



HUMILITY IN LEARNING

THE SURPRISING LEADERSHIP CAPABILITY FOR A DIGITAL AGE

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Can we continue to rely on theories of leadership that were developed many decades ago, long before the widespread adoption of the Internet? What makes a leader successful in highly volatile business environments, like those associated with digital disruption? IMD's [Global Centre for Digital Business Transformation](#) recently completed a research study to find the answers.

A number of attributes emerged that differentiated successful from less successful leaders, such as adaptability, a clear sense of vision, and a high level of engagement with internal and external stakeholders. But one attribute to emerge from the research came as a surprise: humility. In a series of face-to-face interviews with executives from both start-ups and large incumbents, the words 'humble' and 'humility' frequently cropped up. This finding was subsequently reinforced by a survey of over 1,200 executives from a cross-section of geographies and industries.

However, this humility was not simply that embodied by a 'humble leader', but was instead allied to learning or knowledge – what we'll term '*humility in learning*'. On humility in general, CS Lewis remarked "Humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less." This quote applies usefully to '*humility in learning*'. Successful leaders in volatile environments spend less time relying on what they already know, and proportionally more time on exploring new concepts and ideas. That is, *humility in learning* is not thinking less of what you already know, but thinking of what you already know, less.

This makes sense. In a constantly changing world, it is simply not possible that the leader will know the answer, or even be the most informed. Being open to new ideas requires listening to others actively, gathering information broadly, and not allowing perceived wisdom or prior belief to constrain your thinking. Recent psychological studies have indeed shown that the 'intellectually humble' are better able to spot their own errors, and positively correlates with the ability to discriminate ideas in memory. (Deffler, Leary, Hoyle. (2016). *Journal of Personality and Individual Difference*. Vol 9)

Let's apply some real-world scrutiny. If humility in learning is so important, it should probably be visible in leaders of the world's digital giants.

Let's start with Google's Sundar Pichai, the Indian born engineer responsible for Chrome, Android, and Google Apps. Pichai has been described as being humble by [Caldwell Partners](#), [Huffpost](#) and the [Times of India](#). He has [remarked that](#) leadership is "...less about trying to be successful (yourself) and more about making sure you have good people, and removing roadblocks so they can be successful in what they do – Let others succeed". In running the digital leviathan, Pichai regularly seeks advice from those around him, as well as the greater Google community. Every Friday, Pichai holds an all-hands meeting during which he answers questions posed from Googlers from across the company. Pichai is not alone, Lazlo Bock, former SVP of People Operations, emphasized the need for intellectual humility; "[Without humility, you are unable to learn.](#)"

Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg has a very strong personal learning agenda. He's currently engaged in a 2017 '[Year of Travel](#)', that combines engagement with learning humility. He has turned up to listen at a series of low key meetings at community halls, schools, and businesses to learn about the world outside the Silicon Valley bubble. On a number of occasions, he has admitted mistakes, for example accepting that flaws in Facebook algorithms have been exploited by 'fake news' propagandists.

At Microsoft, Satya Nadella operates from an office over-run with books. His personal mantra is '[learn it all, don't know it all](#)'. Since his promotion in 2014, he has been credited with defusing the highly combative, silo-orientated organization of his predecessor by building a culture of listening, communicating, learning, and sharing view-points. Even before his appointment as CEO, he was identified as possessing a key quality for a modern, dynamic leader – [humility](#). He has a well-documented thirst for knowledge, speaking about this plainly in a [2014 email](#) to the company; "I fundamentally believe that if you are not learning new things, you stop doing great and useful things."

Amazons' Jeff Bezos appears to be the exception to the rule. He has a reputation for single-mindedness, even arrogance. But in a recent interview, Andy Jassy, previously Bezos' technology assistant, and now head of Amazon Web Services, gave an interesting insight into Bezos' approach to learning: "He's just an amazing learner. I have never met someone who learns the way he does. I mean, he comes with a lot to begin with. But the way that he is open and curious about learning about new areas and new topics and opinions...". Bezos, himself is [quoted as saying](#) "Thinking you know exactly where you're going is a lack of humility that doesn't let you invent".

Steve Jobs is another leader who doesn't appear to fit the humble persona. Yet, he had a reputation as a voracious learner. A fascinating [2015 study](#) in the Journal of Applied Psychology singled out Jobs as an example of how a leader's humility could counterbalance narcissistic tendencies to great effect.

So, behind the sound-bites and the resolve required to run the biggest technology companies on the planet, these influential CEOs exhibit *humility in learning*. It appears that even the most successful leaders are willing to admit that they do not have all the answers, and spend time actively seeking to learn. As AirBnB's Brian Cheskey has said, it's time for all leaders to "[Take a step back and have some humility](#)". Indeed, as Hal Gregerson from the MIT Leadership Center pointed out, "[The best CEOs embrace being wrong](#)", because the faster they recognize their faulty thinking, the faster they reframe their questions and unlock better solutions".

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