



Humble Learning

Thoughts on leadership
by Karl Pister



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My topic today has its genesis in an experience I had last Friday. As I have mentioned multiple times, I work with amazing people. People that inspire and teach me.

The physician I was speaking with, a superb surgeon, was talking about 'humble learning'. When I asked him what he meant by that term, he spoke about several situations where he will intentionally ask those that might have a different perspective, "What would you do differently"? Some of these situations were professional. Some of these were personal. This is a person, that, to emphasize, could easily be seen as extremely successful without asking anyone for their input.

Additionally, he spoke of being able to go to another surgeon within the organization for insights on medical situations. I happen to know this surgeon also. Truly a renowned individual and professional. Honors from multiple institutions around the world.



What happens in these consultations? Perhaps just a perspective? Perhaps seeing things through a different set of eyes? Perhaps a specific suggestion of moving a suture here, or retracting something just a little bit more there? Some things were alluded to, but I can only imagine the details, since I am not privy to the conversations.

However, what excites me, as a fanatic learner, is to think of the combined brain power of decades of surgical experience and medical expertise creating an entirely different and higher perspective of learning! This is what keeps people at the peak of their performance and creativity.

A key question was noted: Are you able to put aside your ego for the opportunity to learn?

And such learning can come from various levels.

Want some further thoughts on this?

Clayton Christensen, once noted by *Forbes* as one the most influential business thinkers of the past 50 years, was the seminal author on disruptive technologies with his groundbreaking book *The Innovator's Dilemma*, first published in 1997.



The author of several books, many HBR articles, and the founder of four companies before his untimely death from a long battle with cancer earlier this year, he had earned all the accolades of success. However, in a commencement address to the Harvard Business School in 2010, he said the following:

"It's crucial to take a sense of humility into the world. By the time you make it to a top graduate school, almost all your learning has come from people who are smarter and more experienced than you: parents, teachers, bosses. But once you've finished at Harvard Business School or any other top academic institution, the vast majority of people you'll interact with on a day-to-day basis may not be smarter than you. And if your attitude is that only smarter people have something to teach you, your learning opportunities will be very limited. But if you have a humble eagerness to learn something from everybody, your learning opportunities will be unlimited. Generally, you can be humble only if you feel really good about yourself—and you want to help those around you feel really good about themselves, too."

For you as leaders, can you re-read that last line: ...and you want to help those around you feel really good about themselves, too.



These words from a laser-focused, results oriented, brilliant mind that recognized the business imperative of the personal and relational aspect of leadership. You know that I don't espouse a warm, fuzzy, everyone-gets-a-trophy, type of feeling good. Instead, a strong and focused approach of casting a vision, knowing the needs, delivering on those needs, and showing appreciation, concern, and support for your people-type of leadership. A 'leaders eat last' type of person.

But what do untrained leaders, or ego-centric leaders do?
Read on:

"When we see people acting in an abusive, arrogant, or demeaning manner toward others, their behavior almost always is a symptom of their lack of self-esteem. They need to put someone else down to feel good about themselves."

Such incredibly wise words to implement, and avoid, as leaders.

Some key questions to summarize with:

1. Who do you look to for learning?



2. Where would you say you are limiting yourself?
3. How can you expand your learning network?
4. How much is your ego playing into your decisions?
5. What do you need to do to improve your learning?
6. What are you doing so that your people are prime learners?
7. How are you promoting 'humble learning' for yourself and for your people?

A lot to think about.





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