

What is humility: a brief definition

Complete these words to ascertain a helpful definition of humility

Humble people...



- acknowledge, explore, and embrace their limitations and shortcomings,
- appreciate other people and perspectives,
- integrate these insights with their existing beliefs, values, and tendencies.

Before we explore these three features of humility in more detail, we will demonstrate some of the benefits of humility

What do you feel are the benefits of humility?



Complete one or more of the following exercises:



- Recall an occasion in which you acted with humility—such as a time you decided not to demonstrate your knowledge or refer to a recent achievement. How did you feel about yourself afterwards?
- Identify one or more people who you admire who you also perceive as humble. What do you like about these people?
- Identify some arrogant people you do not like. Why do you dislike these people.

From these exercises, list some of the benefits of humility from your perspective



Established benefits of humility

The following table outlines the benefits of humility that researchers have uncovered.

- Which one to three discoveries surprised you the most?
- Which one to three discoveries do you feel may be interesting to other people?
- Imagine a conversation in which you convey one of these discoveries to someone else (Mendonça et al., 2023).

Performance

Generally, people who tend to be humble—and, for example, acknowledge their limitations, question their assumptions, consider diverse perspectives, and do not perceive themselves or their community as inherently superior—perform better on many tasks. For example, these individuals

- receive higher grades at university (Wong & Wong, 2021), partly because they are more receptive to feedback,
- differentiate strong arguments from tenuous arguments better (Leary et al., 2017)—and are not as inclined to ascribe problems in society to secret deals or other conspiracies (Bertin, 2024)
- develop more extensive general knowledge (Krumrei-Mancuso et al., 2020),
- are more prudent, diminishing the likelihood of bankruptcy (Dixon et al., 2025).

Resilience and wellbeing

Typically, people who exhibit the hallmarks of humility—such as acknowledge their limitations, embrace other perspectives, and strive to develop rather than seem defensive or feel special—tend to experience greater wellbeing. For example, these individuals

- experience a greater sense of autonomy, mastery, growth, positive relationships, sense of purpose, and self-acceptance (Ross & Wright, 2023; see also Wright et al., 2018),
- enjoy greater satisfaction with life and more pleasant emotions (e.g., Scharbert et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2025),
- cope better and exhibit resilience in response to initial failures (Porter et al., 2020), unfavourable feedback (Wong & Wong, 2021), personal conflicts (Peetz & Grossmann, 2021), or other adversities (e.g., Zhang et al., 2025).

Relationships

Typically, people who exhibit humility—such as acknowledge their limitations, embrace other perspectives, and strive to develop rather than seem very defensive, competitive, or conceited—are more likely to establish and to maintain trusting and supportive relationships (Peters et al., 2011). For example, these individuals

- are more generous, charitable, empathic, grateful, and willing to assist other individuals (Krumrei-Mancuso, 2017; Zhang et al., 2025)—even after controlling personality (Exline & Hill, 2012),
- establish more satisfying romantic relationships—relationships in which their partner feels satisfied too (Zeigler-Hill et al., 2024).



Integrity

Individuals who are narcissistic are more likely to engage in academic misconduct, such as cheat or plagiarise. This relationship can partly be explained by a sense of entitlement (Curtis et al., 2022).

Leadership

When leaders are humble rather than narcissistic or conceited, they tend to enhance the performance of their teams or organisation and are more likely to be perceived as effective (Lynch & Benson, 2024). For example

- the organisations they lead perform better on the share market than expected (Petrenko et al., 2019),
- the teams they lead tend to collaborate more effectively (Ou et al., 2018; Owens & Hekman, 2016) as well as support customers more proactively and effectively (Peng et al., 2023),
- these teams also adapt effectively and proactively to accommodate recent changes and innovations in the sector (Chaudhary et al., 2025),
- the individuals they lead feel more supported and satisfied with their jobs (Krumrei-Mancuso & Rowatt, 2023).

Did you know



Individuals tend to prefer political leaders who exhibit humility, especially in circumstances in which cooperation and discussion with opposing communities are vital (Koetke & Schumann, 2025).

Did you know



To earn a higher salary, many staff highlight their experience, their education, and the long hours they work, praise colleagues to seem likeable, or even attempt to intimidate co-workers occasionally. Interestingly, staff who utilise these strategies, called impression management, tend to earn a lower salary and receive fewer promotions (Debus et al., 2024).

Exceptions and caveats

Admittedly, the benefits of humility, and the drawbacks of narcissism, entitlement, and conceit, may not be as pronounced in all circumstances. Below are some of these caveats. To what extent do these caveats may apply to your circumstances?



In Western nations, narcissistic people tend to refrain from acts that are intended to benefit the community, such as donations to social causes. But, in some Eastern nations, in which individuals may be more inclined to define themselves by their community and relationships, narcissistic people may be more inclined to initiate these acts to pursue status in their community (An et al., 2024).

In some workplaces, most people, including leaders, embrace the importance of freedom and autonomy. These people recognise that individuals should be granted the right to express themselves and even to deviate from social norms occasionally.

In other workplaces, people are more concerned about law and order. They believe that individuals who deviate from social norms should, in general, be swiftly punished.

In workplaces that prioritise law and order, staff tend to prefer leaders who are authoritarian, dominant, and even masculine—leaders who control and restrict their staff (Chen et al., 2024). Consequently, individuals in these workplaces may, at least initially, be concerned that humble leaders will not control and restrict other people sufficiently.

Some facets of narcissism may be helpful in specific settings. For example, in US states in which narcissism is higher, obesity is not as prevalent, perhaps because narcissistic individuals are often especially concerned about their appearance (Gruda et al., 2024).

The drawbacks of humility

In the following space, list what you feel might be the drawbacks of humility. For example, you might assume that people who are humble do not feel assured and confident.

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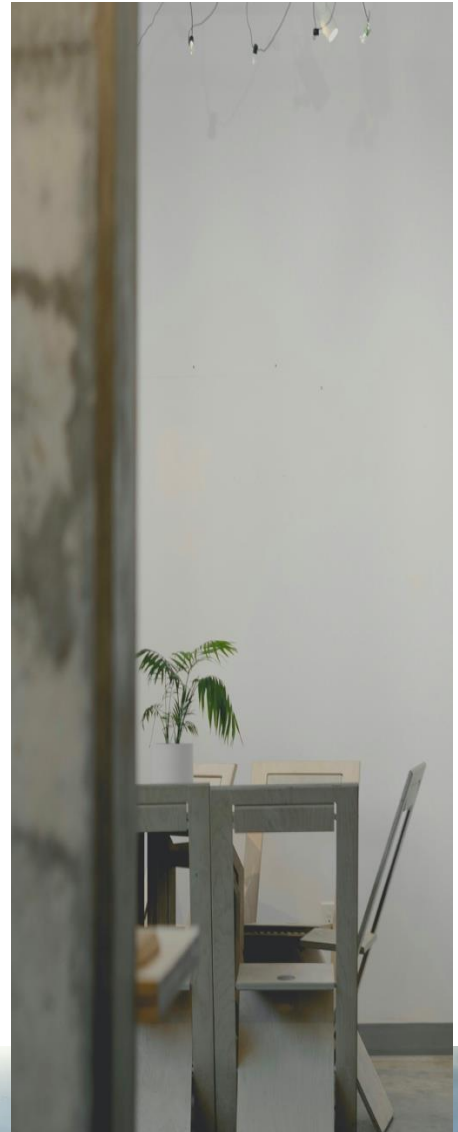
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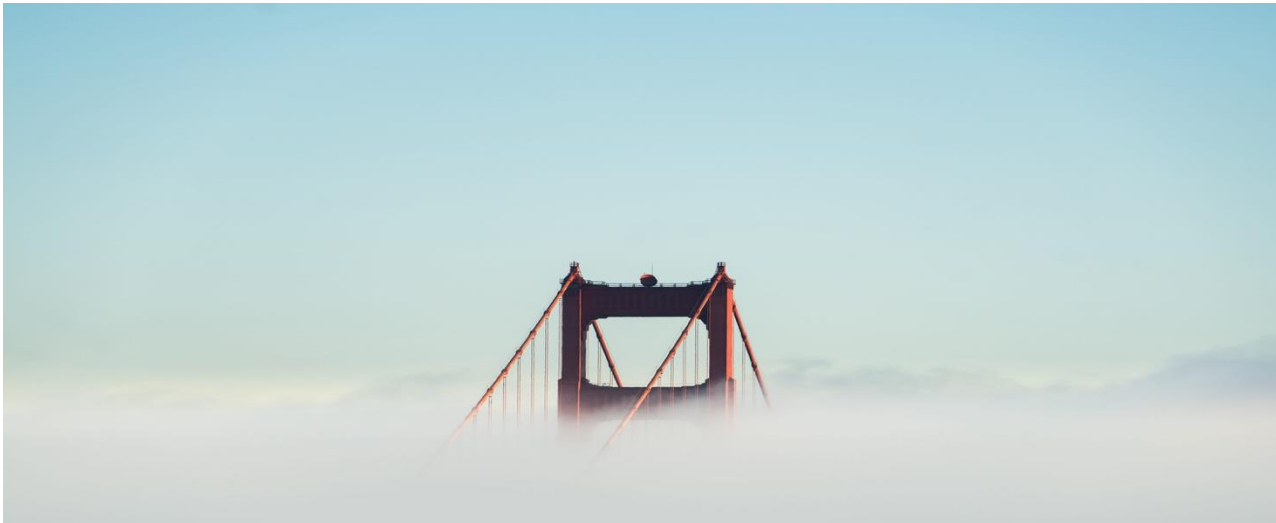
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Research has refuted some of the perceived drawbacks of humility--such as the perception that humble people are not assured and confident.

- People who are humble, rather than narcissistic, are often more assured and confident because they are not as defensive. Their perception of themselves is thus more stable and resilient.
- Likewise, humble people are more inclined to seek, to respect, and to embrace feedback about their behaviour. This feedback helps individuals clarify both their strengths and limitations. So, humble people are often more attuned to their strengths and talents than other people.





In the following table, the left column outlines some perceived drawbacks of humility. The right column outlines the evidence that challenges these perceptions. Scan this table to determine whether this information tempers some of the apparent drawbacks of humility.

Perceived drawback	Reality
People who are narcissistic, arrogant, or entitled—rather than humble—often display unmitigated confidence and may thus impress customers and investors	<p>People who are humble can also display unmitigated confidence and demonstrate leadership at times. As leaders, these individuals tend to promote innovation in their teams. Yet, unlike their narcissistic counterparts, humble people can activate or disable these inclinations—and can thus adjust more appropriately to the circumstances (Zhang et al., 2017).</p> <p>If you feel the need to display humility and confidence simultaneously, you could display body language that manifests this confidence. For example, you could adopt a more dominant posture, with your elbows away from your chest, your legs apart, while you lean back slightly. In response, the other person may feel and behave more submissively (Tiedens & Fragale, 2003).</p>
People who are humble may not seem to be credible.	People who are humble often willing to ask questions and to seek advice. Interestingly, after people seek advice, especially about complicated matters, their credibility improves rather than deteriorates (Brooks et al., 2015).

Perceived drawback	Reality
People who are narcissistic, arrogant, or entitled—rather than humble—tend to be more confident and competent in negotiations	When negotiating, people who are narcissistic, arrogant, or entitled tend to belittle the product or service the other person is offering, expressing statements like “That product is not worthy of this price”. In contrast, people who are humble may indicate they cannot afford the product or service, expressing statements like “I cannot afford this amount at this stage”. The strategy that narcissistic, arrogant, or entitled adopt, however, tends to be less effective. The other person is more likely to experience unpleasant emotions, diminishing the likelihood of compromise (Bhattachary & Dugar, 2023).
People who are humble may not seem to be credible.	People who are humble often willing to ask questions and to seek advice. Interestingly, after people seek advice, especially about complicated matters, their credibility improves rather than deteriorates (Brooks et al., 2015).

Even if you strive to foster humility, you are welcome to pursue inspiring aspirations, but you should question your expectations. For example, you might pursue the aspiration to be a leader of a division. But, to manage your expectations, identify two or three reasons this goal may not be as feasible as you first assumed.

Did you know



People who fail to fulfill their aspirations are no more likely than people who do fulfill their aspirations to experience mental health concerns. Yet, people who fail to fulfill achievements they strongly expect are likely to experience mental health concerns (Sendroiu et al., 2021).

A brief intervention now

Thus far, we have discussed the benefits of humility—compared to narcissism, entitlement, and arrogance. But you might not feel entirely committed to this pursuit of humility until you forge some progress on this pursuit



To achieve this goal:

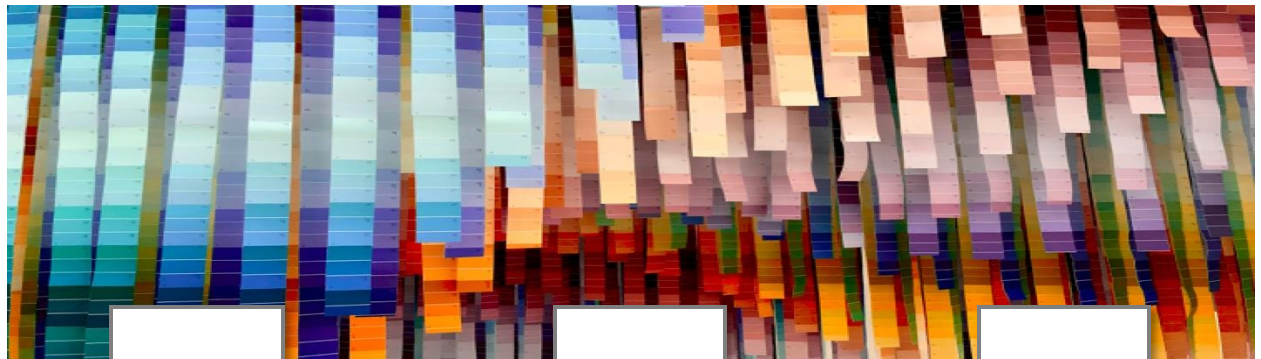


- first skim the left column in the following table, representing common strengths,
- identify between two and four strengths that you feel you have developed or demonstrated,
- for each of these strengths, consider the corresponding drawbacks or complications that appear in the right column.

Strength	Corresponding drawback or limitation
Persuasive in debates and negotiations	You may not always listen effectively or shift your opinions in response to useful information.
Leads people effectively	You feel uneasy when you cannot shape decisions
Courageously expresses opinions that people may not like	You may offend or hurt people unnecessarily—or may overlook the merits of alternative arguments.
Confident and sociable in social settings	You may not listen effectively to people who are more reserved, annoy people who feel their voice is stifled, or not reflect on your own behaviour.
Collaborates effectively with other people	You may not always feel confident reaching decisions alone.
Sympathetic and caring of other people	You may not be able to express feedback that could initially upset, but ultimately help, other people.

Strength continued	Corresponding drawback or limitation
Rational; can use evidence and numbers to reach decisions	You may reach decisions that overlook the broader perspective
Intuitive and able to trust hunches to reach decisions	You may not be able to justify your decisions effectively. Your decisions may be biased by your own preferences.
Careful and able to identify and to prevent risks	You may overlook beneficial but uncertain opportunities
Open to novel ideas and changes	You may perceive your work as tedious and unstimulating
Intelligent and able to understand complicated or intangible ideas	You may not always be practical enough to achieve goals efficiently
Creative and able to suggest novel, helpful, and diverse ideas.	You may disregard useful but conventional practices prematurely or struggle with routines
Adaptable and flexible enough to accommodate diverse circumstances or people	You may sometimes feel inauthentic or uncertain about what you really believe
Disciplined; sacrifices pleasure now to pursue future goals	You may not appreciate your environment or situation enough.
Persistent and conscientious	You may persist on tasks too long rather than change your course of direction when necessary.
Resilient in response to criticism and optimistic about the future	You may dismiss feedback and not adapt your practices when necessary.. Or your expectations may often be unfulfilled, eliciting disappointment in you or the people who trusted you.
Relaxed and composed , seldom showing unpleasant emotions	You may not plan effectively to avoid problems. Or you may perceive your relationships as superficial rather than genuine.
Ambitious; strives to fulfill steep goals	You may not maintain and nurture your friendships and relationships—and may feel detached from other people and exhausted.
Decisive; reaches decisions swiftly	You may be impulsive and regret some choices. Your decisions may be misinformed at times.

From this information, identify some of your potential limitations. Imagine acknowledging this limitation to another person. For example...



1	2	3
You might imagine speaking to a colleague	You might imagine yourself saying “You look so comfortable in this photo. I am not so comfortable in formal settings	Form the intention to acknowledge one of these limitations in the next week or so.

When you acknowledge your limitations or shortcomings, confine these faults to specific circumstances. To illustrate, you might indicate you are unconfident in formal settings rather than say you are socially inept generally. You may even decide to exaggerate your faults humorously, such as “I’m so bad with numbers, while attempting to sleep, I need a calculator to count sheep”.

Many brief interventions later



The following table lists some other actions that could boost your humility, at least to some extent, quite rapidly. You could perhaps



- skim the following table,
- identify at least two activities that you might attempt in the future,
- for a few minutes, imagine the precise circumstances in which you might attempt these activities; then, as vividly as possible, imagine yourself undertaking each activity;
- finally, silently repeat to yourself several times your commitment to undertake these activities in specific circumstances, such as “on the first day of each month, I will deliberately engage in an activity that elicits stress”.

This activity, called an implementation intention, has been shown to significantly increase the likelihood you will fulfill one of your plans.

Activity	Illustration or justification
Search and watch videos in which credible individuals present arguments that contradict your opinions. Attempt to integrate some of their arguments with your opinions.	<p>When people attempt to consider and integrate contradictory perspectives, their capacity to solve problems creatively also improves (Bianchi et al., 2020)</p> <p>These experiences can enhance resilience, promote growth, as well as foster empathy.</p>
Occasionally, express genuine compliments to people—especially people who differ appreciably from you	<p>After individuals praise other people, they often feel more resilient (see also Grant et al., 2020).</p> <p>When people deliberately and confidently approach individuals who differ from themselves, they tend to embrace diverse perspective better.</p>

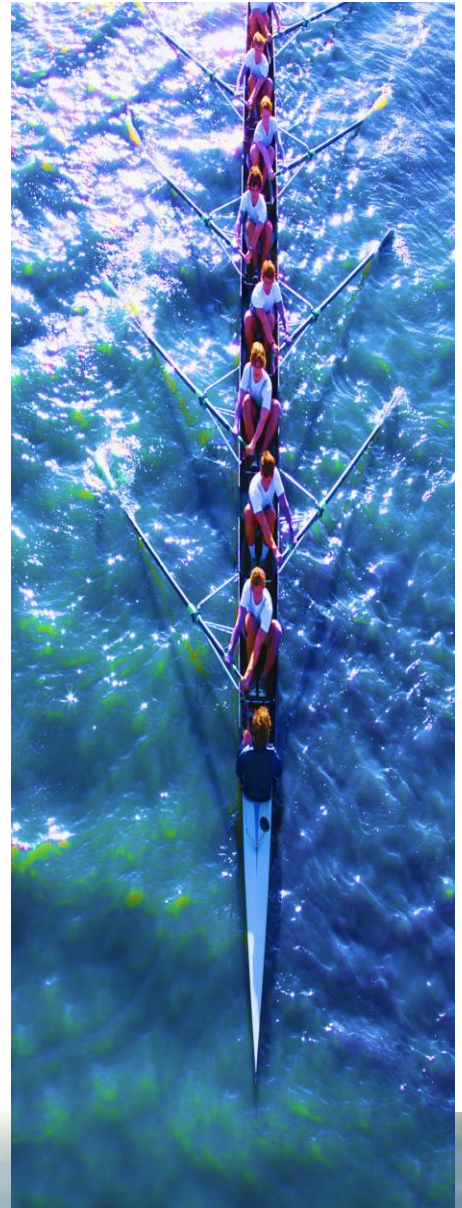
Activity continued	Illustration or justification
Over time, gradually increase the number of people—such as colleagues, mentors, friends, or relatives—from whom you occasionally seek advice.	<p>That is, gradually develop a list of people from whom you can seek advice. Then, formulate a plan on how often you will seek this advice.</p> <p>Ask questions about topics in which your knowledge is limited.</p> <p>When people honestly acknowledge what they do not know about a topic, they may subsequently learn more effectively (Mendonça et al., 2023).</p>
If you disagree with someone during a meeting or conversation and feel emotional about this matter, ask a question to seek more information rather than attempt to counter their argument.	<p>Similarly, when you disagree with an argument, identify opportunities to express your opinion at least two days afterwards rather than during the discussion.</p> <p>Interestingly, people who speak infrequently, but thoughtfully, during meetings often seem more credible as well (Brykman & Raver, 2021).</p>
Whenever you express a suggestion, highlight at least one drawback of this proposal.	
Google “youtube simon moss humble meditation”. Listen to this video, called humble meditation.	<p>This YouTube video presents a meditation that lasts a bit over 20 minutes. The exercise, called humble meditation, introduces a range of peaceful exercises that also promote both mindfulness and humility. You can listen to this YouTube video often—as well as just listen to parts.</p> <p>Mindfulness may foster humility. For example</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• mindfulness helps individuals modify their thought patterns—and thus may enhance the impact and benefits of the various exercises (Wang et al., 2023).• mindfulness fosters respect towards diverse individuals, diminishing prejudice and discrimination (Lueke & Gibson, 2016).

Stability & continuity

Before you continue to foster humility, you should recognise and then overcome one of the key obstacles to this state. Specifically, in recent years, individuals have become increasingly unsure about their future. Their future seems hazy, uncertain, and unstable, exacerbated by rapid changes in technology, COVID-19, the threat of war, generative AI, and other events. In these circumstances,

- people are not as inclined to sacrifice their pleasure now to benefit their future,
- therefore, rather than attempt to develop skills that could be useful in future years, people want to feel good about themselves now,
- and, so, individuals overestimate their capabilities, diminishing their humility.

Fortunately, some practices have been shown to foster a sense of stability or continuity in a dynamic and uncertain world, overcoming these problems and promoting humility.



First, identify a vivid, significant moment or event you experienced in your past that is still relevant to who you are today—a moment and event that benefited your life and you remember often. To illustrate



- perhaps you received some advice or discovered some information that shaped your life,
- perhaps you achieved some important goal or met a significant person.

Relive this event in your mind, as vividly as possible, for a few minutes. After this exercise, people can imagine the future better (Biondolillo et al., 2023).



Second, imagine and then record an enjoyable or rewarding task you may be completing at work in two years—such as presenting an inspiring speech or assisting a child. Write about this event in some detail, such as who is nearby, the location of this event, the emotions you are experiencing, the activities that preceded or succeeded this event, and so forth. This exercise, called episodic future thinking, often increases the degree to which people are willing to sacrifice their pleasure now to benefit their future (Biondolillo et al., 2023).

Third, identify one or more activities that could benefit your health, relationships, or environment—activities that, until now, you have not undertaken frequently enough. Examples may include



- eating fruit during breakfast each morning,
- flossing teeth twice a day,
- calling a lonely relative every month,
- stretching every day, and so forth.

Record at least one of these activities here. To complete these activities, you may need to motivate yourself and resist other temptations. Such activities have been shown to enhance your capacity to resist temptations in other facets of your life as well (de Ridder et al., 2020).

Fourth, identify activities, interests, or goals you naturally pursue—and then convert these pursuits into an extremely ambitious, and perhaps unattainable, aspiration. To illustrate



- if you like photography, you could set the goal to publicise a social or environmental problem that many people overlook,
- if you like to cook, for example, perhaps set the aspiration to design a menu that is designed to prevent diabetes,
- if you like technology and travel, you could set the goal to visit every nation in Asia and teach disadvantaged people how to develop apps,
- if you like to speak other languages, you could set the goal to become a translator in a language that few people speak,
- if you like gardening, may be set the goal to create a permaculture farm that supports the local community and biodiversity.

Record one or two ambitious, if not unattainable, aspirations here. These aspirations have been shown to foster a sense of stability.

Fifth, imagine yourself in a future role that is compatible with one of these aspirations. Consider which of your skills, qualities, networks, or opportunities you could utilise and enhance to pursue this role. Then, record some practice or activity that both improves your capability to secure this role in the future and could be completed every week or so for decades ahead. Here are some examples:



- twice a week, you might trial an AI tool that is relevant to your field,
- every week, you may seek advice from a different person,
- every week, you might read about a development in your industry,
- every fortnight, you might learn a new recipe or song on the guitar.

Please record one to three of these activities here. These sustainable activities also foster a sense of stability in life.

Finally, over time, you should develop resources and materials you could use in the future to secure these fulfilling roles as well as thrive in these roles. Here are some examples:



- you might accumulate some responses to emails that may be useful if you are granted these roles,
- you may even accumulate recommendations you would like to express to this future image of yourself.

Perhaps record in this space other possible examples of resources and materials you could develop and accrue. Besides humility, these exercises tend to evoke positive emotions, such as enthusiasm (Mao & Li, 2024).

Did you know



If people feel a sense of continuity—a sense their values, goals, and life in ten years will overlap with their values, goals, and life now—they are more likely to feel authentic and perceive their life as meaningful (Hong et al., 2024). This sense of meaning enhances their wellbeing and happiness (He et al., 2023).



The facilitator should then collate these practices and activities—and instruct the team to

- sort these practices and activities into clusters,
- identify which of these clusters may be relevant to the organisation,
- formulate a few objectives or actions the team could pursue in the future that enable members to complete the sustainable practices and activities at work.



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Did you know



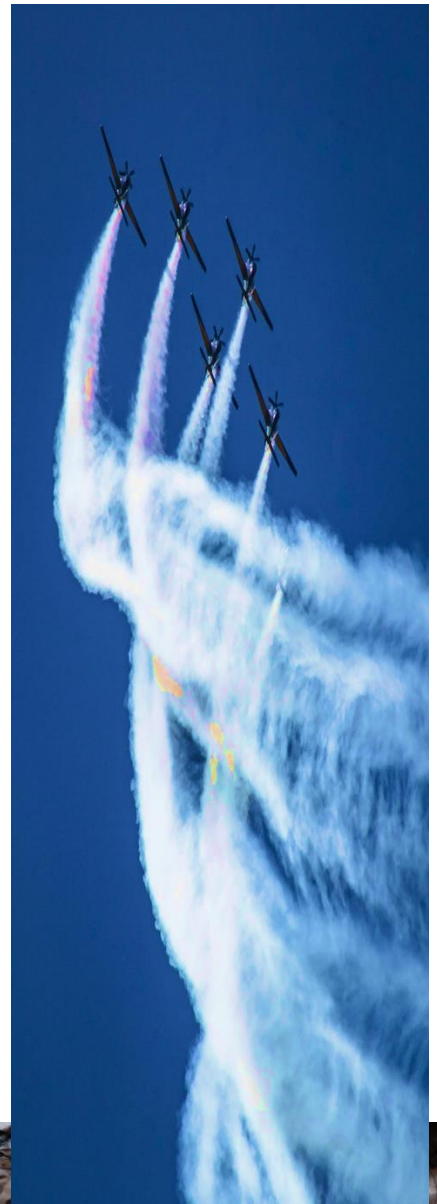
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The benefits of awe

Feelings of awe or wonder elicits a sense of humility (Stellar et al., 2018) and continuity (Pan & Jiang, 2022) as well as similar consequences (Zhang et al., 2025). Awe can also diminish rumination and thus may dampen feelings of depression (Bogaert et al., 2024.) Several reasons can explain why awe fosters humility:

- when people experience a sense of awe, their attention shifts from daily trivialities to magnificent possibilities.
- Individuals who feel awe become aware of possibilities that transcend their understanding, demonstrating their ignorance and fostering humility (Krumrei Mancuso et al., 2024),
- even reflections about sacred, divine, miraculous, or blessed experiences also promotes this humility for similar reasons (Krumrei Mancuso et al., 2024).

Furthermore, when a team of individuals experience this awe together, they are more likely to feel a sense of camaraderie with one another (Jaussi & Dionne, 2003) .



In small workgroups, identify some opportunities in which the team may be able to experience awe together. For example, they could

Examples of awe

- watch people complete awesome feats, like juggling while completing the Rubik’s cube—often on the reddit site “nextfuckinglevel”,
- observe footage of majestic landscapes, huge canyons, or outer space on YouTube,
- reminisce about times in which you felt awe and amazement,
- visit a remarkable landmark, such as a mountain view.
- watch an eclipse, fireworks, or aurora,
- observe the night sky in a remote location,
- watch the performance of exemplary magicians; these experiences have also been shown to foster curiosity (Subbotsky et al., 2010)—a key feature of humility and determinant of resilience in stressful circumstances (Kaczmarek et al., 2024).
- read facts that depict the colossal magnitude of some natural or scientific features, as illustrated in the list below.

Then, during the session, as well as perhaps several times a year, the team should attempt to experience a moment of awe and wonder together. After these moments, members could discuss changes to the vision or practices of this team.



Bensford law: In many datasets—such as the house prices, electricity bills, and lengths of rivers—about 30% of numbers begin with a 1, 17% begin with a 2, and progressively fewer numbers begin with higher digits.



52! exceeds the number of atoms in this galaxy.

One drop of water contains about 1.67 sextillion molecules, in which sextillion is 1 followed by 21 0s, like the number of observable stars.



The Great Wall of China is longer than is the distance from England to NZ.

Strength spotting

Humble people appreciate diverse individuals and, therefore, should excel in strength spotting: the capacity to identify the strengths and qualities of other people (Linley et al., 2010; Tobias et al., 2024). Yet, many individuals are not especially adept in identifying these strengths in other people. Instead, to develop this skill, you could

- in the first column of the following table, list the names of colleagues in your team,
- in the second column, enter 1 or 1strengths of each person—perhaps deriving these strengths from the earlier table that attached a drawback or limitation to each strength.

Person	Strength	Strength after conversation
e.g., Jane Smith	Optimistic	Coding
.		



Next, pairs of participants should discuss what they have learned during this session and which insights they might apply in the future. During this conversation, attempt to uncover one or more strengths of this person. Specifically

- you may detect moments in which they demonstrate joy, energy, confidence, or passion when they refer to some activity,
- or individuals may refer to activities in which they thrived, sustained over a long period, or learned rapidly,
- these activities tend to represent potential strengths.

Roles of participants

Occasionally, apply the same approach when you converse with colleagues in the future. Whenever you feel these conversations reveal a strength, record this strength in the third column of the following table. If possible, inform people of the strengths you observe, such as “I feel you develop rapport with people easily”. Then seek feedback, such as “Has this strength developed over time?” or “Are you able to utilise this strength?” When combined, these activities enhance your capacity to detect strengths and thus may

- foster your humility, as you recognise the qualities of other people,
- improve your skills, as you identify qualities you could perhaps emulate or develop,
- improve your capacity to invigorate other individuals by highlighting their strengths;

Role of facilitators

Finally, in this session, the facilitator should,

- randomly choose some of the strengths of individuals that were uncovered during this session,
- for each strength, encourage a small workgroup to consider how the team could utilise this strength more often at work.

Did you know



After individuals consider their strengths and networks, their life tends to feel more significant as well as meaningful (O’Dea et al., 2004; Soto et al., 2024).



These activities are helpful because of several reasons. Specifically, when people are attuned to their strengths or utilise their strengths at work

- they experience a greater sense of vitality and engagement at work, especially if colleagues recognise these strengths (Moore et al., 2022),
- they feel more aligned to the organization, because they feel the workplace recognises their capabilities (Wang & Ding, 2024), enhancing their commitment,
- hence, they feel more inclined to assist their colleagues—but only if their workload is reasonable instead of excessive (Wang & Ding, 2024).