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Humility is not Optional: It's a Necessity

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"Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it's thinking of yourself less." –C.S. Lewis

As we descend deeper into a society characterized by polarization and division, cooperation is increasingly a curious characteristic. First, let me suggest that cooperation is a product of humility, a dispositional drive of a selfless ego. I introduce cooperation here to set it up as a desired behavior to be exercised in a team environment. Consider humility to be a serious personality characteristic; one that is geared toward the positive construction and building of healthy relationships. But don't align humility with meekness or shyness—as is usually the case.

Indeed, resist the temptation to dismiss humility simply because it hasn't been lionized like "grit," or "mental toughness." One of the biggest mistakes coaches make is thinking that humility means a lack of self-

confidence or a personal shortcoming such as a fragile sense of one's self. Humility is not soft and idealistic. It is the essence of the powerful exhortation "I got your back."

Humility is the quality of acting on positive intentions for others. It's the intention of being of service to others, thinking of others as equals, not inferiors nor superiors.

In team relationships humility shows through by each team member's commitment to serve and support one another, through showing appreciation for the contributions of teammates, expressing encouragement, and acceptance of each other. The person possessing a healthy sense of humility is generous with his or her support of others as expressed through loyalty and respect for teammates. The humble teammate displays a strong sense of duty to the team. Let me be clear: humility is the social glue that holds

*"We never earn the right to be greedy or to pursue our interests at the expense of everyone else. To think otherwise is not only egotistical, it's counterproductive."
-Ryan Holiday, Ego is the Enemy*

the team—a fragile eco-system—in balance. Simply put, humility is the foundation of unity. It's the infrastructure of a team-centered culture.

The trick is, of course, how to mesh cooperation with competition. Competition—a cherished quality in the field of sport—is often considered to be the opposite of cooperation. Competition is the drive and compulsion to win, to earn, to get, to have, to do. Sports and competition are synonymous. Yet, an ego attuned to *only* competition breeds a self-interested ego. At this point I'm sure you're saying...*"and so?"*

We live in a culture with a high tolerance for individualism. This breeds status and ego. It promotes selfishness (might I get creative and say "selfieness"), and an "It's all about me" attitude. Society rewards those who use self-promotion to stand-out. Of course, many young people have bought into this approach to life. However, there is often a darker side to ego. Ryan Holiday, author of *Ego is the Enemy*, reveals:

"The ego we see most commonly goes by a more casual definition: an unhealthy belief in our own importance. Arrogance. Self-centered ambition....The need to be better than, more than, recognized for, far past any reasonable utility—that's ego. It's the sense of superiority and certainty that exceeds the bounds of confidence and talent."

An ego out of control can and often does promote a sense of self-justification giving an individual the "freedom" to say and do whatever is in their best interest. Ego driven people often are self-absorbed and seek only individual fulfillment. Certainly such behavior can be and often is displayed on the playing field.

However, don't confuse this with a default proposition that competitiveness is bad; it's clearly not. But when an ego (triggered by a social or psychological event) is out of touch with reality it can quickly put a person on a

path to self-destruction. And when this happens good luck reaching the person; you likely won't until they meet with a fall that *humbles* them. Reality meets humility.

A humble person, one driven by a strong and stable sense of humility, is simply more likely to help a teammate, to regard others as equals and worthy of a deep, close relationship. In *Good to Great*, Jim Collins showed that humility combined with strong will led to great leadership. Simply said, the humble person who practices humility keeps their accomplishments, gifts, and talents in a proper perspective. They possess self-awareness, avoid self-serving distortions, and are keenly aware of their limitations. They value the welfare of teammates and have the ability to mindfully attend to the uniqueness of each team member. Humility always contributes to unity.

HUMILITY IS A LEARNED BEHAVIOR

"Almost any behavior can be transformed." – Charles Duhigg, The Power of Habit

The urge to associate with others is a fundamental impulse in the human psyche. We see this drive expressed in a multitude of organizational forms; family, tribe, team, clubs, and schools. Yet the pursuit to "come together" collectively is often an individual's choice to enhance their quality of life. Personality dynamics do influence the choices people make, but so does the situation or environment. In basic interactions we may act one way, while in other situations we function in very different ways. All of this is to simply point out that as mindful individuals, the intersection of the individual with the situation is characterized by the unique ways in which people process information, communicate, and relate to others.

Although there is well-established research that personal qualities can be developed, a lot of people simply believe that you either do or don't possess such qualities as humility. People often think that whatever personality qualities you possess, you were born with.

"The great irony is that the animus and personal ambition that often drive people to positions of power stand at odds with the humility required for Level 5 leadership."

–Jim Collins, Good to Great

At its core, humility requires us to examine our embedded assumptions. This involves surfacing our beliefs, values and attitudes in order to develop a humble mindset to drive right behaviors that build right relationships.

This is not so. I've seen quite a few coaches that I've worked with grow and develop the dynamic relational duo of patience and empathy. In fact, if you're a seasoned coach this is probably true for you; if you're a "newbie" to the head coaching community survey the veteran coaches in your sphere and ask them if they've grown in patience, empathy, and interpersonal capabilities. Just as people learn to play musical instruments, golf, or learn a foreign language, they can learn and cultivate influential relational qualities to include humility.

Contrary to contemporary wisdom, examine the inner workings of humility and you'll find that this personality characteristic has immense value. Humility has been linked to positive growth in self-identity, high academic performance, enhanced social contributions to the team, and good to great achievement in leadership. Humility opens the door to better social relationships, provides a moral compass, and drives one to be forgiving, generous, grateful, and—cooperative.

FOUR QUALITIES OF HUMILITY

Here are four core qualities of humility that form a way to honor commitments and enable coaches and players to serve the well-being of the team.

Vulnerability. This vital component of humility involves the willingness and ability to "let your guard down." At times the team player will be "wounded" emotionally or socially but is able to turn the wound and the wounding incident into a growth opportunity. Humility reveals the emotional intelligence of a team player. Vulnerability allows the team player to say "I was wrong." They don't look for excuses. Rather, they stand up for what is right over what is wrong.

Teachability. This transformational quality of humility is reflected in the willingness and ability to learn. The teachable player is open to counsel and correction. The

teachable team player looks for ways to discover, uncover, and explore learning opportunities—and to share these experiences in an enlightening way.

Availability. Being available to one's teammates is no small gesture. One of the keys to building positive relations is being attentive and attuned to others. Are you there when I need you? Even when it's an inconvenience?

Compatibility. Bonding with others is a mindset. The humble person expresses humility by utilizing perspective-taking; they are willing and able to see the world from another's perspective. Awareness of others' perspectives promotes positive social connection. The willingness to walk a mile in the other's shoe is the social glue that binds teammates together.

THE TEAM ECOSYSTEM: BALANCING PRIDE AND HUMILITY

All teams *must* resolve a vexing set of team building questions about how to balance the needs of the individual (an ethos of individualism and "getting one's own") with the needs of the team (an ethos of community and "the common good").

Together, these two distinctive and diverse ethoses thrust a great deal of tension into the team ecosystem. They both represent relational realities—highlighting the conflict between one form of interpersonal relatedness and another. One places more emphasis on competition, while the other cooperation and collaboration. And every coach knows balancing competition with cooperation is a daunting task, as is balancing pride (a task orientation) and humility (a people orientation).

It doesn't have to be either/or, a dichotomy between tasks and relationships. In fact, it can't be. The mission of team building is too important.

The notion of using ecosystem as a metaphor for the team environment was once considered awkward and out of place.

However, it is becoming more common as coaches are getting used to thinking of their team as being more like a living organism than a mechanical machine. Within the team ecosystem we discover the need to balance the pride of *doing* with the humility of *being*.

To start with, every team is made up of individuals, and each individual has wants, needs, and a preferred way of integrating the team experience into their life stream. However, it is the individualistic orientation that, left unchecked, often leads to a “me-first” pursuit of self-gratification. The individualist mindset interferes with the development of the team. The operational framework for the individualist mindset is, of course, set up to seek to gratify one’s self before even considering others.

Think of Barry Bonds and his “me first” perspective. During his playing career Bonds refused to engage a “hit-and-run” strategy when he came up to bat with runners on base. Today, with the advantage of age and its associated wisdom, he wishes he would have done things differently. *“It’s on me. I’m to blame for the way I was.... I mean, I was just flat-out dumb. What can I say? I’m not going to try to justify the way I acted. I was stupid,”* said a humbled Bonds.

For good measure, let’s take a look at another example to help highlight the dark side of the ethos of individualism. Allen Iverson. During an infamous press conference Iverson ranted about the role of practice in building a competitive team.

“We’re talking about practice. I know I’m supposed to be there. I know I’m supposed to lead by example. I know that and I’m not shoving it aside, you know, like it don’t mean anything. I know it’s important. I do, I honestly do. But we’re talking about practice, man. What are we talking about? Practice? We’re talking about practice, man?”

We’re talking about practice. We’re talking about practice. We ain’t talking about the game. We’re talking about practice, man.”

What do these tales of woe have to do with team building? Everything. Because in both cases we are treated to how an ingrained egoism leads to a prideful mindset of entitlement. Individualism as a mindset will, if unbalanced, lead to the individual rationalizing his or her actions in terms of gains and losses to self. The player becomes so focused on his or her self that they develop a hubristic sense of pride. Such brashness tends to involve selfishness and arrogance, and is related to socially undesirable traits such as being disagreeable and defensive, acting toward others with aggression, and having a low opinion of others—such as one’s teammates.

Pride, as I define it here, is one’s caring and committed approach and attitude toward the team, sport skills, teambuilding and game tactics. That is, in short, pride is the filtering of experience through a task orientation. The goal is to have pride in the team and the mastery of the tasks and execution of tactics in order to build up the team’s performance capabilities. So, a reformed Barry Bonds would take pride in the task of executing a hit-and-run, and a transformed Allan Iverson would attack the task of practice with a sense of responsibility and accountability.

On the other side of the ledger, the task orientation is healthy when balanced with a people orientation. The ethos of community (family, team, tribe, organization, society) rests on the ethic of humility. The ethic of humility is based on the expectation that the sum of the team is greater than the sum of the participants who compose the group. Such expectations grow out of the trust created by humility.

In the end, what creates trust is the leader’s and team members respect for one another. This requires putting others first; a humble way of seeing and acting in the team environment. Great leadership emerges from filling the needs, wants, aspirations, and goals of those they lead. And it is within the team that an individual finds his or her greatest accomplishments.

*“I’m successful and you’re not!”
-Chevy Chase*

Personal Growth & Professional Development

This section is for you and your staff to do as a staff learning activity.

TEAM WORK

Highlight three “new” ideas gleaned from reading this short article. Discuss with your staff how these ideas relate to you personally and your team collectively.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Cracks in the Mirror

You have a right to be skeptical about humility. It should be no surprise that most of us have been exposed to years of self-centered, selfishness, and in extreme cases the self-righteous and self-absorbed behavior of others—and dare I say it, our own self-involved attitude and behaviors.

We live in a time in which many commentators refer to our psychosocial environment as a self-centered culture. And yes, it’s clear, societal trends have drifted away from an ethic of care for one’s neighbor—the common good—to one in which most people don’t know the family next door. Humility, it seems, is of little value in our self-aggrandizing, individualistic world in which commitment to others is incompatible with our internal need for self-preservation.

Discussion Question: Extend this perspective to your team. When adversity arises how might you be a part of the problem?

Fragile Egos Can’t Handle Humility

“I was a hothead,” confides Jason Williams, a moderately successful coach. “I used to take my emotions to the extreme—I’d take everything to heart and react adversely. I knew my emotional incompetence affected my relationships with my coaches and players. If they didn’t see things my way, I’d throw a fit. It was my way or no way. I couldn’t see it from their perspective. I simply wasn’t willing to compromise. If I was upset with something or someone, I couldn’t move on.”

Discussion Question: How might an assistant coach bring to Coach Williams’ attention his lack of humility? No, seriously. Give it a shot!

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