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SIPR BRIEFING No 6 - HUMBLE LEADERSHIP AND THE POLICE SERVICE

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"The chief executive who knows his strengths and weaknesses as a leader is likely to be far more effective than the one who remains blind to them. He also is on the road to humility, that priceless attitude of openness to life that can help a manager absorb mistakes, failures, or personal shortcomings."

John Adair quoted by Henry O. Dorman in *The Speaker's Book of Quotations* (1987).

"Humility is one of those leadership traits you do not see as frequently as you should. Humility is often perceived as a weakness when, in fact, it can be a tremendous asset. The leader who is humble rarely allows the power of their position to cloud their judgment. The leader who recognizes they are not perfect creates an environment where those around them feel comfortable making mistakes and taking chances".

Leroy McCarty (2009) on <http://www.emergingleader.com/article20.shtml>

WHAT IS HUMBLE LEADERSHIP?

The concepts of 'Humble Leadership' and 'Leader Humility' are emerging as areas of interest in leadership studies and this briefing note is intended to highlight their potential relevance as a leadership style in the police service. The notion of humble leadership being of relevance to the police service *per se* was first raised by Leadership Professor Dennis Tourish at the SIPR New Directions in Policing, leadership seminar held at the Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen on 7 May, 2009.

In leadership research there is a tendency to concentrate upon the charismatic vein that flows through leadership. However, not all leaders are comfortable with the theatricality and showmanship which often accompany this very public style of leadership. In public services such as the police there is often merit in adopting a cloak of anonymity and being quiet and industrious as one goes about the task of supervising, managing and leading their team. Middle management is a psychic space where one is under pressure to quietly perform and produce results. Thus paradoxically, being the proverbial but dependable 'Grey Man' can have potential benefits in terms of career development. This is particularly true of those officers who are in temporary roles and acting ranks. In this respect the metaphors of the steward and the caretaker are of particular relevance.

Humble leadership is a contemporary concept which is in its infancy in academic terms. As a result the literature is under development. At present it has currency on leadership blogs and in website discussions. The emergence of humble leadership has resulted from a realisation that charismatic leadership can result in unethical leadership. Indeed, Howell & Avolio (1992) challenged the sustainability of the model of unethical, charismatic leadership which appear to prevail in the corporate world. Consequentially, Howell & Avolio (1992) advised the corporate leader to adopt a humble persona. It can be sound

advice. In a similar vein Morris, Brotheridge & Urbanski (2005) compare and contrast the Machiavellianism of corporate success and leadership with what they refer to as the characteristics and demands of humble leadership. They challenge the romanticized notion of the celebrity CEO as lionized in the popular business press. Their scepticism was perhaps fuelled by the corporate malfeasance of such popular corporate scandals such as BCCI and ENRON. It is also of significance that their challenge was made before the financial collapse and the horrific litany of greed and moral panic that followed the financial collapse of 2009 and the Parliamentary expenses fiasco.

To Morris, Brotheridge & Urbanski, the humble leader possessing a blend of humility and strong personal will is the antithesis of the selfish and the grasping corporate mercenary. As a consequence, Morris, Brotheridge & Urbanski (2005) charted the nexus between humility and leadership, mapping and conceptualising the traits that may act as predictors of humility and potentially be channelled as 'a specific' leadership behaviour. Hogan & Kaiser (2005) also appreciate the place of the modest and humble leader as a counterfoil to the self-dramatizing and self serving charismatic leader.

Bass & Steidlmeier (1999) refer to the concept of moral leadership which is of course relevant to this paper. According to Bass (1956), conventional morality necessitates enacting a certain type of behaviour which includes being humble and virtuous. Leaving aside the religious and faith based elements of humble leadership (Standish, 2007) there appears to be sufficient credence and substance to the concept as a leadership style which may be of relevance to contemporary policing. But first we must go in search of the humble leader.

IN SEARCH OF THE HUMBLE LEADER

So what is humble leadership? It is a form of principle centered leadership as envisaged by Covey (1992) but humble leadership transcends 'Servant Leadership' as envisaged by Greenleaf (2002). Sendjaya & Sarros (2002) examined the philosophical foundation of servant leadership by extracting value-laden principles drawn from Greenleaf and from religion. Interestingly, Greenleaf (2002) characterises the servant leader as being humble. Nevertheless, Holmberg & Åkerblom (2001) note that modesty and honesty are seldom mentioned in the business context when reporting on leaders which strikes them as being strange because in real life many leaders are often unpretentious and humble. Moreover, for Hess (2007) humble leaders are 'quiet leaders'.

Thus there is a common thread in the literature which embeds humble leadership at an individual and trait based level. It entails reflective introspection and an ability to understand your strengths and weaknesses.

Understanding your strengths and weaknesses creates a great opportunity to grow as an individual and as a leader (McCarty, 2009). Thus the humble leader accepts that they do not know all the answers and do not have difficulty in allowing others to explain things to them. In the act of being humble, the leader makes others feel important and valued. Strong leadership is built upon a strong foundation and leaders know that no matter how

high they rise, there is still the possibility of a proverbial fall from grace. The humble leader therefore guards against the corporate sin of hubris. Strong leadership is built upon a foundation of personal qualities such as integrity, honesty, humility and reliability. Humility in leadership entails a person's honest and open assessment of their own abilities, and the contribution of and relationships with others. The humble leader on making a mistake acknowledges it but stays focused on their mission and goals and enlists the help of the team to move forward. Such openness may be problematic in a policing context.

Granted it is risky but humble leadership stems from having humble character and from selflessness and as a result creates an aura of nobility of purpose. The essence of humility is the presence and practice of self awareness and the humble leader resists the urge to brag and boast. It is therefore a restrained form of leadership. Humility is not weakness and in fact humble leaders utilise every opportunity to promote, display and encourage the leadership of others before self.

Dennis (2009) proffers the following advice in relation to those who wish to practice humble leadership:

- Serve others – irrespective of position;
- Listen to feedback and criticism and resist defensiveness;
- Be patient with injustice against you and resist the urge to fight back;
- Acknowledge mistakes – admitting professional mistakes is a sign of character ;
- Submit to authority and resist the cultural inclination towards individualism. When necessary submit with grace;
- Find the lowly place. For example give up your reserved chair on occasion ;
- Associate with those less fortunate - This can be difficult but is vital in building a humility profile;
- Forgive – because we all make mistakes;
- Speak well of others, particularly of subordinates.

Dennis advocates that leaders build these issues into their everyday working practices. Humbleness is an admired societal trait as in emerging from humble roots or beginnings – of being rooted in reality. Indeed, humbleness is also an important leadership quality. In leadership terms it entails:

- Possessing the ability to recognise the work of others;
- Attributing credit where credit is due;
- Taking the blame for the team.
- Learning to listen, to not judge harshly and to give compliments and rewards for good work.

These qualities are often difficult to implement in an organisational and institutional context particularly those like the police with blame cultures (Adlam & Villiers, 2003).

ASSESSING ITS RELEVENCE TO THE POLICE SERVICE?

With the police service in Britain undergoing a period of rapid and significant change there is obviously room for another leadership style to add to the armoury. In relation to leadership in the police service being seen as epitomising the qualities exhibited by the quiet leader as envisaged by Hess (2007), the concept could be beneficial in the short term because one could be seen as being a 'safe pair of hands'. Thus humble leadership as a practice could fit in well with the 'Stewardship ethic' prevalent in the police and other public services. In such organisations, leaders often appreciate that they have a short term of tenure in post. Thus their short term plan is to ensure that they do not make mistakes and are able to hand over a department or team to a successor in the 'good shape' they inherited it. Short term careerists resist tinkering with structures, processes and procedures. They often do not take risks or initiate change because they appreciate that they are being watched by their line managers and by Command.

However, adopting a humble leadership style need not entail embracing inertia because humble leaders are often task orientated and get on with the job in hand. The ambitious but humble leader in a police context appreciates the short term nature of many leadership positions and embraces them as opportunities not threats. Thus, if making entrepreneurial change is not an option in your situation, elect to make a difference to those under your command and to the communities you serve. Unlike the ambitious and charismatic high fliers the humble police leader can embark on a slow and cautious journey whilst embracing a problem solving approach in organisational and operation terms. In the long term leaders are ultimately judged by their results.

This is sound advice for those officers who increasingly have to perform 'acting ranks' for short periods of time, often under pressure. There is a pressure to shine and above all not to be seen to be wrong or make a mistake. In such circumstances being humble is a sound option because invariably your team may know more about the particular process than the leader does. Humble leadership is patently the opposite of the dominance model of leadership and as a result the humble leader does not overshadow their team. If the leader is humble there is a good chance that they will also be respected and develop the capacity to influence others. The humble Police leader is a relevant concept because humble leaders create an organizational culture that respects the strengths of all staff whilst being secure enough to accept having weaknesses.

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