



# It's all about ME

*It's Time People Recognized Arrogant Leaders  
Leave their CEOs Vulnerable*

by **Stephen Xavier**

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Once upon a time – not long ago – inflated egos, characterized by arrogance and greed, dominated America's most powerful organizations. Today, that is changing. Corporate leaders are beginning to realize how the absence of humility leaves a company far more vulnerable than does its presence.

What does humble behavior or humility look like? Webster's Unabridged Dictionary lists the first definition of humble as, "not proud or arrogant; modest: to be humble although successful". In a real world application, a Senior Manager of Leadership and Organizational Development at Disney Consumer Products, David Yudis says, "Humility shapes company culture. There are a lot of BIG egos in large global organizations, and justifiably so given the achievements of many different individuals. But, the way these egos are managed influences which values become instilled in the workplace."

Although arrogance may still have a place in business, that place no longer defines an organization's character. Increasingly, attention is now focused on humility and the overriding benefits it can bring.

## **The Arrogant Executive**

If there were a meter to gauge humility in an organization, most workplaces wouldn't test high in terms of its practice. In fact, corporate America is in short supply of humble executives. The question is "Why?" One reason is because many business schools are famous for breeding arrogant graduates who believe their degrees automatically guarantee them a rapid climb up the corporate ladder. These individuals tend to overestimate their smarts, despite their glaring lack of substance from experience. False security in the positions they hold, mixed with a toxic level of fierce competition, ultimately leads to their inability to weigh competing demands. Regrettably, the organization ends up facing unwarranted risks that only get worse if the gap

in management's lack of knowledge versus actual experience isn't eventually addressed.

In addition, companies often perpetuate the problem by promoting individuals into higher management positions even though these executives are often ill-suited for the job of managing their teams. Nevertheless, unless confronted and coached, they continue to exhibit a pompous attitude because they have achieved some level of success and don't see a need to change behavior. Let's face it. To date, their current way of thinking and behaving got them where they are today.

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These distorted patterns are one reason many executives get stuck in the 'fake-it-until-you-make-it' syndrome, which is often the point at which an executive coach is brought in. Clearly overburdened by job responsibilities, misplaced executives

who go unchecked will almost certainly hit the wall hard in terms of their own limits with experience and knowledge. How long can they protect or hide their weaknesses through their egos, forcing them to lose sight of the opportunities in their positions that really matter? No one knows, but it's always just a matter of time until their weaknesses are exposed.

Really, the answer lies in senior management's ability to see and address the problem, often through the help of a seasoned executive coach. Working as an objective intermediary, executive coaches help senior (and not so senior level) employees spin humility from arrogance and puffed up egos. They do this by adding substance through a thoughtful, strategic approach to the particular executive's development.

## **The Humble Executive**

An old Chinese proverb reads, "Arrogance invites ruin; humility receives benefits." Today, this philosophy's popularity is growing by leaps and bounds. Ego-driven executives are no longer acclaimed, and the corporate

landscape is ripe for humility to take its shot at a secure place in American business. One needs only to look at the past year's business pages to see them chock-full of scandals led by so many high-profile executives. Often the public-at-large was more stunned at the arrogance than the acts committed; blatant acts of greed, mismanagement and lack of accountability are, of course, the extremes here, but they all had to start somewhere.

To show humility is to exhibit one's strengths, as well as one's weaknesses. It's usually very easy to spot humble executives because the trait is so apparent in general demeanor. Humility shines through in admirable ways. For instance, humble executives are the individuals who know when to volunteer, step up and take on a challenging task. Yet, conversely they know just as definitively when to decline a challenge that is out of their reach or scope due to its potential for negatively impacting their ability to perform effectively. Mature decision-making like this comes from intimate knowledge of their limits. Disney's Yudis agrees and further adds the six signs he thinks define the presence of humility in an executive:

- Create open communication channels
- Willingness to improve as an executive
- Recognition of others when acknowledged for success
- Self-disclosure
- Introspection
- Communicating a life purpose that is driven by more than financial return

### **Humility is the Cornerstone of Effective Leadership**

Today, a strong case for humility in the workplace is more likely to take hold than it would have ten years ago. Although arrogance is still very alive in business,

it is now recognized as one of the primary causes for America's current economic woes. Unfortunately it's not always easy for companies to determine the best place to isolate their arrogance – isolate being the key word. In truth, arrogance serves companies in situations where a dose of stubborn pride is needed, like when it's time to market an unpopular idea, or when unreasonable optimism is required in order to move forward on a risky deal.

Arrogant executives do have their place in corporate America, just not pervasively, nor in positions where different groups of people count on them for their satisfaction. Similarly, overbearing pride doesn't really work in cases where projects require constant collaboration and acknowledgment. Circumstances like that call for solid leaders who know how to demonstrate humility. This approach translates into management that is willing and able to trumpet the successes of their people, unafraid to show their individual strengths and overall contributions to the organization's success.

As employees develop a better understanding of the importance of humility, they'll recognize its value. Managers who support their own teams demonstrate humility by understanding these are the people who have been hired to get the job done and take the steps necessary to help them succeed in every way possible. When managers show their support in this way, they are viewed by employees as not only approachable, but motivating. These are the managers for whom employees want to understand their needs, wants, styles and preferences.

### **Humility Grows the Corporation**

Very few experts tout the importance of humility as a key leadership characteristic – but the time is fast approaching when they will. Soon the modus operandi for reaching success won't be aggressive tactics and the kind of behavior usually associated with Type-A personalities. Executives who can learn to modify their mindset and behavior will join the growing number of successful corporate leaders who now know that to practice humility is to breed long-term success. ■

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