

Humble Leadership: The Power of Relationships, Openness and Trust

Edgar Schein and Peter Schein

Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2018. 163 Pages

REVIEWED BY DARIN L. GERDES
Charleston Southern University

Edgar Schein, professor emeritus at MIT, is a well-established scholar in fields such as process consultation, organizational change, and organizational culture. He has published numerous books and articles in his more than 50 years in academia. His son, Peter Schein, is a co-founder and COO of the Organizational Culture and Leadership Institute.

Humble Leadership is part of a progressive unfolding of Edgar Schein's research on organizations. It follows closely on the heels of *Humble Inquiry* (2013), in which Schein argues that asking is superior to telling because it enhances trust and builds relationships, and *Humble Consulting* (2016), in which Schein applies this concept to organizational diagnosis. These books, in turn, were extensions of *Helping* (2009) which laid the groundwork for the other works.

Schein and Schein argue that we must see our coworkers as whole persons rather than formal roles or functions (e.g., an accountant or a production manager). They argue that there are four levels of relationship and the optimal level for the workplace will lead to the best organizational results.

Level Minus 1: Domination and coercion of others

Level 1: Traditional business roles

Level 2: Personal, trusting relationships

Level 3: Emotionally intimate personal relationships

The authors argue that Level Minus 1 is always wrong. It is never right to violate another person's humanity. Regardless of practice, few would argue in favor of Level Minus 1.

However, the authors also argue that Level 1 (traditional business roles), characterized by professional distance, is inefficient. Professional distance causes many common organizational dysfunctions. This happens

because at Level 1, it is easy to slide into subtle forms of objectification. When we see others as little more than their organizational role it creates an artificial environment that leads to distrust. Distrust then leads to inefficiency. In a culture marked by objectification, socially acceptable workplace abuses are sure to follow. The authors' solution is "personization."

Personization is not a typo but the introduction of a new concept...Personization is the process of mutually building a working relationship with a fellow employee, teammate, boss, subordinate, or colleague, based on trying to see that person as a whole, not just in the role that he or she may occupy in the moment. (Schein & Schein, 2018, pp. 24-25)

Yet, personization is only possible when leaders are humble enough to recognize the inherent dignity of their followers. Humility allows leaders to be vulnerable and vulnerability opens the door to trusting relationships. Humility allows us to get beyond the professional distance of Level 1.

A leader's disposition toward his followers invites reciprocation. At Level 1, the maintenance of professional distance leads to distrust. At Level 2, recognition of the whole person leads to relationship, trust, and dignity. At this level, formal roles have not changed, but the relational dynamic has. The authors do not argue that Level 3, intimate relationships, are the goal; those are reserved for family and close personal friendships.

The book is divided into nine chapters. The authors' major thesis is laid out in the first two chapters. The next six chapters contain case studies and application that help readers understand the effects of humble leadership. For example, they found that this approach to workplace relationships helped leaders become more effective and it

enabled teams to operate at peak performance. Humble leadership worked in businesses and nonprofits alike. Surprisingly, they found that it also worked in strict, hierarchical environments, such as the government of Singapore and the U.S. military.

Nevertheless, humble leadership is no panacea. The authors included scenarios in which humble leaders fell short. In a number of cases, the dominant culture overpowered humble leadership. In one, the CEO was a humble leader, but as the organization rapidly expanded, the organization returned to many of its former ways and he was fired. In another, a humble manager's command-and-control boss was uncomfortable with his "soft" approach. He was let go in spite of achieving excellent results. In another case, a CEO put programs in place to encourage humble leadership, but the next CEO withdrew this support, undermining his predecessor's efforts. The authors explained that, "Humble Leadership can work anywhere but it is vulnerable to senior executive lack of support" (p. 99).

The final chapter contains a suggested reading list and a half-dozen practical exercises. The exercises are useful for immediate student engagement.

While Schein and Schein make no overt theological claims, their well-researched findings are compatible with a Christian perspective. Biblically, people are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27; Hebrews 2:7). They are not objects to be manipulated, and they should not be reduced to their professional functions. As the authors remind us, "One can only engage a person, not a role" (p. 35).

Humble Leadership is too short to be the only textbook, but it may be a useful supplement in any leadership class (leadership, organizational change, organizational behavior, principles of management, etc.). It is clear and accessible. More importantly, it will change the tone of the conversation because it will help the aspiring leaders that sit in your classroom remember that while people are a *means* in the organization, they are also valuable as *ends* in themselves. I heartily recommend *Humble Leadership*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Darin Gerdes, PhD, is a professor of management in the College of Business and the director of instructional technology at Charleston Southern University. He teaches leadership and management courses, primarily to graduate students.