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True Humility: Embrace Who You Are. Release Who You Are Not.

by Curt Liesveld



Why is it that people are often attracted to the conventional approach to human development, with its focus on what is not working and the aspiration toward becoming well-rounded? My theory is that, on the surface, this approach appears to be more humble, and since humility is a highly valued human virtue, it seems like the best approach. The logic in this thinking is that if I pay most of my attention to what is not working, I will be perceived as having a more realistic view of my own importance. Thus, I will be perceived as being a humble person. While this appears to be humility, I would like to suggest that it is not.

As a practitioner in the field of human development for almost 40 years, I have come to the conclusion that the motivation that often prompts a person to obsess on fixing their weaknesses and to dream of well-roundedness may be based more on hubris rather than humility. While focusing on one's weaknesses might give the appearance of humility as one lowers their gaze from elevated strengths to lowly weaknesses, the source of this approach might actually be a desire to

be self-sufficient and independent. Many times, when people choose to concentrate on their deficits and shortcomings, it is because they are thinking the following to themselves, *“If I can just get to average or adequate at everything, I won’t need to rely on anyone.”* Instead of being characterized by humility, I see the conventional approach characterized by self-sufficiency and independence. The source of this strong attraction to and affiliation with well-roundedness is actually the belief that a strong and successful person has everything they need and won’t need to rely on anyone. This sounds like an inflated and elevated view of the importance of self. That doesn’t sound very humble to me.

I would like to suggest that a strengths-based approach to human development is actually a much more humble approach. As we approach growth and development in a strengths-based manner, we help people own both who they are and who they are not. This approach sees every human as a mixture of abilities and vulnerabilities, of knowledge and ignorance, of mature experience and raw inexperience. None of us can be it all, know it all or do it all. The strengths-based approach to human development and performance maintains that individuals experience their most prolific growth and their most powerful engagement when they capitalize on what they do most naturally, and when they have a strategy for managing or mitigating their shortcomings. The humility is in the strategy itself. It involves relying on another person as a complementary partner, one who is good at things you are not. This is what I call true humility. I call it the Law of Supply and Rely. In areas where I am strong and natural, I willingly play the role of the supplier, willingly offer the best of what I have to give. In areas where I am weak and awkward, I willingly play the role of the relier, willingly admitting what I am not and comfortable inviting others to share what they’ve got.

The extreme value placed on human well-roundedness has led many to pursue development by identifying personal deficits and focusing resources and efforts to reduce or eliminate these gaps. This comes from a clear preference for independence over interdependence and self-sufficiency over collaboration. If you want to be perceived as a humble person, or if you want humility to be a virtue that is regularly practiced in your organization, start by giving yourself permission to own and use what you’ve got and permission to rely on others in areas that require something you are not. A strengths-based approach, full of vulnerability and awareness, just may be the only path to true humility.



Curt Liesveld passed away on May 16, 2015. This piece was one of the final writing projects he completed, a topic he had spoken about for several months. Prior to his passing, he approved all final edits and was excited about communicating the message he believed in completely. Curt inspired a loving family and a legacy of strengths-based development, which lives on in the positive work done by coaches and individuals all over the world. Consider what you might do today to feature your own talent and gifts as an act of humility and strength in your community.

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