

Humility as an educational paradigm in leadership development programmes: the Singapore perspective

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Abstract

Background: The concept of humility invariably emerges as part of serendipitous findings in the limited research conducted in Singapore that pertains to this area. There has not been subsequent significant academic research in the local context since the nineties with regard to the seemingly insignificant notion of humility. It is under such a context that the authors attempt to explore the notion in a pilot study.

Aims: To investigate the notion of humility as perceived by school leaders in Singapore and to determine whether humility is deemed a strength or a weakness among these leaders. This paper also attempts to surface the probable incorporation of the concept of humility in the development and delivery of leadership programs in Singapore.

Sample: A sample of fourteen school leaders in Singapore were requested to share their perceptions in this pilot study. Thirteen responses (93%) were usable.

Method: A survey was conducted and the open-ended written responses received from the school leaders were analyzed.

Results: The results reveal five features that could be associated with the school leaders' perception of humility, namely, self-awareness, open-mindedness, admitting mistakes, generosity in sharing, as well as recognizing and promoting the deserving.

Conclusion: Aspects of the notions of humility as identified pertain to the practice of school management learned through mentoring; the mentoring by worthy role models in education. It is advocated that program delivery of leadership take into cognizance the deliberate incorporation of the concept of humility as part of school leadership development.

Keywords: humility, school leaders, Singapore

新加坡的学校领导培训项目中有关教育领导素质—谦逊—之探讨

缘起：自九十年代开始，有关领导素质中的谦逊这一概念，日愈受重视，但在新加坡，有关研究仍嫌匮乏，尤其缺乏有分量的本土研究，笔者因此尝试作试点研究。

目的：探讨新加坡学校领导对谦逊的理解，以判断这些领导视谦逊为优点或弱点。本文也尝试探讨把谦逊这一概念纳入新加坡教育领导的培训课程中的可能性。

样本：十四位新加坡的学校领导参与试点研究，本研究采用十三位（93%）领导的回复

方法：分析问卷调查与开放式问题的回应

成果：学校领导认为教育领导素质中的谦逊应该包括以下五个特征：自觉、思想开明、愿意承认错误、无私分享、赏识与奖励表现卓越者

结论：谦逊这种教育领导必须拥有的优秀素质，是能通过学校管理实践中的辅导计划来加以培训的，因此，应该有意识地把谦逊这一概念纳入学校领导培训课程中。

关键词：谦逊，学校领导，新加坡

INTRODUCTION

The term “humility” has its roots in Middle English (*humilite*), Old French and Late Latin (*humilitas*, *humilis*), in association with “humble” (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 1996, p. 881). “Humble” quintessentially can be humbling, being “marked by meekness or modesty in behavior, attitude, or spirit”, “showing deferential or submissive respect” and “low in rank, quality, or station” (p. 880). How convincing is it then to extol the value of “humility” in educational leadership? Should school leadership development programs incorporate the concept of humility as a viable component? This paper explores the concept of leadership humility and surfaces perceptions of education leaders in Singapore.

PERCEPTIONS OF SINGAPORE SCHOOL LEADERS

The concept of leadership humility per se has yet to generate interest in the Singapore educational setting. It has never been explicitly surfaced in any of the leadership development courses conducted at the National Institute of Education (NIE), Nanyang Technological University (NTU). The only controversy that was raised pertains to Lim (1984), who found that the most effective principals were more assertive in being “aggressive, authoritative, competitive and stubborn” (p. 35). In contrast, the least effective principals were more *humble* [italics added] in being “mild, accommodating, easily led and conforming” (p. 35). The assessment of those principals in terms of “most effective” or “least effective” was derived from their ranking position as determined by their superiors in the educational hierarchy. Local research on successful women educational administrators (Low, 1988, p. 154) surfaced the theme of “self-devaluation or self-denigration” which could be viewed as “humility or modesty”. Many of these women attributed their success to some sources like “a series of accidents”, “just evolution” or “opportunities” (pp. 154 & 155). This “luck” factor similarly prevails itself in a study on women in professions from the public and private sectors (Low, 1993, p. 37). Humility invariably emerges as part of serendipitous findings. Conducted in the eighties and early nineties, there has not been subsequent significant academic interest in the local context with regard to the seemingly insignificant notion of humility thereafter.

In relation to the above, the authors recently conducted a preliminary study to seek the perceptions of school leaders on humility specifically. They were also requested to indicate whether they deemed humility as a strength in leadership. Out of 14 school leaders who were approached, 13 (93%) of those surveyed replied in the affirmative; that is, they deemed humility as a strength. Based on content analysis done on the 13 usable responses, five features could be identified that are associated with the school leaders’ perception of humility. Firstly, *self-awareness* is deemed an essential feature of humility, for instance, “to be in touch with yourself”; “to know who you really are - your strengths, your weakness”; “to know the limit of your ability, acknowledge it and ask for help”. The second feature is *open-mindedness*, “the ability to open to others’ perceptions and values, while refraining from imposing one’s perceptions and values on others”; “keep an open mind to others’ suggestions, opinion, feedback, comments”; “willing to learn and listen”; “involves active listening”. The third feature is with regard to *admitting mistakes*. “Humble to admit mistakes” is deemed a feature in humility and it is associated with learning from mistakes and the first feature of knowing one’s weaknesses. Fourthly,

humility entails *generosity in sharing* experiences, resources or ideas with others; and not being proud or arrogant when one has achieved certain “material gains” or “successes in life”. The fifth feature of humility encompasses the feature of *recognizing and promoting the deserving*; it means to “allow others to excel and shine in areas that they are talented in”; “discover others’ potential and give support to develop the potential”; “appreciate others’ strengths and weaknesses”, “respect everyone as an unique individual human being and recognize their abilities”; “give glory to others”; “recognize the contributions made by staff and fellow colleagues”.

In sum, the features of humility as identified are self-awareness, open-mindedness, admitting mistakes, generosity in sharing, as well as recognizing and promoting the deserving. Conceptual-wise, humility appears to contradict the notion that the self is better or more important than others. The following section attempts to bridge such features of humility as perceived by current school leaders to existing knowledge on practice, with emphasis on the local educational context.

EXPLORING HUMILITY AS AN EDUCATIONAL PARADIGM

Greenleaf accentuated the humility of a leader in humbly serving via emphasizing that “the servant-leader *is* servant first... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve *first*... the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served” (Greenleaf, 1991, p. 7). He cited and reiterated the “extraordinary presence” and “powerful leadership” of Leo in Herman Hesse’s *Journey to the East*, one who “ostensibly only served in menial ways” (pp. 1 & 34). In a similar note, research on practice by Collins (2001a) asserts that the highest level of leadership is an integration of humility and will: “modest and willful, *humble* [italics added] and fearless” (p. 22). This is akin to Lao Zi’s (Lin, 1942) analogy that the best of people are like water that benefits yet dwells in “(the lowly) places” (p. 586) and that the best of rulers empower such a sense of pride and confidence in people such that they themselves may not recognize the ruler’s significant role in their success (pp. 591 and 592). In addition, Lao Zi promoted the notion that one who is good at deploying personnel is humble towards those being deployed... and taps on their strengths (*Lao Zi: The Book of Tao and Teh*, 1995, p.274). Collins (2001b, p. 73) provided further description of such a leader who builds enduring greatness, with regard to the aspect of “personal humility”:

Demonstrates a compelling modesty, shunning public adulation; never boastful. Acts with quiet, calm determination; relies principally on inspired standards, not inspiring charisma, to motivate. Channels ambition into the company, not the self; sets up successors for even more greatness in the next generation. Looks in the mirror, not out of the window, to apportion responsibility for poor results, never blaming other people, external factors, or bad luck.

The term “quiet” used as a positive descriptor in leadership also resurfaces in Badaracco’s (2003) study, that quiet leaders contribute to a better world by successfully solving difficult, important problems and they fail to fit the traditional heroic mold. They are termed “*quiet leaders*” because “their modesty and restraint are in large measure responsible for their impressive achievements” (p. 3).

There appears to be congruency in the descriptors used, with the underlying common theme of serving others in leading and not consolidating self-interest. In serving others, listening is a form of humility on the part of the leader in being prepared to listen to the words and meanings of another. According to Greenleaf (1991, p. 10), “only a true natural servant automatically responds to any problem by listening *first*... a long arduous discipline of *learning to listen* [italics added], a discipline sufficiently sustained that the automatic response to any problem is to listen first... true listening builds strength in other people”. The willingness to listen pre-empts the disability of certainty (Low, Lim, & Baruch, 2005) which can distort or blind our perception of reality, as such disability weakens awareness and breeds complacency. Further, Livingston (2003, p. 100) asserted that “indifferent and noncommittal treatment, more often than not, is the kind of treatment that communicates low expectations and leads to poor performance. Active listening on the part of a humble leader could serve to minimize such adverse relations and productivity.

Similarly, school leaders who participated in the preliminary study expressed that humility involves a willingness “to learn and listen” actively and “refraining from imposing one’s perceptions and values on others”. Such a feature of “open-mindedness” in humility is associated with the feature of “recognizing and promoting the deserving”. It also pertains to developing staff in bringing out their best for the team. Lim (2005) surfaced the practice of leading learned through mentoring which involves consulting and developing ownership (p. 38). This is exemplified in the following quote:

Boosting of staff morale is an important consideration. Work on teachers’ strengths. I share with my HODs [Heads of Department], “Let’s not just look at the surface of a person. Let’s look into the heart. Let us look at her strengths. She is just like an unpolished diamond. The shine will come out eventually.” ... When she [a teacher] surfaces anything, complaints and all these, we say, “OK, this is the problem. What do you think is the alternative solution?” So make her come up with solutions, and we make a point to implement the solutions when feasible.

Further, Lim (2005) reported the wisdom of mentors who role-modelled the listening and generating of ideas from the expert practitioners at ground level, culminating in collective decision-making:

There’s a lot of participation with regard to the HODs [Heads of Department in the mentoring school]. Over here, the same thing--- I have left a lot of ideas to be generated from my HODs. A lot of leeway is given to the HODs because I feel that they are on the ground, they are specialists in their subject area. And if they, as specialists in their subject area would like to recommend certain modes of delivery or certain strategies with regard to improving results here, we’ll listen or collectively we’ll give our input though we may not be specialists in that area. Even a Science HOD can recommend something and the English HOD can commend on it and this way, more heads are put in and you generate the idea... collectively, we’ll make a decision and say, “OK. We’ll proceed.”

From the above, there appears for a need to question the archaic Singapore notion of humility with its negative leadership connotations in association with words like mild, accommodating, easily led and conforming (Lim, 1984; Chong & Low, 1991). Humility could be a viable leadership concept and practice. Instead of being a stumbling block to genuine leadership, humility can exist as a strength in the educational paradigm, yet to be maximized in the Singapore context.

CONCLUSION

Humility as a leadership concept has yet to be explicitly deemed of probable significant value in the education arena in Singapore. Nonetheless, the authors attempt to elucidate features pertaining to the concept of humility as perceived by school leaders. Such exploration surfaces congruent notions as expressed by these school leaders as well as by those beyond the education service. There are also aspects of these notions pertaining to the practice of school management learned from mentoring; the mentoring of aspiring leaders by worthy models (Lim, 2005). These aspects have not been specifically highlighted as humility. In view of this, it could be meaningful in the Singapore context to consider the inclusion of humility as a leadership concept in the development of school leadership programs. Program delivery could also take into cognizance the assertion by Hamilton and Knoche (2007, p. 169) that “a principled and discerning nature is essential... and that without it, coaching for development is fruitless”; This aspect is consistent with Collins’ (2001b, p. 75) preliminary hypothesis that not all have the potential or “seed” within them to attain the triumph of humility and fierce resolve in leadership. In the Singapore context, it could help to illuminate the concept of humility in leadership program delivery and hence help raise awareness of its probable significance towards the achievement of the highest level of leadership (Greenleaf, 1991; Collins, 2001a & 2001b). The humbling experience of being humble in theory and practice could propel school leaders to greater heights in leading to serve and serving to lead.

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