

Humility as an Attribute of Effective Leadership (#1 Trending Article in 2019)

Editor's Note: This post was originally published last summer and has achieved an extraordinary readership. It is a timely and important topic. Appreciation to Helio Fred Garcia for sharing his wisdom with the CommPRO community.

Helio Fred Garcia, Executive Director, [Logos Institute for Crisis Management and Executive Leadership](#)

One of the common patterns of mis-handled crises of recent years, from Volkswagen to Wells Fargo to Equifax, is CEOs who seem unable to appreciate the point of view of their most important stakeholders, and who persist in saying and doing things that only infuriate those whose trust they need.

Arrogance among leaders is a common barrier to effective crisis response, that causes leaders to fail to empathize with their most important stakeholders. Arrogance is a potentially fatal [leadership](#) failing.

The Need for Humility

Humility isn't a word we often see in business. Humility all too often is interpreted as weakness, especially in competitive cultures like Wall Street, politics, or the top of big organizations.

But the best leaders exhibit humility; the best-handled crises are those where humility prevails.

One of the common patterns in mishandled crises is the absence of humility. Such bungled crises reflect what my friend, America's Crisis Guru® [Jim Lukaszewski](#), calls "[testosterosis](#),"

which he labels as a “powerful and hugely costly affliction.” He defines the affliction this way:

“Testosterosis: Men and women both have it. It’s that state of extraordinary irritation and agitation when something goes awry which makes us want to lash out rather than fess up; to slap a few folks around to see what happens; an agitated state caused by adverse circumstances which we regret about the time it begins, but is most often one of the things leaders, lawyers and other top people wind up apologizing for.”

But a little humility can prevent testosterosis.

A dollop of humility tempers other attributes, and makes a leader even stronger. Humility helps a leader to recognize that maybe – just maybe – he or she might be wrong; that there may be other valid perspectives; that he or she doesn’t have to be the smartest person in every room, at every meeting; that he or she doesn’t need to prevail in every disagreement.

The best leaders take responsibility in a crisis by using what *Good to Great* author [Jim Collins](#) describes as the paradoxical combination of humility and fierce resolve. He admonishes that humility must not be mistaken as weakness. He notes that the most effective leaders are a study in duality:

“...modest and willful, shy and fearless. To grasp this concept, consider Abraham Lincoln, who never let his ego get in the way of his ambition to create an enduring great nation... Those who thought Lincoln’s understated manner signaled weakness in the man found themselves terribly mistaken.”

Emotional intelligence guru [Daniel Goleman](#), in a *Harvard Business Review* article “What Makes a Good Leader?,” identifies self-awareness as the preeminent leadership skill:

“People with a high degree of self-awareness know their weaknesses and aren’t afraid to talk about them.”

He notes, however, that many executives mistake such candor for 'wimpiness.'

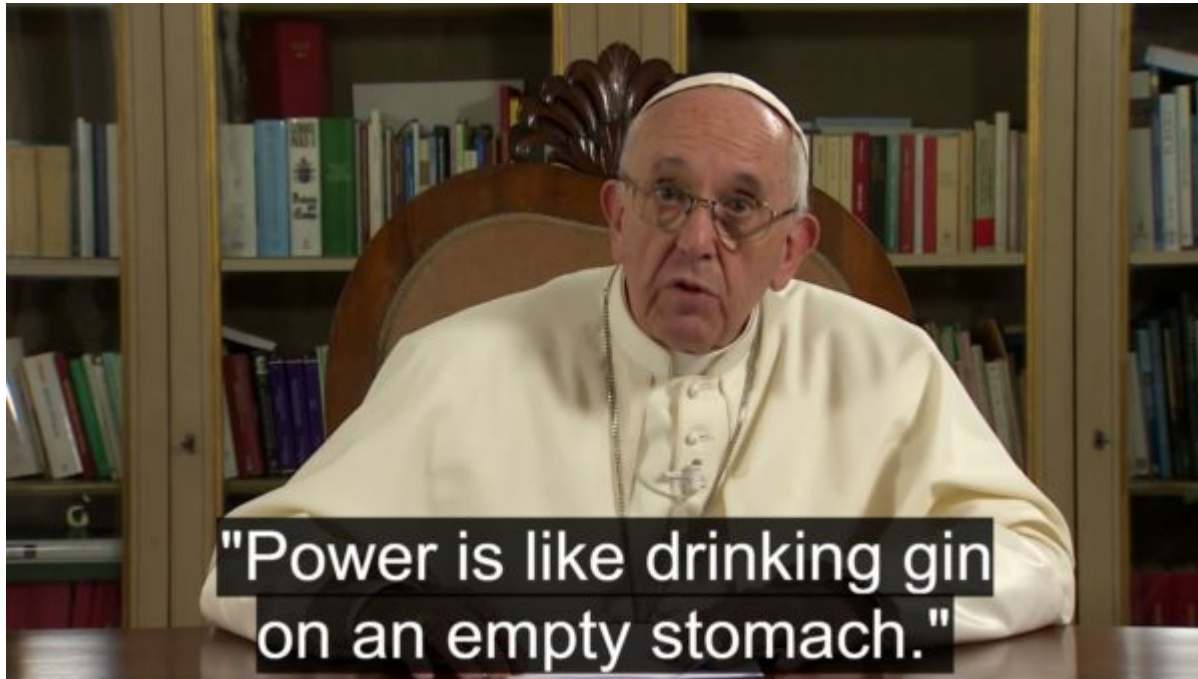
Pope: Power Without Humility is Dangerous and Self-Destructive

Indeed, Pope Francis, in a TED Talk recorded in April, 2017, noted that humility is not weakness; rather, it is a kind of fortitude. He said,

“Please, allow me to say it loud and clear: the more powerful you are, the more your actions will have an impact on people, the more responsible you are to act humbly. If you don’t, your power will ruin you, and you will ruin the other.”

The Pope used a simile to illustrate the consequence of having an imbalance of humility and resolve:

“There is a saying in Argentina: ‘Power is like drinking gin on an empty stomach.’ You feel dizzy, you get drunk, you lose your balance, and you will end up hurting yourself and those around you, if you don’t connect your power with humility. Through humility... power... becomes a service, a force for good.”

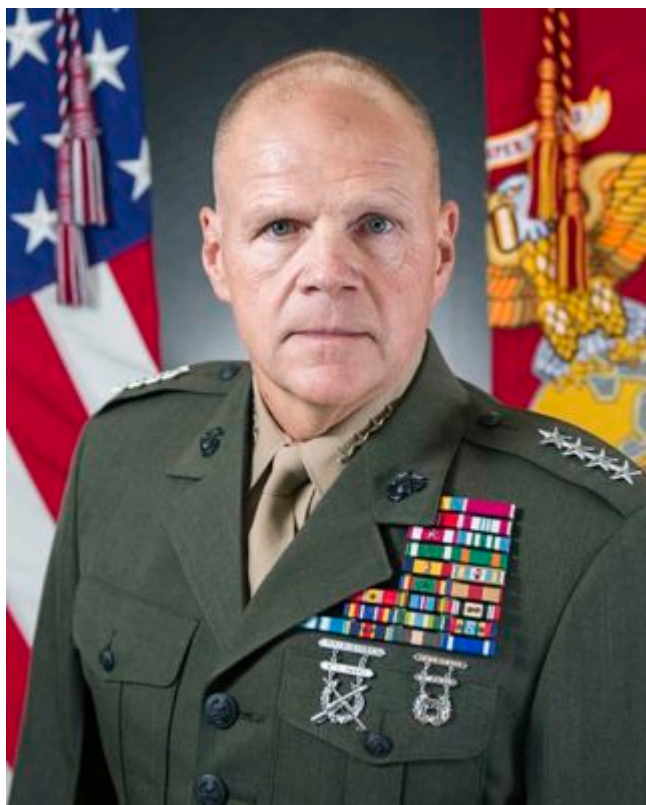


Humility Enables Empathy

Humility is what makes empathy possible.

Humility helps leaders to connect with others up, down, and across the chain of command; to build organizations and cultures that are more likely to thrive; to understand the perspectives of other stakeholders. The best leaders have a temperament that blends both power and humility that allows them to create a culture of accountability in all directions.

The end of 2017 revealed a powerful example of effective leadership as the tempering of power with humility. As covered by military.com, the Commandant of the United States Marine Corps, [General Robert Neller](#), was addressing troops in Afghanistan just before Christmas.



He told of the time when, as a one-star general commanding Marines in Iraq in 2006, he acted grinchy because he was away from his family at Christmas. He initially exhibited some testosterosis:

“It was was Camp Fallujah, it was cold, it was wet, rainy... I just got up in the morning... Overnight they had put up all the Christmas stuff, and Frosty the Snowman, and Santa Claus, Rudolf, and little trees and lights, and I’m like, [shouting] Who did this? Why are you doing this? I don’t want to be here for Christmas. And this is reminding me that I’m here. Take it all down!”

That could have been it. He was the boss, a general, addressing subordinate staff, in a war zone. But what happened next is remarkable. General Neller recounts,

“And this female sergeant, name escapes me, maybe 5 foot 1, stands up and says, ‘General, you need to knock that sh*t off. I don’t want to listen to any of that whiny sh*t. We’re here,

it's Christmas, we're your family, you're not going to be home, so suck it up... Sir!'"

General Neller was taken aback. He stood silently:

"And I kind of stood there [pause]... didn't quite know what to say [pause]... looked at my boots [pause]... and I raised my head and said, 'Yes, Ma'am, you are correct. I am sorry. This is my family for Christmas. And I will do my very best to have as good a Christmas as I can.'"

This expression of humility, this acknowledgement of his initial failure, this apology and acknowledgment of the rightness of the sergeant's admonition, is an extraordinary demonstration of leadership. Officers typically do not address non-commissioned officers as Sir or Ma'am, but rather by rank, Sergeant. But here General Neller intentionally showed respect for his subordinate, addressing her as Ma'am.

It is also remarkable that despite the disparity of rank and power the sergeant felt empowered to address him directly. General Neller had created an environment in which accountability in the form of such push-back was appropriate. And here the follower, the sergeant, had become the leader, holding the general accountable for a violation of his core responsibility, the well-being of his Marines.

You can see General Neller tell this story [here](#).

Humility as a Leadership Discipline

This ability to understand the perspectives of stakeholders is critical to being an effective leader and to getting through a crisis effectively.

Finally, humility recognizes that there's a big difference between responsibility and blame; that taking responsibility regardless of where the blame may lay down the organization is a first step in getting people to focus on a solution rather

than simply point fingers.

Humility marks the best leaders and the best handled crises.



About the Author: Helio Fred Garcia, who teaches crisis at New York University and Columbia University, is the author of, [The Agony of Decision: Mental Readiness and Leadership in a Crisis.](#)