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Emotional Intelligence

Don’t Let Power Corrupt You

by Julie Battilana and Tiziana Casciaro

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Dave Sandford

Summary. Although power is essential to taking charge and driving change, it makes leaders vulnerable to two traps that can not only erode their own effectiveness but also undermine their team’s. Hubris—the excessive pride and self-confidence that can come with... **more**

As the physician Vera Cordeiro tended to impoverished children at Rio de Janeiro's bustling Lagoa public hospital, her anger mounted. Illnesses easily treated in private hospitals for the well-to-do were death sentences for many of her patients, who lacked regular meals and sanitary living conditions. So in 1991 she founded a nonprofit, Associação Saúde Criança (Brazil Child Health), to break the cycle of poverty by providing the medical care the children needed and supporting their vulnerable families.

Initially Cordeiro relied on personal funds and the help of family and friends. But in time she realized that she had to seek the support of Rio's rich and powerful. Although uninterested in—even somewhat repelled by—power herself, she worked hard to attract the attention of private donors, government authorities, the media, and the public. Her NGO (since renamed Instituto DARA) became one of the country's most successful nonprofits. Accolades poured in.

Along the way, Cordeiro realized she had become more comfortable with power. She was well-connected nationally and internationally and frequently spoke at the World Economic Forum and other prestigious conferences. But she started to get troubling feedback from people close to her. Colleagues complained that she was constantly interrupting them and running roughshod over their ideas. Her adult daughter wondered why she now cared so much about awards ceremonies and other high-profile events. She recognized that her immersion in power was changing her.

Having once been wary of power is no guarantee that you are immune to abusing it. We are all susceptible to its intoxicating effects. Essential though power is to taking charge and leading change, it makes you vulnerable to two insidious traps—hubris and self-focus—that can not only erode your own effectiveness but also undermine your team's. We have studied and taught classes in power for two decades and have interviewed more than a hundred people on five continents about how they attained and exercise it. In this article we offer strategies for recognizing power's pitfalls, as Vera Cordeiro ultimately did, and avoiding them.

The Dangers of Hubris and Self-Focus

The perils of hubris—the excessive pride and self-confidence that can come with power—are well-documented. Consider a study in which some participants were asked to write about a time when they felt powerful while others wrote about feeling powerless. All were then given a die, offered a reward for correctly predicting the outcome of a roll, and asked if they wanted to throw the die themselves or have the experimenter do it. Only 58% of those who had written about feeling powerless rolled for themselves, while every single participant who wrote about feeling powerful did so. Simply recalling an experience of power can lead people to greatly overestimate their abilities, even to the extent of thinking they can affect a random roll of a die.

If that's what thinking about power for a few minutes can do, imagine the implications of holding an important position for years. It's no wonder studies of CEO hubris abound. Research shows that top executives who have experienced and been lauded for success become so overconfident that they'll pay vastly inflated premiums for acquisitions, especially when board vigilance is lacking. The greater the CEO hubris and acquisition premiums, the greater the shareholder losses. If power goes to your head, everyone loses.

Dave Sandford

Psychologists have documented the impact of reflecting even briefly on one's power relative to that of others. In one study, researchers asked participants to think about either those with the most wealth and prestige in the United States or those with the least, and then to mark their own position on a ladder. Reflecting on the most-powerful people led participants to feel relatively powerless and to place themselves low on the ladder, while reflecting on the least powerful led them to place themselves higher. The participants were then given a well-known test, Reading the Mind in the Eyes, which measures people's empathy by asking them to discern others' emotional states from photos of their eyes. Those who had been led to think of themselves as high-ranking were significantly less accurate; the feeling of power made them less attentive to others' emotions.

Such insensitivity is often reflected in managers' poor understanding of the relationships among subordinates. Research shows that the ability to map networks is a source of power—but paradoxically, as people become more powerful, they are less likely to harness the benefits of accurately perceiving networks below them. That's because of the self-focus induced by power: People at the top tend to become less attentive to subordinates and can't be bothered to map their networks.

Not “seeing” the people you lead diminishes effectiveness all around. You can’t lead colleagues you don’t understand—and people aren’t motivated or able to contribute their best efforts if they perceive that you are disconnected from and uninterested in them. You might be able to push through in the short term, but eventually their performance will suffer and your leadership may be called into question.

To effectively exercise power while avoiding its pitfalls, leaders must cultivate humility as an antidote to hubris and empathy as an antidote to self-focus. Those qualities increase openness to learning and altruism—the keys to using power toward a collective purpose that transcends self-interest.

Cultivating Humility

Humility—freedom from pride or arrogance—requires having an accurate perception of one’s own abilities, accomplishments, and limitations. Several steps can help you instill it in yourself and your team.

Make it acceptable—even desirable—to say, “I don’t know.”

Priscilla Luna is the vice president of enterprise operations at Loblaws Companies, a Canadian retail food and pharmacy chain. Here’s what she says about training pharmacy students early in her career: “I always told them, ‘When a patient wants to know something about their medication, don’t ever feel you must answer their question right away. If you know your answer 100%, of course go for it. But if you are not 100% sure, give yourself permission to tell them you’ll look into it. You build credibility and trust by being humble and saying, “I don’t know.”’ I still give this advice to my teams.”

Anne Mulcahy, the CEO of Xerox from 2001 to 2009, was dubbed “the master of ‘I don’t know!’” by her colleagues. “They actually gain confidence [in you] when you admit you don’t know something,” she says. Her humble approach created space for others to offer their expertise and engage in turning the troubled

company around. Research confirms that when a leader expresses humility, the quality of team members' contributions improves, and job satisfaction, retention, engagement, and openness to learning rise as well.

Establish ways to obtain honest input. When a few team members dominate the airtime, it's generally out of a conviction that they know best and don't need to hear from anyone else. But not even the strongest leaders have all the answers. And studies have shown that the extent to which members take turns speaking is one of the best predictors of team performance.

Having realized that hubris was beginning to affect her leadership, Vera Cordeiro knew she needed to manage the negative effects of power. So she structured her weekly executive team meetings to give everyone the same amount of time to report on activities and share ideas and concerns. This fostered inclusivity and built a communal sense of responsibility. She also made a public commitment not to interrupt her colleagues and to listen carefully before voicing her reactions, and she asked others to do the same.

> **A banking executive who volunteers at an inner-city school or a homeless shelter will think differently about the social role of financial institutions.**

Leaders can encourage broad participation by establishing formal channels for honest input. Many companies do so through "all hands," "open mic," and "ask me anything" forums, starting with the top leadership team and extending all the way down the hierarchy. As the CEO of VIDA, a global platform that connects designers and manufacturers to produce and sell original apparel and accessories at scale, Umaimah Mendhro started weekly all-

hands meetings. In them she was careful to model the approach she wanted everyone to adopt. “If I am the only one making decisions, then we are only as good as I am, and that’s not good enough,” she says. “The most important thing to me is to lead with curiosity and not ego, and to be transparent about what I know and what I do not know. I look to ask questions and make a conscious effort to listen carefully, and I have learned to be genuinely excited about all the moments I am proven wrong and others have proposed better ideas than mine. There is power in recognizing your own limitations and in empowering others.”

Some leaders create personal channels to obtain straight talk from their people. Tracy Abel, the chief operations and pension officer at Ontario Teachers’ Pension Plan, instituted a “culture council” consisting of 12 team members in whom she has a lot of trust. Their job is to give her candid feedback, no holds barred. They don’t hesitate to tell her when they don’t like something she’s said or done, and they serve as a sounding board for her ideas. “It’s invaluable,” Abel told us. “It keeps you grounded.”

Sometimes opportunities for honest feedback emerge organically —and the best leaders embrace them. Ciarán Hayes did so after he became CEO of the Sligo (Ireland) County Council. While being shown around the offices, he was told that a particular table in the canteen was known as the bold table, because those who sat there —a mix of senior and middle managers and technical staffers— shared their opinions about all and sundry. “I determined that would be the table I would sit at—and true to form, everybody at it was ritually cut down to size, including myself,” Hayes says. “It was the perfect environment in which to keep your feet on the ground as well as your finger on the pulse.”

Create visible reminders that success is fleeting. Historians have written that behind every victorious Roman general riding through the streets in a chariot stood a slave whispering, *“Hominem te memento”* (“Remember that you are [but] a man”). Nothing dampens illusions of infallibility more than a *memento*

mori, a reminder of the impermanence of our lives.

Andrea Van Leeuwen, the head of marketing at Facebook and Instagram Canada, told us how Facebook reminds its employees of the transitory nature of success. Its headquarters is located in the former Sun Microsystems building, but instead of replacing the free-standing sign out front, the company simply flipped the sign over and put Facebook's name on the back. "Whenever anyone does a campus walkthrough, they see the sign and its reverse," Van Leeuwen explains. "It's a signal to say, 'Just because you are doing well today doesn't mean you'll be around tomorrow.'" She adds that when someone offers a differing viewpoint, employees are urged to ask themselves, "What if they're right?"—a simple and effective reminder that others have something to offer.

Measure and reward humility. If you want to increase your humility, you must measure it. However, you can't reliably assess it in yourself. An overconfident person is apt to claim, "I am the humblest person you'll ever meet," whereas someone who is genuinely humble will be more likely to say, "I try to stay humble, but I often fail." To get a true picture of how humble (or not) you are, ask your colleagues for an honest assessment. (For guidance on specific criteria they can consider, see the sidebar "Are You Humble?")

Are You Humble?

The researchers Bradley Owens, Michael Johnson, and Terence Mitchell developed the following assessment for ...

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Cultivating Empathy

Psychologists have shown that people view themselves as either separate from and independent of others or connected and interdependent. Not surprisingly, the latter perspective inspires greater empathy and cooperation—antidotes to the self-absorption that power can bring. Empathy can be encouraged though simple interventions, such as having someone substitute interdependent pronouns (we, ours) when reading a story containing independent pronouns (I, mine).

New leaders tend to be self-focused. They often feel they have a lot to prove, and that takes their attention inward. Unless their development is stunted, they gradually come to see themselves as interdependent with larger entities: company, community, and country, and ultimately humanity and the planet. That sense of interdependence allows them to develop empathy: the ability to understand and share the feelings of others. Vera Cordeiro turned to meditation to help her counter a tendency toward self-focus. Developing a regular practice "helped me have more empathy for my staff and the families our NGO serves, reminding me of the primacy of our social mission," she told us. In connecting empathy with her organization's mission, Cordeiro took a fundamental step along the developmental path to exercising power wisely: embracing the recognition that we are all part of one human family.

The following actions can foster empathy in yourself and your team.

Immerse yourself in other people's jobs. The more embedded you are in someone else's reality, the more empathy you'll feel. A manager who once held an entry-level job and makes a point of getting to know lower-level workers will appreciate the contributions of frontline personnel more than will a colleague who started in a mid-level position and ventures out of his or her office only for power lunches with clients and investors.

What If You're *Too* Humble?

When we talk with women (and some men) in leadership roles, they often raise entirely different concerns: Far from ...

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Recent-graduate hires at Bell Canada spend eight weeks in call center and retail positions to gain frontline customer-service experience in preparation for future management roles. The Ontario Teachers' Pension Plan has a program whereby employees can "take a trip" to another part of the business, working there for a while before returning to their usual roles. We have studied social enterprises in the United States and Europe in which social workers and technical staffers shadow one another to gain a better understanding of others' work.

Experiencing someone else's reality firsthand builds empathy for colleagues and an appreciation for how various parts of the business are linked, creating the conditions to break down silos and enhance collaboration.

Use storytelling to make things personal. It's not always possible,

of course, to immerse oneself in another person's job. Hearing others' stories is a powerful alternative that likewise builds empathy. By creating space for such storytelling, organizations can help people transcend their own perspectives.

Janice Smith, the vice president of national sales at Rogers Sports & Media, told us that a wave of empathy was generated by "safe talk" sessions at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic and continued during the protests after the murder of George Floyd. "These are brave individuals who come together and share their personal experiences and stories of pain, with the deepest vulnerability and transparency," she says. "These sessions are a safe space, and the trust they create is not only a comfort in a time of great need but immensely powerful and life-changing. Colleagues from all levels and every area of the business listen to these stories, learn and educate, get inspired, and become better people. It's been a game changer for company culture."

Embed interdependence in organizational systems. Companies can also combat self-focus by building an awareness of interdependence into their systems. Microsoft has removed ratings from its performance review process, refocusing evaluations on collaboration. Managers first ask employees, "How did you contribute to the success of others?" They then want to know, "How did your results build on the work, ideas, and efforts of others?" During the review process, they also encourage reflection with the question "What could you have done differently?" This approach spotlights the reality that employees don't work in a vacuum, they need one another, and their actions have consequences for their colleagues. It's hard to remain self-focused in such a system.

Dave Sandford photographs the powerful waves of the Great Lakes. Cold arctic air pushing against a warm front from the south creates perfect storm conditions, high winds, waves that can reach heights of 20 to 30 feet, and even shipwrecks. Dave Sandford

During the pandemic, VIDA CEO Umaimah Mendhro and her team wanted to strengthen awareness of the organization's interdependence with the community and the environment. So they made VIDA a public-benefit corporation—a for-profit entity whose legally defined goals include making a positive impact on workers, the community, society, and the environment. "We do not want to fall into a place where we lose sight of our social responsibilities," Mendhro explains. "It's a matter of balancing power. By becoming a public-benefit corporation, we have structurally and legally created this accountability never to abuse power purely for profit. If I am no longer there, if we have another investor, or a buyer, they will know what they are getting: a company aligned with this accountability and responsibility."

Step out of your company and into the real world. To appreciate your impact on others and develop empathy for them, you must move beyond the confines of your company and into communities whose lived experience is profoundly different from your own. This personal engagement is invaluable to shedding self-absorption and putting yourself and your business goals in perspective.

Anand Mahindra, the chairman of the Indian conglomerate Mahindra Group, understands the need for such connections. His mother, who came from a modest background, raised him with a healthy skepticism about those born to money (as his father was). She made sure her children met people from outside the halls of privilege, whom she saw as "the salt of the earth": those who know about life's hardships and about making it on one's own. She sent Mahindra to a government-run school, attended by children from backgrounds very different from his own, rather than one of the private institutions typically attended by the children of the elite. The unease with privilege this instilled in him led Mahindra initially to stay out of the family business, he told us. Only later, when his family needed him, did he join the firm, where his sensitivity to the perils of privilege became an important strength. "I've come to conclude that perhaps the best way to exercise power, the most responsible way to wield power, is to have a very constructive discomfort with it," he says. Staying connected to the world at large is key to developing such discomfort.

We've seen the positive impact of engagement with the real world manifested in young people and seasoned executives alike. A university student from an affluent family who takes a summer job at a fast-food restaurant will know what it means to be at the bottom of a hierarchy and will have some insight into how tough it is to live on a minimum wage. A banking executive who volunteers at an inner-city school or a homeless shelter will think

differently about the social role of financial institutions. Whatever your stature and status, engaging with the community around you will help you resist self-focus.

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A balanced relationship with power is seldom developed overnight; after all, our emotions, not just our thoughts, are in play. And as Vera Cordeiro discovered, even when we exercise power for a noble purpose, we remain vulnerable to its corrosive effects. But by cultivating humility and empathy and implementing organizational structures that ensure true power-sharing and accountability, we can avoid the twin pitfalls of hubris and self-focus. Leaders who do so will boost their own effectiveness and facilitate exceptional performance from their teams. The novelist and Nobel laureate Toni Morrison summed up the challenge and the opportunity succinctly. "If you have some power," she used to tell her students, "then your job is to empower somebody else."

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Julie Battilana is the Joseph C. Wilson Professor of Business Administration at Harvard Business School and the Alan L. Gleitsman Professor of Social Innovation at Harvard Kennedy School, where she is the founder and faculty chair of the Social Innovation and Change Initiative. She is the co-author of *Power, for All: How It Really Works and Why It's Everyone's Business* (Simon & Schuster, 2021).

Tiziana Casciaro is a professor of organizational behavior and HR management and holds the Marcel Desautels Chair in Integrative Thinking at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management. She is the co-author of *Power, for All: How It Really Works and Why It's Everyone's Business* (Simon & Schuster, 2021).

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