

The Ego of Success...Numbing Humility (Part 2)

Great leaders are humble.

But humble leaders are hard to find because success has a way of numbing humility.

Why is it hard to find humble leaders today?

1. Success breeds success and infallibility

“A CEO can do no wrong. The boss is always right.”

How do we get these perceptions?

With success after success, the CEOs reckon that they are infallible. The CEO becomes larger than life. That’s why leaders find it difficult to be humble.

Success is a good servant but a bad master.

We are reminded of Lord Acton’s warning that “power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” No CEO’s power is truly absolute but the corporate CEOs and their employees often create the illusion. They nurture a culture of flattery and make them feel like ‘god.’

2. Success has high powered connections

No one will dispute that in today’s business environment, we need connections. Cultivating this kind of connection is both necessary and dangerous because it places CEOs in touch with the world of extremely heavy perks and a great deal of status, without any normal checks and balances to keep them accountable.ⁱ

Connections sometimes make us choose our interactions. As one business person suggests, “The only way you’ll get anyone to participate is to guarantee they’ll be in the company of someone who they feel is more important. If there’s status, they’ll help you; otherwise, not.”ⁱⁱ To put it bluntly, ‘No status, No access.’

These connections tend to feed into the CEO’s ego and further isolate them from uncomfortable common human existence. They belong to the *avant garde* rather than the *hoi polloi*. Subsequently, leaders lose touch with the realities of the common. They forget their roots.

3. Ego is two-edged sword

This is the dilemma of leadership. As Laura Nash, former Harvard professor explains, “A person needs a certain amount of ego, or self-confidence, in order to have the stability, decisiveness, ambition and independence of mind to be an effective leader....So the problem with ego is not with *having an ego* but with losing one’s proper perspective.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Ego has many bright sides: It brings drive, it gives excitement and it provides a sense of satisfaction when things went well.

It has many dark sides as well: It needs to be massaged, makes us feel that we are bigger than we are and finally, it leads to self-aggrandizement and pride.

We lose perspective when CEOs develop a hyper-inflated self-regard and a deflated regard of others and their contributions.

4. Clinging to and making success permanent

Power, the high life, and the lifestyle of the CEOs have an intoxicating effect. CEOs are made to feel that they can't live without them. They create a deepening and insatiable desire to make them permanent.

Jim Baker, the former US Secretary of State, sounded this warning in a conference, "Someone asked me what was the most important thing I had learned since being in Washington...I replied that it was the fact that temporal power is fleeting." He recalled driving through the White House gates and noticing a man walking alone down Pennsylvania Avenue. Baker recognized him to be someone who had held his position in a previous administration.

"There he was alone – no reporters, no security, no adoring public, no trappings of power. Just one solitary man alone with his thoughts. And that mental image continually serves to remind me of the impermanence of power and the impermanence of place."^{iv}

Richard Ferris, former president of United Airlines, says, "The major failure you make is when you feel success is achieved." Tom Peters mentions this frequently, "If it ain't broke, it soon will be."

5. Success make us self-reliant

Self-reliance is both a virtue and a vice.

We are often told: In this dog-eat-dog world, don't depend on others. If we don't help ourselves, no one can help us. Hence, the necessity of self-reliance.

Self-reliance is a plus because it helps us accomplish our economic objectives, teaches us to be creative and to channel the commitment of others to a common purpose in the organization.^v

On the other hand, self-reliance can tempt the CEOs to be too confident of their own judgment, to fail to consult others or become reluctant to admit their own mistakes. Tom Phillips, former Chairman of Raytheon, identified ego (in the sense of unquestioning self-confidence) as the number one ethical problem of CEOs.^{vi}

It is for all the above reasons that humility is a rare commodity among successful leaders today. There is an enormous difference between success and great leaders. Great leaders recognize their vulnerability but successful leaders may not.

Leadership is about keeping ego in check, creating self-confidence to take risks, handling failures, and accepting short-term sacrifices for long-term values.

One way of fighting the delusions of ego is to have a strong sense of accountability. One of the safeguards for the CEOs is to give permission to be held accountable.

Leaders need to recognize that power does corrupt. And absolute power corrupts absolutely!

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ⁱ Nash, L.L. 1994. *Believers in Business*. Thomas. Nelson Publishers. Nashville. USA.

ⁱⁱ Nash, L.L. 1994. *Believers in Business*. Thomas. Nelson Publishers. Nashville. USA.

ⁱⁱⁱ Nash, L.L. 1994. *Believers in Business*. Thomas. Nelson Publishers. Nashville. USA.

^{iv} Nash, L.L. 1994. *Believers in Business*. Thomas. Nelson Publishers. Nashville. USA.

^v Nash, L.L. 1994. *Believers in Business*. Thomas. Nelson Publishers. Nashville. USA.

^{vi} Nash, L.L. 1994. *Believers in Business*. Thomas. Nelson Publishers. Nashville. USA.