

Up With Humility

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One of the greatly undervalued virtues today is humility—having a humble attitude. Public praise for humility is rare these days. In fact, saying someone is humble may not even be considered praise, at least not in a society where an in-your-face attitude is often condoned or admired.

But humility is important. It is especially valuable in the workplace. Humility is the key to effective training, to serving customers, to improving quality.

Think about today's emphasis on training and learning new skills. Despite all the talk from teachers and trainers about empowerment, enablement and self-esteem, learning can only happen when someone is humble enough to admit ignorance: "I don't know this but I need to learn it." People who think they already have all the answers are truly unteachable. (This is why top managers are sometimes the biggest hindrances to change.)

Likewise, skills are only acquired when someone accepts the need to practice, practice, practice. It takes humility to submit to the work of learning, literally, to get down to the lessons or exercises on hand.

Humility is the basis of true service, putting someone else's needs and interests ahead of your own. If you think that you are more important than those you work for, or that you are more important than those you work with, or that you are more important than those whose work you oversee, then you can't be a very good follower, or a very good team player, or a very good leader. But worst of all, you probably can't offer your customers very much either.

Arrogant disregard for their needs is a manifestation of this waywardness in the extreme, but in less conspicuous ways, an inability to get outside your own world and inside your customer's world will be a persistent handicap, maybe even a fatal flaw.

Humble people take pride in their work but not in themselves. That is why humility underlies a passion for quality in manufacturing. There has to be a willingness to define self worth in terms of how well we can make things. It includes a willingness to be measured by standards of excellence not necessarily of our own choosing.

In their capacity to learn, to change, to serve customers, and to pursue quality, those possessing humility have strength, nobility and greatness. The earth is indeed their inheritance.