case means they have accepted an environment where they make themselves and everyone around them miserable. The message here is that they need to go out and get a good dose of humility. Being humble does not make you a good leader; it just gives you a fighting chance to become one.

I do not think humility comes naturally. I think we have to work at it on a continuous basis. One of the largest obstacles to being humble is experiencing some success and having other people tell us how great we are. It feels good and it is important to acknowledge nice things that people do and say on our behalf. However, that also means we have to work extra hard to convince ourselves that we are probably not the only reason things went well and that we should not take too much credit for success.

So how do you get a good daily portion of humble pie without having your pants fall down at a banquet? Start with blocks of time where you proactively allow yourself to be interrupted by God and by other people. Try and envision yourself equal or less important than those that approach you—even if you are the top dog. See them as wonderful people that are very capable. What you believe about folks has a huge impact on how they will respond and what you will see. If you are chairman of the board of a company that has a manufacturing facility, dress down occasionally and wander around the plant (alone) looking for that opportunity to be interrupted and helpful. Engage individuals—really engage and listen. Also try this away from work; then stand by for some fun.

Last year a good friend and I went to Yellowstone

to hike the backcountry looking for grizzly bears (we actually found a few). I tried to practice the above discipline on our trip. At the Chili's in Idaho Falls we met the world's worst waiter-- Zack. However, instead of getting angry because of some really rotten service, we began to implement the plan. Surely Zack did something other than messing up orders and forgetting what tables he was supposed to serve. Perhaps he was a student. "Hey Zack, what do you do when you are not waiting tables? Are you a student or something?" "Nope, waiting tables is what I do. In fact, I'm getting married soon." Zack was in trouble and obviously needed some consulting help. It was his lucky day as he was serving two of the world's greatest consultants (see what happens when you leave your spouse and cat behind on a trip? That humble thing goes out the window.). It was a slow night in Idaho Falls, so Jim and I were able to engage Zack without ruining Chili's bottom line. We learned that Zack was quite a fisherman and that being a fishing guide might be a better alternative than dropping dinner trays on people. By focusing on Zack, rather than on our own service needs, we may have helped open some new possibilities and help create an all-star fishing guide. By the way, service also picked up.

Let me attempt to sum up. Excellent leaders are disrupting, aligning and honoring. In order to honor you must be humble. In order to be humble you must stand for something greater than yourself. All of us are good folks and have varying levels of humility. However, those in leadership positions have more responsibility to make sure their egos are kept in check. I firmly believe this does not happen by itself or in a vacuum. A lot of this "being humble" stuff can be strengthened through our faith. So, another good reason to hop on over to your church or synagogue is to improve your leadership potential so you can help make a bigger difference in your organization.

John Covington
President



What's Happening?

1. It can be lonely at the top. That's why more and more executives and business owners are utilizing executive coaches to help them wrestle with the challenges of leading complex systems. We now offer such a service. If this is a service that interests you, please contact us for more information.
2. It has been such a long time since I launched a newsletter that to talk about all of our new faces would be lengthy. When you have a free moment, go to our web site and check out some of the interesting and talented folks we have on our team.
3. Many of you have fussed at me for not sending out a newsletter for nearly a year. Well part of my "excuse" is that I was helping to put the finishing touches on Let's Don't Pave the Cow Paths which put many of your favorite newsletters of the past in book form. Information on how to get your copy is attached, and it will soon be out in audio.
4. We are again offering public courses at our offices in Severna Park, MD. We offer programs on synchronous flow, lean concepts, critical chain project management, communications skills, leadership development and throughput accounting. Check our website for details including dates and prices. We also offer all of these courses in-house.
5. We are happy to announce that we are working with Bishop John Schol and the Baltimore-Washington Conference of the United Methodist Church. Chesapeake Consulting is providing leadership development and coaching support for their **Discipleship Adventure**, which is a major initiative to transform the United Methodist Church in this region.
6. Penny Gladwell actually does work other than her role as Chaos Wench. She recently returned from the FAA training facility in Florida where she added to her OMB 300 expertise. The in-depth training she received dealt with the Office of Management and Budget's expectations for Fiscal Year 08 submissions.
7. I would encourage all to support us in our efforts to help Bello Machre, an organization that provides loving homes for the developmentally disadvantaged. I will be

participating in their Every Step Counts Walkathon to be held June 3rd. Their website is www.bellomachre.org. Please make your checks out to Bello Machre and send them to my attention at Chesapeake Consulting. It's a great cause.

8. Manufacturing Executive/Manager curriculum is something working its way to the front burner with us. I feel the U.S. has been in a crisis for years and it's getting worse with respect to having enough well-trained manufacturing executives and managers. We are building a curriculum around the six areas where these executives need to excel:
 - a. Safety
 - b. Quality
 - c. Service
 - d. Cost Control
 - e. Leadership and Culture
 - f. Regulatory Compliance

Companies that exceed a billion in sales and that have been in the manufacturing business for long times normally have such programs in place, and even many of them don't. Currently ways to get this knowledge is piecemeal at best. Several of you have already expressed some "enthusiastic" interest in this endeavor. We are looking for some people who have the same passion and are willing to help fund this, and, of course, will get some major reductions in fees to participate. Give us a call if this hits one of your hot buttons.

9. If you live in Tuscaloosa County, Alabama, be sure to vote for my daughter Leigh for Tax Collector. She is running unopposed in her party's primary, so she'll be on the November ballot. She is absolutely a better candidate than that sorry rascal running against her.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Chesapeake Consulting, Inc., announces the opening of an additional office in Philadelphia, PA.

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