TEAMWORK

# The Power of Enabling Humility in Teams

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ABSTRACT

By studying the performance of extraordinary teams, we observe the power of humility. Research on individual humility, group humility and team dynamics support these observations and suggest several components of team humility as well as mechanisms via which humility contributes to team success. Humble teams develop a culture which nurtures the primary traits that contribute to their performance: kinship, extraordinary collaboration, professional excellence, and an attitude of inquiry. Leaders can contribute to the development of humble teams by modeling their own humility and exhibiting a strong professional will. Furthermore, they can nurture an environment within which humble teams can flourish by creating a psychologically safe environment in which mistakes are tolerated and authority can be challenged.

## Introduction

On the playing field and even the battlefield, there is a kind of magic that happens in which teams deliver exemplary performance while operating as a single unit as they move in harmony to accomplish their goals. When mistakes happen, members compensate immediately and without judgment, using the knowledge learned through their mistakes to empower the team in the future. When the inevitable hardships arise, members face them together, adapting as needed in a way that often seems effortless. They care deeply for one another on a personal level and maintain a single-minded determination to perform with excellence. It is a complex and beautiful dance that delivers seemingly impossible results. Some of these teams have a single star performer, some have multiple stars, and others have none, but all perform in the same way – with team humility.

The 1980 USA hockey team – the "Miracle on Ice" – with their upset of the Soviet team at the 1980 Olympics and the 1936 USA Men's Rowing Team of "Boys in the Boat" fame are examples of teams without individual stars. At the opposite end of the spectrum are professional sports teams that perform with great humility including Steph Curry's Warriors, Peyton Manning's Colts and Broncos, and Wayne Gretzky's four National Hockey League teams. Such teams play with incredible selflessness with the emphasis on scoring, not on the individual making the score. They pass pucks, hand off balls, and change lineups to ensure a win. It can be hard to pick out critical individuals, because they prioritize the team's success above all else. There may be extraordinary team members,

but by leveraging their gifts within a humble team construct, the performance of the team can surpass their individual glories. The value of humility is further confirmed by the numerous teams, that, despite the presence and performance of their star(s), fail to live up to their potential.

Typically, most professional sports teams have one or two stars, with the remainder of playing roles being tangential to the outcome. The stats are where we see these stories play out. LeBron James, for example, dominated all of the Cavaliers' stats, singlehandedly scoring the most total points, rebounds, and assists (Basketball Reference, 2017; Rosenberg, 2015). Contrast this with Steph Curry's Warriors, which show a consistent pattern of well-distributed assists and rebounds, leading to good point distribution across four or five players (Basketball Reference, 2017). As the data show, stars on humble teams have statistics that are dominated by assists, and lead teams in which points are distributed across a wider swath of the team. These leaders establish a humble culture across their team, and establish their own role as an enabler for the team's success, creator of opportunities to score or push ahead, and strategic thinker and player.

Beyond sports, we see this humble dynamic played out whenever teams come together to deliver extraordinary results, prioritizing the mission above individual agendas. We see this emerge in teams when they face particularly challenging or complex tasks, for which success is neither guaranteed nor probable (Edmondson, 2016). In depth studies of teams – from surgical and innovation teams to large-scale crisis and rescue teams – point out the power they have when they embrace humble practices. As a critical subset of these extraordinary teams, military special operations teams illustrate how individuals with different but complementary specialized skills can set aside their own egos in order to work together effectively. This practice can also be observed when teams leverage a distributed leadership style in which multiple members share the leadership burden by distributing the leadership tasks among members (Lindsay, Day & Halpin, 2011). Similarly, but at a much larger scale, the team that led the rescue of 33 men trapped inside a Chilean mine (Rashid, Edmondson, & Leonard, 2013) engaged the specialized knowledge of hundreds of experts and worked together in harmony to execute an unprecedented rescue.

Regardless of the composition, humble teams combine an extraordinary will to win with a collective selflessness. These teams, despite being highly capable, possess a clear understanding of their individual and collective strengths and weaknesses. They possess a fierce resolve to deliver their objectives in service of the group and the organization. They willingly admit mistakes, acknowledge limitations, actively seek help and feedback, remain open to new ideas, share praise for successes, accept blame for failures, and do whatever it takes to achieve their mission. In addition, their leaders support the team's adoption and adherence to these practices (Owens & Hekman, 2012, 2016).

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Teams, not individuals, have the greatest potential to impact performance and results, given that most work is accomplished in teams (Edmondson, 2012; Katzenbach & Smith, 1993, 2015). Therefore, the deep understanding of culture and humility at the team level shapes how organizational performance can be improved effectively both in the short and long term. Humility establishes a positive team culture which facilitates success in a multitude of environments (Crossman & Doshi, 2015; Edmondson, 2012; Hearsum, 2017; Hess & Ludwig, 2017; Kaissi, 2017; Koesters et al., 2017; Rashid et al., 2013; Schein, 2013; Tyler, 2017). Teams that exhibit humility are more effective at innovating, solving complex problems, and delivering high-quality outcomes (Edmondson, 2012; Robinson, 2014; Schein, 2013). It is therefore critical that we, as individuals and leaders, cultivate a culture of humility within our teams and our organizations.

Humble teams, like humble leaders, possess not only humility but also high levels of professional will: that is, the determination and drive to deliver extraordinary results (Collins, 2001, 2005; Norcross, 2018; Owens & Hekman, 2012). With this in mind, I proposed the following as a working definition for team humility (Norcross, 2018, p. 27):

> Humble teams, despite being highly capable, possess a clear understanding of their individual and collective strengths and weaknesses. They possess a fierce resolve to deliver their objectives in service of the group and the organization. They willingly admit mistakes, acknowledge limitations, actively seek help and feedback, remain open to new ideas, share praise for successes, accept blame for failures, and do whatever it takes to achieve their mission.

Humility is not about being overly modest, it is about being real – understanding and embracing the capabilities, strengths, weakness, and challenges of self and others. It is about appreciating what is and is not working, where additional expertise might help, and how the team might come together to deliver better results. Humble teams are driven to succeed and do so as a result of their unique culture.

So, if humility is linked to success, how do we identify, create and nurture it in teams? Fortunately, a detailed review of organizational and team research sheds light on this challenge and suggests potential solutions. Unpacking this research allows us to identify the unique components of a humble team culture and what each contributes to the team. Once the individual cultural elements are understood, we shift our focus to how leaders can foster an environment in which humble teams flourish.

## Components of Humble Team Culture

Studies of teams in a variety of contexts (Edmondson, 2012, 2016; Norcross, 2018; Owens & Hekman, 2012, 2016) surfaced observable components of humility that positively impact a team's performance, including an attitude of inquiry, kinship, extraordinary collaboration, and professional excellence.

### *Attitude of Inquiry*

Attitude of inquiry is the practice of keeping an open mind, embracing the possibility that others might possess ideas, information, or perspectives that are valuable or new. It allows even highly knowledgeable individuals to maintain an open mind and embrace the limits of their capabilities (Schein, 2013) and suspend judgment and truly value the input of others (Hook & Watkins, 2015; Whitney, 2014) while objectively seeking to understand new things (Marshall & Reason, 2007). It does not require them to discount the value of their own expertise, but rather to "recognize those situations in which one's expertise is 'limited' or 'not applicable'" (Yanow, 2009, pp. 593–594) and incorporate the expertise of others into their approach (Tangney, 2000).

Teams that possess an attitude of inquiry hold conviction about their knowledge of a situation, but remain open to the possibility there might be a perspective they have not yet considered (Edmondson, 2012). They regularly seek and embrace critical feedback from contributors both inside and outside their organizations (Edmondson 2011; 2013). Because they embrace their own limitations and recognize their need for additional expertise and new perspectives (Edmondson 2016), they ask for help. Their practice of seeking help facilitates the growth and maintenance of networks outside their own teams, functions, and organizations, including individuals different from themselves. These diverse networks are rare among professionals, whose networks are typically small and homogenous (McDonald et al., 2008). Tapping into diverse networks, in order to share knowledge and practice perspective taking, increases learning and ultimately drives improved performance (Edmondson, 2012; 2016; Fernández-Aráoz, 2014; Feser et al., 2015).

An attitude of inquiry is often most visible by its absence, and we have all experienced it at one point or another in our careers. It is felt most viscerally when we face the "not invented here" syndrome (Cohen & Levinthal, 2000; Katz & Allen, 1982), the "my ideas are the only ones that count" leaders, or the "we have always done it this way" organization. Humility unlocks an appreciative mindset (Harvey & Pauwels, 2004; Whitney, 2014), allowing individuals to eschew their own hubris (Lockhart, McKee & Donnelly, 2017) and value different approaches (Lindorff & Prior Jonson, 2013; Vera & Rodriguez-Lopez, 2004). It fosters a compulsion to understand things from another point of view, seek critical feedback (Edmondson 2011; 2013), and actively combat biases and stereotypes (Edmondson, 2016). An attitude of inquiry allows even the most capable and expert of teams to entertain new ideas, seek outside help, and truly value the resulting new ideas, all while actively combatting hubris – the root cause of many team failures (Edmondson, 2012; 2013; 2016).

### *Kinship*

Extraordinary but humble teams also exhibit kinship – an intense loyalty and willingness to support and challenge one another, with an enduring commitment and dedication to the group and its collective purpose. Much like a tight-knit family, their relationships endure and are strong enough to support differences (Frostenson, 2016; Wang et al., 2016), enable candor even when difficult things must be said, and ultimately bring out the best in the team. It is no surprise that kinship is observable in highly specialized teams undertaking nearly impossible missions – such as Army Rangers, Navy SEALs, or other elite Special Operations teams – as intense time together working to deliver difficult objectives in adverse circumstances provides a crucible experience that can shorten the time to develop deep and abiding "Band of Brothers" type relationships (Ambrose, 2017; Willink & Babin, 2017).

Kinship is expressed as loyalty, benefit of the doubt, and true joy in the successes of their colleagues. Kinship becomes observable when we see teams share credit, opportunities, and successes, as well as when we see them offer one another unwavering support. There is joy in one another's success, encouragement in their challenges, a culture of coming together to help when they struggle, and a genuine underlying affection for one another. Often, relationships extend into personal lives, spanning years and involving families and careers at new organizations. Because there was no existing term that adequately captured this concept, I considered the term "kin" used in the Scottish clans and co-opted "kinship" as a way of describing this deeply loyal and supportive culture.

Because it takes time and shared experiences, kinship develops gradually over the life of a team. Once present, however, it improves every future team engagement. Teams with a culture of kinship exhibit grace with one another, giving the benefit of the doubt, thereby minimizing unproductive conflict. Turf wars and workplace drama is minimized, making teams more

efficient, more productive, and better able to handle productive conflict (Edmondson, 2004; Katzenbach & Smith, 2015). Relationships between members are so entrenched that they typically outlast the existence of the team itself, creating rich networks that traverse and strengthen the organization as a whole, improving information sharing, knowledge transfer, and adaptability (Schein, 2004).

### *Extraordinary Collaboration*

Extraordinary collaboration describes an unparalleled spirit of willingness to work together in a well-coordinated, participatory fashion, often prompted by an overarching commitment to delivering a goal. We observe this in jazz performances, as musicians simultaneously listen and react to and build on one another's notes, making unplanned but extraordinary music (Barrett, 2012). In his book *Say Yes to the Mess*, Barrett (2012) reminds us that the practice of simultaneously observing and performing is a discipline critical to collaboration for high-performance teams. Individuals in these kinds of teams embrace the flexibility of their role and "leave their titles at the door." To build upon our jazz metaphor, even great musicians, when performing as part of a jazz combo practice humility and collaboration, handing the melody over to others and slipping into a supporting role (Barrett, 2012). Inside organizations, humble team members also slip into supporting roles, often performing tasks outside their responsibilities or "below their pay grade" in service of the greater collective goal (Norcross, 2018). Similarly, we see the same phenomena on the basketball court, as players seem to anticipate, compensate and complement one another's moves, moving with harmony and unchoreographed grace. Work teams that exhibit extraordinary collaboration exhibit these same traits, accomplishing their goals through working together selflessly – focusing on team objectives and deprioritizing their personal stats.

In humble teams, members willingly step into roles outside their traditional function, or represent the team's perspective to their own function, prioritizing the group goal over their own objectives or functional loyalties. There is a willingness to bend the norms of the organization and expend personal capital in order to ensure team objectives are met. Difficult challenges require adaptability in order to effectively maximize the input of a diverse set of individual expert contributors (Edmondson, 2016). Humble teams cooperate in order to get their work done, and willingly volunteer for tasks typically considered beneath them or outside their functional roles in service of the greater purpose and goals of the team (Edmondson, 2016; Fernández-Aráoz, 2014; Rashid et al., 2013). In such teams, times of crisis lead to stories of sacrifice and team spirit, with senior members and team leaders taking out the trash, mowing lawns, operating production equipment, and more as a way to allow more junior team members additional time to focus on critical tasks (Norcross, 2018). In short, individual members make personal sacrifices in order to ensure the work of the team is successfully completed. Furthermore, when problems surface, there is a noticeable lack of blame tossed around; instead, the focus is on facing the challenge and improving the situation. When there is credit due, it is doled out generously to even the most junior of team members.

### Professional Excellence

Contrary to colloquial wisdom, humility, and professional excellence are not opposites. They are the yin and yang of leadership (Collins, 2005), complementary but interdependent facets of humble teams. Humble teams are highly capable and will do whatever is needed to succeed, but without a great deal of bravado. They adhere to Theodore Roosevelt's adage suggesting it is best to "speak softly and carry a big stick" (Roosevelt, 2004). Humble teams exhibit high degrees of functional competency, have a strong work ethic, and are extremely dedicated to delivering their objectives. Professional excellence is the expressed combination of professional skill, will, and a strong work ethic.

In order to have humility, there must also be excellence. Consider this: would we ever describe someone who is a poor performer as humble? Likely not, we would simply describe them as realistic. Implicit within our natural conception of humility is the construct of professional excellence. Take Wayne Gretzky for example. We describe him as humble because he was an extraordinary player, who despite his talent, we saw him regularly pass the puck to others rather than taking all of the shots himself. It is because of his professional excellence – his unprecedented skill as a player and team captain – that he was able to effectively assess the situation, the skills of everyone on the ice, and place the puck where it was most likely to ultimately end up in the opponent's net. If he lacked this degree of both skill and will, we would not have attributed humility to his actions.

Humble teams are not groups of underachievers. They are often considered experts in their fields and possess an unwavering drive to accomplish their task, a finding consistent with how individuals display professional will (Collins, 2001, 2005; Reid et al., 2014) and determination (Fernández-Aráoz, 2014). Like elite Special Ops teams, they are each high-performers in their own right, but display a unique synergy and an outsized determination to deliver something extraordinary. These humble teams perform at levels far greater than the sum of their individual competencies would suggest is possible.

## The Real Impact Leaders Have on Team Culture

If teams are the primary unit of performance in today's world, is it still relevant to focus on what individual leaders can do? Research suggests it is, because there is a strong connection between leaders, team humility, and resulting team performance (Owens & Hekman, 2012; 2016; Rego, et al., 2017). The most effective leaders display humility, foster follower trust (Nielsen et al., 2010), and create positive organizations (Cameron et al., 2003). Research on teams and culture established psychological safety as a critical enabler of high performing teams (Edmondson, 1999, 2004, 2012) and humble teams (Norcross, 2018). In addition, humble teams are more likely to develop in the presence of leaders who demonstrate humility and professional will (Norcross, 2018; Owens & Hekman, 2012, 2016). Therefore, leaders who strive to develop cultures in which humble teams can flourish, should focus on creating psychological safety, modeling humility, and leading with professional will.

### *Create Psychological Safety*

Psychological safety is a group-construct shaped by the common understanding that one can "show and employ one's self without fear of negative consequences" (Kahn 1990, p. 708). It establishes an environment in which even junior members of a team feel comfortable speaking up, asking questions, and challenging the status quo (Edmondson, 1999). In order to become accepted as a norm, it must be modeled and embraced at even the most senior levels of leadership.

Consider a manufacturing environment in which the factory manager models humility and welcomes input from engineers, line managers, designers, and operators. Anomalies in production, productivity, and quality are more likely to be identified quickly because someone other than the plant manager can detect and report it as soon as they observe it, and the problem can be addressed. Less humble plant managers, however, may create an environment in which no one feels "safe" reporting a problem, particularly as it may negatively impact their career. This lack of psychological safety means that issues can fester, becoming costly, possibly even dangerous, before they are addressed.

Psychological safety fosters an environment in which team members perceive their contributions are welcome (Schein, 2013), there is low cost associated with speaking up and taking risks (Edmondson, 1999, 2004), processes are flexible, and members are more fully engaged (Edmondson, 1999). As a result, learning

improves (Edmondson, 2012) as does productivity and results (Edmondson 2012; Owens & Hekman, 2016). Humble leaders create psychological safety by embracing their own limitations and welcome input (Edmondson, 2016; Schein, 2013). They openly share their shortcomings – talking about where they lack perspective, their skills are limited, or their experience is lacking. They accept feedback from team members, and encourage discourse and criticism. When there is psychological safety, doctors praise rather than reprimand nurses who catch mistakes and team members are not afraid to point out a leader's miscalculation. A psychologically safe environment establishes a foundation for humble team to develop the kinship, attitude of inquiry, professional excellence, and extraordinary collaboration that sets them apart from other teams.

### *Model Humility*

Humble leaders positively impact team performance (Liu et al., 2017; Owens & Hekman, 2012; 2016; Nielsen et al., 2010; Robinson, 2014; Tyler, 2017). They value their own expertise, while they "recognize those situations in which one's expertise is 'limited' or 'not applicable'" (Yanow, 2009, pp. 593–594), and embrace the expertise of others (Tangney, 2000). "Humility pays off. It is conducive to behaviors or attitudes among followers that are in one way or the other beneficial to the company or to leadership" (Frostenson, 2016, p. 94). Individuals, particularly leaders, model humility by recognizing their limitations, accepting their contributions to failures, embracing the contribution of others, sharing credit and opportunities with others, and prioritizing the organization's mission above their own. These leaders help establish patterns of behavior that become contagious, changing the dynamics of the team itself, and making it more likely that the team will exhibit humility as well (Owens & Hekman, 2012; 2016). As a result, even the most accomplished of teams are able to hold their judgment in reserve while they explore a range of perspectives, seeking input and help, and becoming more capable (Fernández-Aráoz, 2014; Feser, Mayol, & Srinivasan, 2015; Marshall & Reason, 2007; Edmondson, 2012; 2013; 2016).

### *Lead with Professional Will*

As Collins (2001; 2005) points out, both humility and professional will are necessary for extraordinary leaders. Through their professional will, leaders model a commitment to the organization, a work ethic, and a prioritization of organizational over personal goals, which sets a high standard for the team. In addition, it strengthens perceived psychological safety because it drives home the fact that delivering organizational goals supersedes individual agendas, and is worth investing effort, even at the most senior levels of the organization. Furthermore, research suggests that leadership professionals will also influence the development of team kinship and professional excellence (Norcross, 2018).

## Conclusion: Our Mandate as Leaders

Because most work is undertaken at the team level, leaders who prioritize organizational results must focus their efforts on developing high caliber teams. Unfortunately, building great teams is neither simple nor formulaic, and leaders must be intentional in their efforts to both understand and shape them. Studying elite teams highlights the role that humility played in their successes and demonstrates the power a humble team culture unlocks. Their high levels of kinship, attitude of inquiry, extraordinary collaboration, and professional excellence are the secrets to their exemplary performance, allowing them to learn, grow, and successfully deliver extraordinary results.

A challenge for every leader is to create the conditions for their teams to develop humility. In order to do so, leaders must model humility and professional will as a way to establish standards and norms for team. But in order to create a culture that will support humble teams, leaders must create and nurture a psychologically

safe environment. The effects of their efforts will ripple outwards in the organization, shaping the observable team behaviors and ultimately buoying performance of the teams they impact.

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