

OPINION

LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP



By Fusi Akinkugbe

Humility and Indian-born CEOs

they are 'below' them. Humility is important for leaders in every sphere. It shows that you acknowledge that you are not more important than the purpose you are meant to pursue and those you serve.

How does humility work to make leaders effective?

In his celebrated book 'Good to Great', Jim Collins addresses the challenge a manager has on his or her way to becoming a leader. He identified it as being able to make the organisation's success his personal priority, not his own ambition. Such a manager should demonstrate two things: the professional will and the humility to do what is required for the organisation to achieve its goals. Professional will is a determination or resolve to fulfil the purpose and priorities of the organisation. It works with humility because it takes humility to rank the organisation's goals over your ambition.

This blend of professional will and humility has been identified as the reason for the success of Indian-born corporate leaders, as an increasing number of them are CEOs of major international companies globally. The list includes: Sundar Pichai of Alphabet (parent company of Google); Satya Nadella of Microsoft; Ajay Banga, Executive Chairman

(formerly CEO) of Mastercard; Indra Nooyi of PepsiCo (retired 2018); Vasant Narasimhan of Novartis, Rajeev Suri of Inmarsat (formerly CEO, Nokia), and Arvind Krishna, Chairman and CEO of IBM. One study says Indian managers are more successful because

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of: "a paradoxical blend of genuine personal humility and intense professional will." These two things are what Jim Collins identified as necessary for successfully making the transition from being a manager to becoming a leader. It is interesting that an immigrant group has been able to distinguish itself at the highest levels of the corporate world partly through their humility.

Humility should not be misunderstood because it does not mean weakness. These successful CEOs are certainly not weak and could not have reached these heights of corporate success if they were. But they have not vaunted themselves

above their organisations. This is humility. Having a professional will should not pose a conflict for leaders if their motivations are primarily the success of the organisation. Leaders should be ready to subsume their ego to the cause or benefit of the greater good. They un-

objective.

What happens when a leader lacks humility?

Theodore Roosevelt (later President of the United States) came from a wealthy family and entered politics as an elected member of New York's state legislature with the distinction of being its youngest member. Within a short time, he came to prominence gaining a second term, and in spite of his youth was selected as the house Minority Leader. Roosevelt in light of these successes was said to have: 'lost perspective. "His head was swelled"; he became indulgent and self-absorbed.' Despite being counselled by concerned friends about his behaviour, he did not listen to their advice and paid a heavy price for his arrogance. He was abandoned by friends and could not raise support for projects. He

found his influence gone and was unable to accomplish the things he wanted to do. Learning this hard lesson, he saw how important the cooperation of other people was. He changed by starting to help other people, which attracted their help in return. The lessons he learned from his mistakes helped him grow as a leader.

Arrogance pushes those who can help you away, causes your influence to evaporate and hinders you from becoming an effective leader. Unfortunately, we see this here, with many in public positions who have an entitled attitude. One former State Governor is famously remembered for chiding protesting university students by calling himself a 'constituted authority'.

Leadership will test your motives and not just your actions. Will you be able to prove that the pursuit of the organisational goal is what matters to you, irrespective of the capacity in which you contribute? Humility and an intense professional will are a path to effective leadership, and Indian-born CEOs have proved this by consistently getting to the top of the corporate tree. Perhaps there's a lesson for us all to learn here.

Thank you and until next week, let me challenge you to begin to lead from where you are.

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