

## VIEWS FROM THE FIELD

# Humble Leadership

Edgar Schein, Professor Emeritus, Massachusetts Institute of Technology;  
Sloan School of Management; Organizational Culture and Leadership Institute

Peter Schein, Organizational Culture and Leadership Institute

### Interviewed By: Douglas Lindsay

**JCLD:** You have recently published a book called *Humble Leadership*. Could you please give a little background on how each of you got into this area of study.

**Ed Schein:** My version of this goes back to the decision to go into social psychology. Already in graduate school, I was interested in social influence in leadership as a topic because it is one of the central topics in social psychology. I was prepared for a career in that, but I was in the military. I was in the Army's Clinical Psychology Program and my first post-doctoral assignment was to the Walter Reed Institute of Research where I did a variety of odds and ends of research. In 1953, the armistice was signed with Korea and there was suddenly a repatriation of 3000 or more American POWs. So, the military created teams of social workers, psychiatrists, and social psychologists and sent us over to Korea to get on board a ship with a group of repatriates to interview them and find out what all of

---

**Ed Schein** is a Professor Emeritus of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Sloan School of Management. He has degrees from the University of Chicago, Stanford University, and received his PhD in Social Psychology from Harvard University. Dr Schein is an accomplished author of numerous books such as *The Corporate Culture Survival Guide*, *Organizational Culture and Leadership (5th Edition, 2016)*, and a recently released book on Humble Leadership which he co-authored with his son Peter Schein that challenges our current theories of leadership and management. He is the recipient of the Distinguished Scholar-Practitioner Award from the Academy of Management, the Lifetime Achievement Award from the International Leadership Association, and the Lifetime Achievement Award in Organizational Development from the International OD Network.

**Peter Schein** spent over 30 years working in Silicon Valley in the areas of marketing and corporate development. His previous organizations include Pacific Bell, Apple, Silicon Graphics, Concentric Network Corporation, and Packeteer. He also spent 11 years with Sun Microsystems in strategy and corporate development. During that time, he led numerous acquisition efforts, drove innovation, and coordinated mergers. As a result of those experiences, he developed an interest in the organizational culture challenges innovative-driven enterprises experience with rapid growth. Currently, he runs the Organizational Culture and Leadership Institute with his father Edgar Schein. Mr. Schein received his BA in Social Anthropology from Stanford University and his MBA from the Kellogg School at Northwestern University.

this brainwashing was all about. There had been a lot of talk about indoctrination. I was literally handed, as a post-doc, a real case of social influence. So, I started to interview the repatriates to ask them: “What happened to you?” and “What impact did it have?” I learned right away that there is something important that no matter how much coercion the captor (in this case the Chinese interrogators) can exert and make you change your behavior, sign false confessions, and make you march in propaganda parades, no matter how much of that they can successfully do, it doesn’t seem to change attitudes. None of those POWs, even those who had collaborated with the enemy, had any illusion about the content of what the Chinese captors were trying to get across. I think that was a very important lesson that applies to leadership today. A

*A coercive leader who just issues orders can get the illusion of influence, because people will respond, but that is not the way to change attitudes, beliefs, and values.*

coercive leader who just issues orders can get the illusion of influence, because people will respond, but that is not the way to change attitudes, beliefs, and values. So, that early lesson stuck with me. Then the question that arises is “What does it take to be influential and to influence things that are more appropriately cultural?” So, I have been, in a way, working on that forever. It was enhanced by my first mentor when I left the Army. I went to MIT where Douglas MacGregor hired me. So, I immediately came under his influence. He sent me off to the human relations labs where I really learned all about systems thinking, openness, and spirit of inquiry. That was almost the opposite of the coercive persuasion stuff with the POWs. In a way, this humble leadership, working with Peter (Schein) is the final statement. I think I’ve got it together now. The point is that it is as much about leadership as a process, as it is about the qualities of the leader.

**Peter Schein:** The things in my background that are most pertinent are that I arrived at Stanford University as an undergraduate in the early 80’s believing I would major in psychology because I knew that Stanford

had a great Psychology Department. Nominally, my father Ed was a Social Psychologist, so that much I understood. I quickly realized that wasn’t interesting to me. What was interesting was the sociological and anthropological point of view. So, I was majoring in anthropology when Ed was writing the first edition of the *Organizational Culture and Leadership* book. At the same time, my older sister was doing a PhD in anthropology. As a family, we kind of realized that was the family business. I went into a consulting job and I worked in some companies like Pacific Bell and Apple, and had done an MBA in marketing at

Kellogg at Northwestern. Really though, marketing is anthropology as well. I’ve let anthropology have a very broad definition for me. In the early 1990s, I became really excited about what was happening in Silicon Valley. Apple in particular. So, I sort of rode the Silicon Valley growth wave working at a bunch of companies, large and small. I really felt like I found my passion when I was doing corporate development at Sun. A lot of the reason for that was that I was intrinsically interested in how cultures merged. I was doing mergers and acquisition work and found myself, as much if not more, focused on the cultural fit as the strategic fit. The other thing that happened for me in 30 years in Silicon Valley was starting to see things that didn’t seem quite right. That there was such a relentless impetus for innovation, but there isn’t necessarily a passion for management and good leadership. In general, in Silicon Valley, the invention and the creation of entire new industries is so rapid that you could see how it doesn’t really matter how well companies are managed. We just need to create amazing things and we have to hire the most brilliant engineers. It doesn’t matter if they can’t get along with anybody. The emphasis on

innovation is so strong. At the same time, companies are growing up and some are run better than others. What was it that created that dynamic? Ed and I started exchanging stories. Interestingly, a lot of Ed's early work on culture was in the 20 years that he consulted with Ken Olsen at Digital Equipment Corporation. With my 11 years at Sun Microsystems, we had a lot to compare and not as much to contrast, honestly. With the stories, we found a lot of our own personal learnings about humble leadership. At the same time, we saw a number of things in mismanagement and some false notes in management that we thought would create a good foil and counterpoint to talk about in *Humble Leadership*. Starting with what we mean by that at a very fundamental level and recognizing that it was about how leaders get the most out of teams not about how leaders are the most brilliant or the most charismatic. That's sort of how we arrived at humble leadership from my perspective. The only other thing I will say is that we created the Organizational Culture and Leadership Institute (OCLI) as a way to provide some focus to the both of us. I took a fork in the road of

that it is pretty easy to work together. We formed the Organizational Culture and Leadership Institute to give ourselves that focus and for me to put Ed's legacy in a more full and compelling way on the internet.

**JCLD:** Thank you for sharing that. With the OCLI, do you do consulting, thought pieces, or is it an organization that gets the word out about humble leadership? How have you been able to use that as a platform?

**Peter Schein:** It's sort of all of that and an opportunity to focus and pursue this work and dedicate our full attention to it. We also do consulting work.

**JCLD:** With the idea of humble leadership, what does that mean? What is the message behind it?

**Ed Schein:** Let me take a crack at that. There is a historical way of looking at it and there is a very contemporary way of looking at it. Peter referred to my consulting with Digital Equipment Corporation.

Ken Olsen was a very dominating fixture as the founder, but when I would sit in on his meetings, he would bring together the best and brightest engineers that he could find, and say "What are we going to do?" Then, he would sit in the corner. That was rather dramatic behavior. What did it mean? It meant that he understood that even though he founded the company and sort of knew where they were trying to go, he knew enough not to try to dictate anything because the power was in the group. So, that's one important way of looking

*The other element is what we called "here and now" humility in one of our earlier books. This is where the immediate sense that the leader must have, and would apply now to an Air Force leader, that fits with what General McChrystal has tried to get at with his team of teams. That a good leader knows that the situation may require more than what he or she had in the way of knowledge and skill. So, it is humility in the face of a difficult task.*

my career and said, this is important and is what I want to do. It's a gift to be able to work with your father. We are fortunate in two ways, that we can do it and

at humility. The leader understand his/her own limitations. You could say that characteristic can be right along with arrogance. Another character who is

very controversial that we talk about in the book is Lee Kuan Yew in building up Singapore. He was totally willing to listen to consultants, how companies did things, and to his colleagues. He knew where he was going and he was autocratic in the areas where he had to be, because it fit his design, but he was always learning and looking for new ways of doing things. Steve Jobs was very arrogant, but what he wanted was people as bright as or brighter than himself or nothing useful would happen. That is one element. The other element is what we called “here and now” humility in one of our earlier books. This is the immediate sense that the leader must have, and would apply now to an Air Force leader, that fits with what General McChrystal has tried to get at with his “team of teams.” That a good leader knows that the situation may require more than what he or she has in the way of knowledge and skill. So, it is humility in the face of a difficult task. A complex task that is going to require that the leader draw on other resources, ask for help, and listen to subordinates. But it’s not that leaders makes themselves subordinate, but rather that the leaders makes themselves dependent on others in the face of a difficult task. That’s when humility becomes a critical variable.

**JCLD:** That’s interesting and you write about the military in one of your chapters. It’s because in a bureaucratic and hierarchically structured organization, you can’t get away from the rank. It’s always there and always salient. For the leader to be able to stay in that role and step back and not feel threatened by people who might have more information is very important right?

**Ed Schein:** Exactly. It’s built into the system. In the Navy, at least, you don’t have the Captain challenging

the radar operator and saying, “let me look at the screen.” He had better trust what that radar operator is telling him.

**JCLD:** When you do your consulting, or study leaders, how do you help them grasp that concept of getting out of their own way? Getting past their hubris or the identity that they have of themselves as the formal leader. How do you help bring in that idea of humility?

**Ed Schein:** If they have a hip pocket agenda and they are just looking for an opportunity to get it out there, then they aren’t listening. They are only listening to themselves. To me, the most interesting book that we reviewed was the Marquet book, *Turn the Ship Around*, where he sits his Chiefs down and asks, “Are you guys satisfied?” An extraordinary thing for a leader to say to the troops.

*We use the term VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) in the book, and the military is where that term came from. They were the first to embrace the fact that at some level, no leader is going to have all the information that they need. 50 years ago, we held on to the notion that the smartest person in the room was the CEO and the leader, we just don’t accept that premise any more.*

**Peter Schein:** We use the term VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) in the book, and the military is where that term came from. They were the first to embrace the fact that at some level, no leader is going to have all the information that they need. 50 years ago, we held on to the notion that the smartest person in the room was the CEO and the leader, we just don’t accept that premise any more. There is too much

volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity for one leader to physically know everything that he/she needs to know. It's just important to accept the present and the future that the world is just too complex. At a fundamental level, if you are not drawing all the information that is in the heads of all the people that are on your team in order to make the best decisions, your leadership decisions are going to be worse than the leader who is doing that. The person that is doing that is drawing all the information that is available, and then works with the group to synthesize it in a superior way. There is nothing that gets in the way of that more than ego and hubris. The other thing, Ed had mentioned historically, that we try to draw out in the book that is that the past rewarded the heroic leader. We created these myths around these iconoclasts. These forces of nature. Take us to the current time and we are still seeing these images of the great iconoclasts. Steve Jobs was one of them. Henry Ford was one of the first. We always have this image of these great individuals. Recently, we started to see a lot of literature suggesting how it's not about the individual. It's not about the ego. It is about reimagining organizations in a way that isn't an "I alone" top down hierarchy. We start seeing experiments in holacracy. Self-managed teams is a critical concept. We quote a Belgian business historian, Fredrick Laloux, that "something is in the air." What we are talking about in *Humble Leadership* is trying to put our own color on something that everyone is feeling. We've sort of worn out the well-oiled machine, top down hierarchy, heroic leader model of organizations. The interesting organizations that are innovating at a rapid pace, aren't the ones that are the top down hierarchies any more. They are much more organic and living systems organized as opposed to the command and control machine organized. What we are arriving at with *Humble Leadership* is being talked about in a lot of other places that are adjacent, and are being referred to in different ways. There is something in the air.

**JCLD:** I agree. When you look at the proliferation of writings out there on topics like shared leadership, relational leadership, and others, it's clear that it is becoming a more important topic. One of the nice things that is both part of it's simplicity and elegance of humble leadership is it is not negating the formal role of a leader, but it does a nice job talking about how a leader in that formal role of influence can utilize the relationships that they form at different levels. Some of the other theories and perspectives don't always do a proper valuation of the formal role of the leader and some of necessary accountability structures that go along with the leader's role.

**Ed Schein:** I'd like to come in on that discussion by introducing where culture comes in. The levels issue is that management and leadership over the last 100 or more years has evolved this Level 1 kind of culture of command and control, the machine model, the assembly line, and everything is organized. People are in roles. This whole culture of management has dominated organizational thinking. All our career systems and all of our reward systems. They are all geared toward individual competition and climbing the ladder. That's just as true today. The system is highly individualized and geared to being competitive. So, I think the young officer in the Air Force or the Navy, is coercively brought into that system. We don't say there are other ways to reward people or other ways to enter the career, they enter a system that is very locked in. Then, the question is, when you are a graduate of that, into the real world, the first problem the young military leader has is to get over some of the command and control routines that have been imbued in him/her. That may be one of the toughest problems for young leaders, for them to say to themselves, "I do have a choice in how I'm going to relate to the people under me." Even though during my training and most of my history it's been very rule based, orders, and that's the system. To discover that I have a choice and I can relate to people differently is counter cultural. So, the

question then for the Academy is, “How do you begin to raise the question within the culture you already have?” “Are we too much a Level 1 culture?” Do you even need to begin to teach the importance of knowing your people, listening to them, relating to them, in a more personal way, and arguing that, in fact, in the long run, that way you are going to be most successful. These are questions in my mind. I don’t know how the Academies have dealt with this kind of issue. It seems to me that it is very intrinsically important that the whole society has to move from Level 1 to Level 2 and get over this very bureaucratic form of individual, competitive style management. The “how to” is going to require some innovative and new kinds of training and experience.

For example, Warren Bennis and I actually taught a leadership course using only movies because the movies can really bring out these contrasts beautifully. A lot of the things that we are talking about have been scripted out pretty nicely to show the effects. A good example is *The Cain Mutiny* (1954). You have several different types of leaders and leadership that are present. Part of the challenge is that the leadership literature is not always that helpful because it is all over the map.

**Peter Schein:** The other thing that comes out of this is comment about how the culture work and the leadership work connect, is that all of this is relative to the culture you are talking about or the culture you are in. Take a look at the military itself. The way I think about it is that it is entirely appropriate that culture expresses itself differently in the Army, Navy, and the Air Force because they are dealing with physics in a different way (land, water, and air—line-of-sight issues are different from oceanic/meteorological forces are different from gravity and atmospheric physics). That will naturally define the culture in a certain way and it will be expressed differently. So, how we think about humble leadership should always be relative to those tasks and basic survival issues that those cultures

have. Similarly, since our culture is such a moving target, the recruits come in roughly from 18-21 years old, their way of processing information is different than how we process information. Given that, we have to think about how we are going to express some of these ideas and how we are going to tell the stories that resonate with this different kind of learner. We need to be able to articulate the difference in our audience. Or the differences in the people we need to ask questions of rather than who we will be telling something to.

**JCLD:** Another wrinkle to the situation is that we are preparing Airmen today to fight in a future that is, as you mentioned earlier, in the VUCA arena. You had previously mentioned different levels of culture from your book. Could you please explain those for us?

**Ed Schein:** Level Minus 1 is pure domination, where the leader simply exerts power because he/she has the power, either economic or physical. You see that in a POW camp, you see it in prisons, you see it sweatshops. You see it in situations where leadership is the arbitrary exercise of power for whatever goals the leader has. That is pretty much irrelevant except in war, where you see samples of it here and there. What we have evolved as a society is this very powerful Level 1 combination of hierarchy and bureaucracy. Where we have figured out if you can specify people’s roles, teach people etiquette and tact and how to behave, give them job descriptions, train them for their particular jobs, this produces a very powerful machine because you can then coordinate all these roles. This Level does depend, however, on psychological distance between the roles. The superior and the subordinate are not supposed to get too close. They are supposed to maintain a professional distance. This is because the idea has grown up that if you get too close, you are going to play favorites and your rational assessments of people are going to suffer. The justification for the distance is that it is going to be more objective/bureaucratic. However, our point

is that what we see in effective organizations is that leaders from different domains are violating that rule. They are getting closer to their people, creating more fluid jobs, recomposing groups. So, Level 2 is more like what we do in our families and social lives. We get to know each other and we collapse some of the distance. That enables more openness and more trust, because Level 1 is not particularly geared toward high trust. We are in a competitive and individualistic society where we are all in our roles. The rules are do what is best for yourself. Your boss may ask if things are going well down in your shop, and you know there are problems, but you are not about to tell the boss. He

*Your boss may ask if things are going well down in your shop, but you know there are problems, but you are not about to tell the boss. He doesn't want to hear it and you may be afraid you will get blamed. So, what you see in Level 1 organizations is all kinds of deviant behavior, mistrust, lying, cheating, etc. which then erupts into the big scandals.*

doesn't want to hear it and you may be afraid you will get blamed. So, what you see in Level 1 organizations is all kinds of deviant behavior, mistrust, lying, cheating, etc. which then erupts into the big scandals. So Level 2 is geared toward building openness and trust. The only way you can do that is to get to know your people, make them feel psychologically safe, and create an open and trusting relationship, knowing that you don't want to go too far, unless the task demands it. For example, in a book about the Thunderbirds, Venable (*Breaking the Trust Barrier*), describes the amount of trust that they must have for each other. They probably go almost to Level 3 with the amount of trust that they have.

**Peter Schein:** We often use the example of “being able to finish each other’s sentences”. It doesn’t mean intimacy, but it does indicate that you know someone very well and knowing how they are going to react to situations. Without that, in these high performance teams (in the military), people can die. There is a different expectation and different requirements that we feel moves beyond Level 2 for these teams. We often say that some of the best sports teams have a level of connection to each other that can go beyond the Level 2 personalized connection. It’s common to hear coaches talk about how much their players “love” each other. It does suggest how that deeper level of connection allows you to create extraordinary results at the margins.

**Ed Schein:** The work on some of the psychiatric breakdowns in the Army shows that a major cause is the loss of a buddy. Because then you feel guilty that you should have done more. I want to throw in one sports example because it makes it so clear. At the end of the game, the quarterback says to the right guard who is there

to protect him, “You have to do better because I got sacked 3 times.” That’s Level 1. Level 2 would be the quarterback says to the guard, “You know, I got sacked a few times, what can we do about that?” The guard says, and this is the key, the guard says, “When we play the Packers, at Lambeau Field, they have a guy who always gets to me. I can do my job with most teams, but on that day, give yourself an extra bit of protection yourself because I’m not sure I can handle that guy.” That’s the missing component in Level 1. Where the guard would say, “Hey, I’m not perfect. You better know that.”

**JCLD:** And the guard has the psychological safety to say that because of the relationship.

**Peter Schein:** Exactly. The quarterback is not going to hold that against him if he is candid about the actual situation that they are going to be presented with.

**JCLD:** Is that because the quarterback now has information about the capacity of the individual that he did not know before?

**Ed Schein:** Exactly.

**JCLD:** Based on your work on humble leadership, what advice would you give to a new leader as they are getting ready to go into a leadership position. What advice would you give them about how to be as a leader?

**Ed Schein:** The reason that I am reluctant to answer that is that I have learned that life is so situational. I guess the advice that comes out of that is to know your people and be very good at situational awareness. And then make some good on the spot decisions as to whether to inquire or tell.

**Peter Schein:** I guess I would be a little stronger by saying, step away from the mirror. Don't be thinking about what are the 12 things that I need to do today to be a better leader. Think about whether or not your team, or the people you are working with that day, are feeling psychologically safe enough to really tell you what is going on. If you approach each day with that, rather than what are the things that I need to be doing, and focus on what's the information that our group

needs to share, it could make it easier for the leader to, as you said earlier, to get out of their own way. It takes the pressure off thinking about your personal development list and think about what ways the group you are working with might operate with psychological safety and share the information that is needed.

**Ed Schein:** I would add something to that. I have observed that more and more good leaders are using the "check in" format to support that and make it routine. What that means is that they never start discussing the task until all members present have checked in with a word or two about how we are doing today and what is going on. So, everyone's voice is heard before we launch into what we are going to do. For example, in the operating room, the surgeon says "let's use the checklist to connect." Then the nurse, as she goes through the checklist, makes a lot of eye contact. In other words, create an in-the-moment groupness.

**JCLD:** That's great. Thank you for that advice. As we close, what is next for humble leadership or OCLI?

**Ed Schein:** We are in the middle of revising our book called *The Corporate Culture Survival Guide*. It is about how you change culture. Leadership and culture are two sides of the same coin.

**JCLD:** Thank you both for your time.

♦ ♦ ♦