

LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP:

Reflections on the role of humility in leadership

BY PHIL HANSEN



Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. – Paul to the Philippians¹

As our nation enters another brutal election cycle, a discussion about the role of humility in leadership might seem naïve, outdated or out of touch with reality. Regardless of politics or party affiliation, our elected leaders attack one another with a vengeance, and bombard us with self-serving and self-aggrandizing rhetoric that is anything but humble. I'd like to think that as professional law enforcement leaders, we're better than that. I am certain our personnel deserve something better.

IT'S NOT ALL ABOUT YOU ... IT'S ABOUT THE PEOPLE YOU LEAD

Most outstanding leaders share a number of characteristics that probably won't come as any surprise to most of you. Intellect, adaptability, strength of character, a solid ethical foundation, and a passion for the mission are all traits that easily come to mind. I'd like to submit that humility should have an equal place among those other important qualities.

When I speak of humility in a leadership sense, I'm talking about the characteristic of being humble in the face of our responsibility as leaders; of subjugating ourselves to more important priorities, placing our mission and the well-being of our personnel above our own ego and self-interest.

Humility should never be associated with weakness. A humble leader can also be strong, courageous,

self-confident and assertive. But humble leaders don't count themselves as more important than others. They display a willingness to serve the very people they lead. They have the strength to admit when they don't have all the answers, the honesty to acknowledge their mistakes, and the dignity to apologize when appropriate.

RESPECT BEGETS RESPECT

Humble leaders realize that they are dependent on subordinate personnel for the success of their mission and ultimately, for their own accomplishments as the leader. The overall success of an organization (or team) relies on mutual trust and respect between all levels, and the best way to display our respect and build trust with others is to give them our full attention and listen to what they have to say. Listening lays the foundation for trust and for mutual respect.² Humble leaders listen, while arrogant leaders do all the talking.

Arrogance is the antithesis of humility, and it usually leads to a leader's undoing. It's far too prevalent

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in our world and it is exemplified by those who reject input, demean others, and choose courses of action that are best suited to advance their own personal interests. While humility earns respect, arrogance causes resentment, creates needless animosity, and undercuts the leader's authority over time. It may even result in the creation of powerful enemies and widespread turmoil within the organization.

Think about a really good leader you've worked for that you personally admire. Whose success did they appear more concerned with, yours or theirs? Did they constantly order you about, or did they take time to listen to your concerns and provide guidance? Finally, did they tend to create more work for you, or did they remove obstacles from your path and allow you to do your work to the best of your ability? The best leaders spend a majority of their time working in the interests of the people they lead.

HUMILITY AND THE CREDIBILITY PARADOX

Many leaders feel the need to validate their position by constantly exerting their authority and trying to demonstrate superior knowledge to subordinate personnel. This is particularly prevalent in inexperienced leaders who are somewhat insecure in their new roles. They see themselves primarily as senders of information, persistently giving orders rather than also listening and acting as facilitators and receivers of information. Some feel pressured to know everything and act as though they always have the right answer, which only re-

sults in the erosion of their credibility because after all, none of us always has the right answer.

In my experience teaching and serving in leadership roles, I've found that admitting when I made a mistake or don't know something, or apologizing when my performance falls short of expectations, actually serves as a source of tremendous credibility. That's what I mean by humility and the credibility paradox: The harder you try to enhance your image by pretending to have all the right answers, the more you damage your credibility. In the worst case scenario, you may even undercut your authority by damaging your reputation for integrity. Your personnel don't expect you to be perfect, but they do want you to be honest with them. I think this is especially true in the law enforcement arena, where our personnel are particularly good at seeing through swagger and false bravado.

PARTING THOUGHTS

I once had an instructor who said, "The first half of life is about success, and the second half is about significance."³ As I've aged, I've found there's a good deal of truth in that statement. I think I'm a more effective leader than I may have been as a young man because I give less consideration to how my decisions might affect me. I try to remain focused on what is really most significant. By that, I mean our mission to protect and serve the community while preserving the mental and physical health and well-being of the tremendous people I work with.

Looking back at my essays on leadership, they all touch on at least one of two primary themes. One is honoring and adhering to our core values as law enforcers and defenders of our Constitution. The other is consistently recognizing the tremendous obligation we owe to those we lead, placing their interests above our own. While reading the most recent book from General Jim Mattis, I was struck with how succinctly and eloquently he put those two same principles into words. "Leaven your professional passion with personal humility and compassion for your troops. Remember: As an officer you need to win only one battle — for the hearts of your troops. Win their hearts and they will win the fights."⁴

All of us engaged in this noble profession are blessed to be a part of something that's more important than ourselves as individuals. As leaders, we're further honored with the responsibility of watching over the fine men and women with whom we share that blessing. At day's end, we should humble ourselves and give thanks that we were granted such an opportunity to serve.

ENDNOTES

1. The Holy Bible, Philippians 2:3, English Standard Version
2. For more on the importance of listening in leadership, see *Leadership by Design: Tools for Leading and Active Listening, The Tactical Edge*, Spring 2016
3. Dr. Rick Cully, University of Southern California, April 2, 2010
4. Jim Mattis, "Call Sign Chaos" (Random House Books 2019), P. 13.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Phil Hansen is chief of police for the Santa Maria (CA) Police Department. Prior to his service in Santa Maria, he retired as a captain from the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department with 36 years of service. Most of his work was in the field of tactical operations and critical incident command, including 13 years as a full-time SWAT sergeant/team leader and six years as the SWAT lieutenant/team commander for SEB. He was an elected member of the NTOA board of directors for 20 years and was chairman of the board from 2008 to 2013; he now serves as a director emeritus.

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