Humble Leaders

What is leader humility? Is leader humility in Singapore the same as elsewhere? How much do Singaporeans value humble behaviour from their leaders? SMU Professor Gary Greguras investigates.

AsianScientist (Feb. 26, 2015) - By Sim Shuzhen - Business magazines, career development courses and self-help books abound with advice on what it takes to be a great leader. To a certain extent, these sources provide information that may seem like common sense, because often-cited qualities such as confidence, honesty and the ability to communicate are characteristics that people generally admire, and by which they are influenced.

However, for researchers who are interested in understanding and conceptualising leadership, such qualities are often nebulous and poorly defined. Given that work cultures vary widely across countries and business settings, we do not know if critical leader qualities are universally applicable.

Professor Gary Greguras from the Singapore Management University (SMU) Lee Kong Chian School of Business studies leader humility, a characteristic that is commonly mentioned as critically important for leaders to be effective.

Historically, humility has occupied a prominent position in philosophy and religion, and is widely believed to have a strong impact on employees and businesses. Despite this, humility suffers from a lack of conceptualisation, thus making it difficult to study.

"For example, humility has been used synonymously with virtue, forgiveness, honesty, modesty, empathy, low self-esteem and integrity. In addition to this lack of clarity, humility also has been defined at times as a personality trait, a value, an orientation or a virtue," he notes.

Humility in an Asian context

While there have been recent efforts to define leader humility in more concrete terms, these have yet to be applied or tested in a non-Western context. To address this issue, Professor Greguras collaborated with a team of researchers, including SMU colleague Assistant Professor Michael Bashshur and Senior Research Associate Michael Daniels from the Human Capital Leadership Institute in Singapore.

"Many popular books on leadership mention humility and it is a topic that often arises in conversations about effective leadership. In addition, many people in Singapore, including my students, would often note how much more important leader humility is in Asia than in the West," he says.

Professor Greguras and his team have conducted a series of studies to define leader humility in Singapore and to examine its impact on employees in terms of job attitudes, job performance and the quality of relationships employees have with their bosses. The aim of this research is to understand what leader humility is in an Asian context and to what extent it matters.

The process of translating people's thoughts about humility into a formal definition, however, was not without its challenges.

"Our respondents were all familiar with the term humility, but often struggled to articulate what it represents," says Professor Greguras.

To conceptualise humility, the team carried out extensive interviews and surveys with people from different managerial levels, asking open-ended questions such as "What behaviours do you associate with humble leaders?" and "Does leader humility mean the same thing to Singaporeans as it does to non-Singaporeans?" Participant responses were parsed into individual statements, which were then sorted into categories that best captured the content of these statements.

The team learnt that leader humility, as it was perceived in Singapore, consisted of the following nine dimensions: having an accurate view of self; recognising followers' strengths and achievements; modelling teachability; leading by example; showing modesty; working together for the collective good; expressing empathy and being approachable; showing mutual respect and fairness; and mentoring and coaching.

Having such a detailed, multi-faceted definition now provides the possibility to train or develop leader humility, highlights Professor Greguras.

"This is important because our research showed that leader humility relates to a host of positive employee outcomes, including increased job satisfaction, increased organisational commitment, higher quality leader-member relationships, increased job performance and increased organisational citizenship behaviours."

Do people all respond similarly to humble leaders?

To complicate matters, Professor Greguras and his team also found that not everyone responded equally to leaders who are humble. One factor that affected their responses was power distance—the extent to which people (or societies) are willing to accept inequalities in the distribution of power.

Power distance shapes an individual's views of how people on different rungs of power should interact. Individuals who are higher on power distance orientation believe that authority figures should be respected and deferred to, while individuals who are lower on power distance orientation value a more open and equal relationship between bosses and subordinates.

> "As such, those who may not expect their leaders to be humble actually respond more favourably when the leaders are humble," he explains.

In addition, these researchers also observed that individuals who were more neurotic (a personality trait characterised by anxiety, fear and worry) did not respond as favourably to a humble leader.

The challenge of measuring and increasing leader humility

One challenge that Professor Greguras and his colleagues faced during their studies was figuring out how to accurately measure humility, especially because self-reporting in this case would be difficult to interpret.

> "For example, if we ask a supervisor whether he or she is humble, and she or he says yes, is the person really humble?" he clarifies. Maybe not. But on the other hand, given that self-awareness is part of the team's definition of humility, it may very well be true.

To get around this, the researchers often use reports from a person's colleagues or subordinates in place of self-reports to measure leader humility.

Professor Greguras is optimistic that findings from these studies will eventually allow the team to develop programmes to increase leader humility.

> "One intervention could be having multiple sources (peers, subordinates, supervisors) evaluate the target on the nine humility dimensions. The target could then compare self-ratings to other ratings, and discrepancies may be highlighted. These discrepancies often increase self-awareness and may lead to behavioural change, which in this case, may result in increases in leader humility," he explains.

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