

ARROGANCE, HUMILITY¹, AND TIMIDITY STORIES²

How to Use These Stories

Leadership begins when people exhibit virtues with excellence. Virtues are standards of moral behavior, such as courage, integrity, kindness, and humility. This document focuses on the virtue of humility. When we lead with exceptional humility, we feel deeper satisfaction over what we accomplish, we help and benefit others, and we improve the world around us.

Like all virtues, too much or too little of a virtue is a vice. Thus, when leaders are not humble enough, people may become resentful of their leaders and become disengaged with work. When leaders are too humble, people may not listen to their leaders and take advantage of them.

Leading with exceptional humility is often difficult. It is difficult to find the optimal expression of humility between arrogance and timidity. It is difficult because a humble action in one situation is not a humble action in another situation. It is difficult because the people who care about a situation often disagree about the best way to exhibit humility, and in many of these cases each person—including you—will be partially right and partially wrong, and we need to learn from each other and work through conflict to sort this out. Even when you figure out how to exhibit exceptional humility, it is also important to communicate what you are doing to others so that they will understand what you are doing.

This document contains stories of people being humble and of failing to be humble. (The titles next to people's names are their titles at the time the story occurred and may not be their title currently.) Discussing diverse situations in which people failed or succeeded to live up to their values often helps people to recognize and act on other opportunities when they arise. By discussing these stories in meetings, on teams, over internet or intranet forums, or in classrooms, groups can come up with ideas for leading with exceptional humility, learn each other's perspectives, work through disagreements, and generate ideas. For example, you might read and discuss one story at the beginning of a weekly meeting, post a story on a team forum and ask people to share their thoughts, begin a work shift by discussing a story, use a story in a town hall meeting, or use the stories as fodder for discussion in classroom settings. The following questions may be helpful in discussing the stories. Choose whichever questions are most helpful for your group.

¹ In addition to being used to foster discussions about the virtue of humility, these stories may also be used for discussions about deference or modesty.

² The stories in this document were written or told by the protagonists. Ryan Quinn edited them and added the reflection questions. The stories are to be used as the basis for class discussion, and not to illustrate effective or ineffective handling of a particular situation. Some protagonists agreed to use their real name, others asked for us to use a pseudonym. The goals of this document include becoming aware of issues, identifying the benefits and drawbacks of taking different approaches, assessing their impact on outcome(s), and learning ways of addressing situations you may encounter in the future.

1. What, if anything, did people do in this story that was humble?
2. How could the people in this story have been humbler? How could they have been exceptionally humble?
3. How might some experiences from your own life be similar to this story?
4. What inspires or elevates you about this story?
5. What disappoints or angers you about this story?
6. What might you have done in this story to overcome your disappointment or anger and help the person who disappointed or angered you to do better?
7. What caused the people in this story to behave the way they did?
8. Who in this discussion disagrees with you? What could you do to understand this person's point of view?
9. How might your perspective on this story be wrong?
10. What ideas can you take from this story and discussion to apply in your own life?

Story #1: Anne L'Heureux, Sales Support Representative

I started receiving an increasing amount of negative feedback. This was unusual for me, and I wanted to get back to being concise and efficient in my job performance. At the time, I was asked to do many unrelated tasks, which varied in difficulty and in length. Most of the tasks had many changing details. It was easy to make mistakes, especially if I had to multitask.

At first, I was defensive about the feedback. I told myself that I would not make mistakes on the next task. Over time, however, I accepted that I needed to listen to the feedback and change my approach. I knew that if I did this, I would have more confidence and peace of mind.

I reached out to a co-worker who also works on the same projects that I do but has been with the company longer. I asked him to refresh me on the key points to remember when completing projects. I felt comfortable asking for help, because I knew that the whole department would appreciate my efforts of improving my work. My co-worker broke down all of the material that I wanted to go over and reassured me that a few minor tweaks would be sufficient to complete projects without any mistakes in the future. Ever since meeting with him I do feel more confident in my work and I'm getting a lot of positive feedback on my minor shift in performance.

Story #2: Timothy Flanigan, Deputy Counsel to the President

Over the years, I have learned that I need to adapt my management style to the circumstances. My tendency is to rely too much on appeals to authority. Early career experiences reinforced this in me, because I was working in the George W. Bush White House during the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. In those days, we could even tell Secretary of State Colin Powell that he needed to "Do X." He might have grumbled about it, but he did it because of the exigency of the moment. He knew that he did not need to agree with us,

we all just needed to keep the administration moving in the same direction on treaties, policy, and other legal issues.

Unfortunately, I developed the tendency to carry appeals to authority too far. Once the exigency of the moment is gone, it is not time to be in command and control mode. It is time to build relationships, and seek greater buy-in and cooperation, but I still sometimes push the authority angle. For example, I remember a blow up that we had with Colin Powell over a legal issue relating to Geneva Convention treaties. In this case, his team actively fought our legal team. To fight us, they leaked something to the Washington Post that was damaging to the President's objectives. They did it because we were appealing to authority when we should have tried a more cooperative approach. We should have taken the time to cooperate, but we tried to force the issue, I think because we thought it would be a short cut. Instead, our approach made things worse.

Story #3: Achmad Hidayatullah, Manufacturing Manager

In our factory, data must be entered manually during one of the error-proofing steps for a component we assemble. At one point, the quality manager found an irregularity in one of the entries made by one of the production teams. When we looked deeper, we found that there were hundreds of these irregularities, spanning the two years since we last made updates to the system. After further analysis, we learned that the cause of these irregularities was team members who failed to close work orders before starting the manual entry of the next batch's work order.

To me, the solution was obvious: write a program that would disallow the double entry of serial numbers. However, the quality manager wanted me to sort through all the erroneous data and make manual corrections.

I immediately lost my temper. I raised my voice and expressed my disdain for having to manually correct the data. In my eyes, this was something that the quality team should have caught before compiling 2-years' worth of bad data. It was their big mess to fix.

I cut the impromptu meeting short because I felt that my emotions were slipping. When I left the office, I left those problems behind for the quality team to fix. It was within my authority to tell them to do so. However, after I left, I felt defeated. I knew that this was not the result I wanted to create.

Once I started to get honest with myself, I knew that I had reacted that way because I felt inadequate to fix the issue. Therefore, the next day I assembled a group of team leaders and team members who I believed could help me tackle this problem. We met with the quality team, and they told us what they saw in the data. We came up with a multi-pronged solution, which included early detection of erroneous data entry and disallowed bad-form data entries. I could not have come up with this multi-pronged solution on my own. In fact, I did very little.

In the end, the quality team felt very appreciative after meeting with the production members. I am extremely fortunate to work with very mild-tempered coworkers.

Story #4: Brad Keller, Director of Workplace Strategy

Dan, one of my direct reports scheduled a meeting with me, with one of my peers, and with one my peer's direct reports. I was unclear about the purpose of the meeting prior to attending. Dan was an invaluable and experienced team member with an unfaltering work ethic who helps me think strategically.

On this particular afternoon, Dan kicked off the meeting with a well-prepared presentation highlighting a problem statement and a recommended course of action. He explained the need to focus a small team of top-performers on developing a strategic portfolio plan. His rationale and recommendations were well thought out. However, instead of being pleased by his efforts, I was frustrated by the audacity of his approach and assumptions.

The need for a strategic portfolio plan had become clear to me over the past few months. In fact, it was just elevated to a top priority for our department, and I was selected to lead the effort. Unfortunately, I had been unable as yet to kick off this effort.

When Dan presented his recommendations to me, my peer, and her direct report, I felt blindsided. I was upset that he was so audacious as to include his recommendation for staffing the team, comprised of resources from my team. They were not the team members that I was considering for the assignment.

As Dan presented, I remained silent, and when he finished, I limited my response to, "Thanks, I'll think about it." It was the best response I could muster at the time without showing my frustration.

On the way home that evening, I listened to a chapter of a book that explained some of the obstacles people encounter to feeling empathy. Included in the chapter was a story about a product development team, in which Joe pitched a new product idea to his boss, Micah. These two men experienced multiple barriers to their empathy, and their lack of empathy spiraled into problems that both prevented them from being able to build the product and also ruined their relationship. I immediately realized that my reaction was identical to Micah's. I devised a plan to overcome my reaction to Dan's recommendation and scheduled time to meet with him to discuss his ideas.

When we met again, I candidly explained my initial reaction to Dan and how I had mistakenly perceived myself as a victim. I expressed gratitude for his hard work and initiative to proactively identify an issue and make a recommendation. We discussed additional enhancements to the proposed plan. Dan was very receptive and complemented my leadership

approach. We both agreed to maintain an open environment that encourages and supports improvement recommendations.

The organization change that Dan pitched was a success. We developed a new portfolio strategy team for long-range real estate planning, including using his personnel suggestions. That team has morphed and changed over time, but the original team laid the foundation for five years of portfolio optimization efforts that resulted in a reduction of 1.97M square feet of leased real estate for an annual savings of \$61.7M. Needless to say, I'm glad that I was able to rethink my initial reaction and support the recommended opportunity. Years later, I still work exceptionally closely with Dan and value his strategic thinking, leadership skills and planning capabilities. Over the years, he and I have been able to do some great things for the company together.