

Humility as Self-Discovery—Leadership Insights for Human Resource Professionals

Cam Caldwell¹ & Michael Kirchner²

¹ Human Resource Management Discipline, Alabama A & M University, Alabama, United States

² Human Resource Management, Purdue University Fort Wayne, Fort Wayne, United States

Correspondence: Cam Caldwell, Human Resource Management Discipline, Alabama A & M University, Alabama, United States.

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to help Human Resource (HR) Professionals understand six elements of self-discovery and to apply those elements in understanding the relationship of self-discovery to humility.

Design: This summary is prepared by independent writers who specialize in the development of interpersonal leadership skills and includes their insights about the importance of self-discovery and humility in building interpersonal relationships.

Findings: This paper explores how six elements of self-discovery can apply in understanding the three pillars of humility and in incorporating humility in building interpersonal relationships for HR professionals. Based upon the literature about humility and leadership, the utilization of a self-development process can inform HR professional's approach toward strengthening interpersonal relationships.

Originality: This briefing offers HR professionals insight into how application of the six elements of self-discovery can contribute toward their effectiveness as leaders by developing greater humility in their approach to interpersonal relationships.

Keywords: humility, leadership, self-discovery, human resource professionals, leadership development

1. Introduction

Although much has been written about self-awareness as a requirement for effective leadership (Maxwell, 2021), the challenge for Human Resource Professionals (HRPs) has often been to develop greater self-awareness in order to be more effective communicators and to be perceived with more credibility (Goleman, 2005). According to a growing body of research, this quest for personal self-discovery is closely related to acquiring humility and has been cited as a major element of effective human relations (Anderson & Caldwell, 2019).

This paper identifies the importance of humility as a key to the self-discovery that is vital for HRPs to incorporate in their lives as they increase their self-awareness and create relationships with others. We identify six key elements in the self-discovery process, define humility as a quality essential for effective interpersonal relationships, and explain how the three pillars of humility relate to personal self-discovery. We propose eight hypotheses for HRPs to consider as they seek to improve organizational relationships and invite HRPs to increase their understanding of humility as it relates to their interpersonal effectiveness.

2. Elements of Self-Discovery

Self-discovery has been acknowledged as a key to personal growth (Kyle, 2019). Aristotle declared that this knowledge of oneself was the beginning of wisdom. Self-discovery is a complex process of personal commitment that requires an objective willingness to examine oneself and to then use that self-appraisal to constantly improve and achieve one's highest potential (Benner, 2015). A fundamental aspect of emotional intelligence, HRPs who achieve self-discovery have an enhanced ability to understand and meet the needs of others (Goleman, 2005).

Achievement of self-discovery requires recognition of three complementary facets of human behavior. HRPs' ability to attain self-discovery necessitates that they (a) fully recognize themselves, (b) the factors that motivate them, and (c) the steps to undertake as they strive to become their very best (Ulrich, 1996). Self-discovery enables HRPs to more

fully understand their own values and assumptions about ethical duties owed to others as well as their personal commitment to honoring relationships with whom they serve (Caldwell & Anderson, 2018). The research associated with self-discovery has identified six elements that contribute to the ability to fully understand and discover oneself. Table 1 (see below) briefly defines those elements and explains their relationship to self-discovery.

Table 1. Elements of Self-Discovery

Element	Definition	Relationship to Self-Discovery
Self-Analysis	Looking within and examining past and present actions.	Willingness to conduct this examination is the first step to change.
Self-Motivation	Wanting to become the best one can be.	Motivation must be translated into intelligent effort.
Self-Understanding	Seeing oneself clearly by identifying moral and ethical motives.	The learning process is continuous as one sees the self-more precisely.
Self-Regard	Valuing oneself, despite imperfections or shortcomings.	Acknowledging one’s worth provides inspiration for growth.
Self-Transformation	Taking action to make desired changes.	Transformation only occurs with effort and action.
Self-Reflection	Recognizing opportunities to refine oneself.	Continuing to grow is the ongoing process of self-discovery.

Self-discovery requires the ability to integrate these six factors in examining oneself, striving to improve, developing insights and appreciating one’s value, constantly seeking to improve, and looking for opportunities to become a better person. Figure 1 is a simple model that identifies how these six elements contribute to self-discovery.

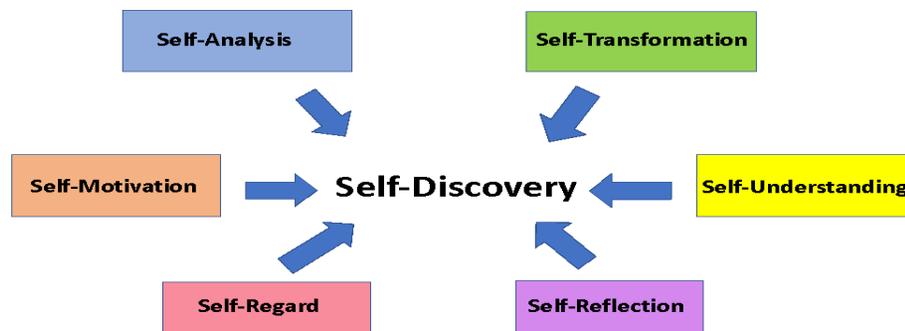


Figure 1. Elements Contributing to Self-Discovery

Each of these elements is necessary for self-discovery and equally important toward empowering HRP to serve their colleagues through myriad of interpersonal duties (Gomez-Mejia, Cardy, & Balkin, 2015).

3. Humility as Self-Discovery

Although humility is often thought of in terms of personal modesty, its role in helping individuals develop effective relationships has been increasingly recognized as the distinguishing factor of successful leaders (Owens, Johnson, & Mitchell, 2013). Incorporating the metaphor of the window and the mirror in emphasizing the importance of leadership, Collins (2001) explained that the most effective leaders were humble enough to take personal responsibility when problems arose while giving credit to followers when the organization experienced success. Humility requires

accurately assessing oneself without exaggeration and is best understood as a positive and accurate self-regard (Ou, Waldman, & Peterson, 2018).

Owens (2009) went further and described humility as incorporating three pillars: 1) high self-awareness, including an appreciation of one's strengths and weaknesses; 2) an appreciation of the worth and capabilities of others; and 3) a commitment to constant improvement. In the paragraphs that follow, we examine the six elements of self-discovery as they relate to these three pillars of humility and propose eight hypotheses associated with humility and self-discovery as HRP's reflect on their interpersonal obligations.

3.1 Humility as Self-Analysis

The willingness to examine oneself in-depth and to understand the assumptions, beliefs, and values that guide one's life are critical elements of self-awareness, humility, and personal growth (Horney, 2013). Recognizing one's strengths and weaknesses provides HRP's with insights about honoring obligations to those they serve (Yammarino & Atwater, 1993). This capacity to willingly examine oneself is a critical factor of both emotional intelligence and humility (Anderson & Caldwell, 2019) and enables individuals to honestly assess their strengths, weaknesses, and obligations to others (Goleman, 2005). Accordingly, we propose the following hypothesis for HRP's associated with self-analysis.

H1: HRP's who conduct formal self-analysis will be perceived as possessing greater humility than HRP's who do not.

3.2 Humility as Self-Motivation

Personal improvement and the ability to make significant personal growth demands both passion and perseverance to accomplish worthy goals (Duckworth, 2018). The willingness to invest in improving oneself is derived from recognizing one's own value, as well as the importance of pursuing personal improvement in the quest for self-fulfillment (Fromm, 2006). An HRP's motivation to become a better leader requires the passion and perseverance to convert their personal potential to actions that benefit others' lives. Consistent with this insight, we offer this hypothesis about self-motivation.

H2: HRP's who demonstrate passion and perseverance associated with their personal improvement will be perceived as possessing greater humility than HRP's who do not.

3.3 Humility as Self-Understanding

Self-understanding transcends self-analysis and involves looking deeply within to examine how and why a person acts as (s)he does (Damon & Hart, 1992). Self-understanding comes only through a major personal investment in understanding why one makes the choices that (s)he makes. That investment in understanding oneself demands the humility to acknowledge one's faults while simultaneously being committed to making the changes required to redefine one's life (Caldwell, Dixon, Atkins & Dowdell, 2011). As HRP's consciously examine the moral obligations of their roles, they are far more likely to be perceived as ethical and humble. We propose this hypothesis about self-understanding.

H3: HRP's who consistently look within themselves to examine their ethical and moral obligations are perceived as possessing greater humility than HRP's who do not conduct this examination.

3.4 Humility as Self-Regard

Self-regard is the ability to love oneself, despite acknowledging that one possesses imperfections and faults. Fromm (2006) explained that this ability to unconditionally love oneself makes it possible for a person to also develop love and regard for others. Honoring the obligation to serve others, to be committed to their welfare, and to honor duties owed to them is the essence of effective relationships (Caldwell & Anderson, 2019). HRP's who genuinely care about those whom they serve must also possess this self-regard but also demonstrate that same regard for others (Folger & Cropanzano, 1998). We propose two hypotheses about self-regard.

H4: HRP's who have developed high personal regard for themselves are perceived as possessing greater humility than HRP's who have not.

H5: HRP's who have developed high personal regard for themselves also are perceived as demonstrating high personal regard for those with whom they work.

3.5 Humility as Self-Transformation

Self-transformation is the positive result of changing one's actions and behaviors and includes developing new attributes and skills that are acquired by conscious effort (Yahav, 2018). Self-transformation is an essential requirement for honoring one's moral identity and for reaching one's highest potential (Maslow, 2019). The commitment to excel

and to become the best that a person can be is the essence of self-transformation and a fundamental element of humility (Anderson & Caldwell, 2019). HRPs can transform themselves and contribute to the transformation of their organizations as they demonstrate their commitment to constant improvement (Pillai, 2008). We propose the following hypothesis about self-transformation.

H₆: HRPs who have actively transformed their actions and behaviors and developed new skills are perceived as having greater humility than HRPs who have not.

3.6 Humility as Self-Reflection

Self-reflection is the ongoing process of examining oneself in the pursuit of continuous improvement in the effort to excel and become the best possible person that an individual can be (Rose, 2022). The self-reflection process is critical to the achievement of competitive advantage as a strategy for both the personal development of HRPs and the organizations that they serve (Caldwell, Dixon, Atkins & Dowdell, 2011). The willingness to keep improving and to persist in the quest for excellence is the key to self-transcendence that Maslow (2019) explained as going beyond self-actualization to become the highest motivation of individuals. We propose two hypotheses about self-reflection.

H₇: HRPs who engage in personal self-reflection are perceived as having greater humility than HRPs who do not.

H₈: Organizations whose leaders actively engage in self-reflection are more successful than organizations that do not.

4. A Challenge and Opportunity

Leadership scholars and practitioners rarely discuss humility and leadership in the same breath. In fact, countless other attributes are often prioritized over humility in leadership development. Particularly in western cultures, humility is almost an antonym to effective leadership. Indeed, western leaders are often encouraged to be overly confident, proud, hard charging, and aggressive as a means of demonstrating their competence and worth to followers. On the contrary, softer tones emphasizing listening, relationship-building, and valuing others' roles and contributions have been somewhat overlooked—potentially contributing to the leadership issues organizations and HRPs face today. For humility to be embraced by HRPs, organization leaders need to also model humble behaviors and encourage others to do so. An organization's culture is shaped by its leaders and HRPs who establish goals, priorities, and core values. Once established, those core values need to be defined, modeled, and integrated by leaders and HRPs as a means of promulgating those values across the organization. We hope the outlined elements of self-discovery can serve as a guide for HRPs to use as part of their own self-discovery and, more broadly, developing humility in themselves and the organizations they support.

5. Conclusion

As HRPs strive to increase their effectiveness, developing their ability to improve relationships with others requires that they be perceived as more caring, more competent, and more genuine. They honor the responsibilities that match the quasi-sacred nature of interpersonal relationships that are widely acknowledged as fundamental elements of leadership and service (Covey, 2004; DePree, 2004).

As HRPs increase their understanding of the six elements that make up personal self-discovery, they can become leaders who possess humility in establishing the relationships that enable them to be perceived as personally credible, authentic, and fully competent. In a world where leaders and organizations struggle to earn and retain the commitment and followership of their employees, HRPs who invest in self-discovery are able to create the relationships that are worthy of others' trust. Developing greater humility by incorporating the elements of self-discovery becomes both an opportunity and a personal challenge that can enable HRPs to honor themselves, their organizations, and the people whom they serve.

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