

The highlights

Recently, researchers have discovered a **specific mental state or attribute** that resolves most problems in life—from domestic violence and bullying to corporate fraud and incompetence.



- What is this state or attribute? In essence, when people experience this state, their primary goal is to learn from other people and experiences.
- This state or attribute roughly corresponds to the quality we call humility.

The benefits of humility

When people are humble, their resilience, relationships, and reputation all improve. In contrast to some misconceptions, humility often coincides with a sense of conviction, passion, and curiosity rather than a low self-esteem or a meek personality.



Resilience

If humble, criticisms and challenges feel like opportunities to learn & not as threats. Negative emotions abate swiftly.

Relationships

People assess the humility of other individuals to decide who to trust. So humble people are trusted, facilitating relationships.

Reputation

Humble people are less defensive and more informed, enhancing their credibility.

Initial attempts to foster humility



Here are some practices that foster humility. If you want to foster humility in other people, such as your staff, perhaps apply these practices yourself first. These activities will enable you to role model humility and inspire other people to follow.



- Identify occasions in the future in which you may be able to acknowledge some of your limitations or faults to other people.
- About once a month, deliberately engage in an activity that elicits modest levels of anxiety or stress, such as speaking in public.
- Over time, gradually increase the number of people—such as colleagues or friends—from whom you occasionally seek advice.
- Occasionally, express genuine rather than feigned compliments to people, especially people who differ appreciably from you
- Whenever you express a suggestion, attempt to highlight at least one drawback of this proposal.

Limitations of these practices



These practices are not sufficient to sustain humility—or to generate the benefits of humility—in stressful and challenging circumstances. That is, these practices alone will not instill in people the profound motivation to learn from other individuals and experiences

Practices that foster humility sustainably



Here is a limited sample of practices that, when repeated over time, can gradually entrench humility. These practices can boost resilience, relationships, and reputation considerably and enduringly.

- Again, perhaps apply these practices yourself first before you inspire other people.
- Later sections will extend these practices & present evidence to validate these activities.

Enduring activities

When individuals perceive their future as vivid and certain—as well as feel their values and interests in ten years will be like their values and interests now—they feel motivated to learn from other people and experiences. They show humility. To foster this state

- identify activities, interests, or goals you naturally pursue—and then convert these pursuits into a very ambitious, and perhaps unattainable, aspiration,
- imagine yourself in some future roles that are compatible with this aspiration,
- record some practice or activity that you would like to complete every week or so for decades ahead and improves your capacity to secure these roles in the future.

For example, your aspiration might be to help disadvantaged people use AI more efficiently. Every week, you could read about more efficient methods to use AI.

Practices that foster humility sustainably continued

To develop humility, individuals need to enhance their resilience—their tendency to recover in response to distressing or upsetting events, such as failures or criticisms. Otherwise, they will seem defensive rather than humble. These activities help foster this resilience.



Here are some practices that foster resilience. Later, we will discuss why these practices may be more powerful than many people realise.



- Whenever you feel distressed, attempt to smile, at least briefly. You could try to remember a joke that tends to elicit some laughter.
- Whenever you feel stressed, imagine your romantic partner—or a fictional partner in the future—touching you gently to comfort you.
- After some failure, generate as many ideas as possible—even vague or unrealistic possibilities—on how you could prevent a similar problem in the future. You can use AI to complete this task.
- Perceive feedback, failures, and similar challenges as opportunities to derive lessons you could impart to other people.
- Close your eyes. Repeat to yourself, about five times, a statement like the following:

Whenever I feel distressed or upset, I will say to myself—or to someone else—"Let me think about this matter for a while, and I am confident I will think of a solution later"...

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
<p>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</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 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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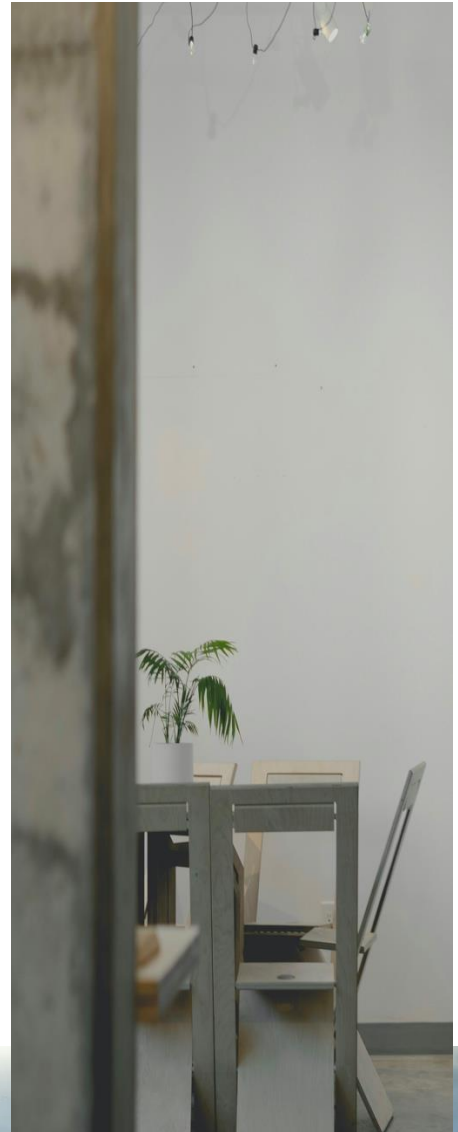
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Research has refuted some of the perceived drawbacks of humility--such as the perception that humble people are not assured and confident.

- 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).

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 friends and colleagues,
- in the second column, enter 1 or 1 strengths 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, when you next speak to each person, you may uncover some of their other strengths. 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

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;

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).

How to become a humble leader

After learning about the benefits of humility, many leaders assume they can readily become humble. Indeed, at least to some degree, humility is simple to develop. For example, to demonstrate humility, leaders should utilise variations of the following phrases more often:



Phrases that epitomise humble leaders



- Can you advise me on how I can support you better—to help you achieve your goals? For evidence on the benefits of this question to customers, see Owens & Heckman (2012, 2016).
- What are some ideas you want me to pilot or trial in the future?
- What is your intuition or hunch about the key obstacles in this organisation—and how can we address these obstacles?
- I would like some people to complete these tasks...Who do you think would benefit most from this experience?
- What have we learned from these challenges?
- If you were me, how might you solve these challenges?

Although you can exhibit some humility almost immediately, leadership humility demands significant time—often weeks if not months or longer—to develop fully. The following table outlines some of the reasons that leadership humility is harder to develop than many people assume.

Why leadership humility is hard to develop	Details
<p>Some leaders may be humble in specific circumstances but not humble under more challenging circumstances.</p>	<p>Indeed, this course differentiates 10 levels of humility.</p> <p>Level 1: Can demonstrate many features of humility—such as the capacity to acknowledge personal shortcomings and biases—but only if concentrating.</p> <p>Level 2: Can demonstrate many features of humility effortlessly, but only in amenable settings.</p> <p>Level 3: Appreciates the benefits of humility and is committed to a life of humility.</p> <p>Level 4: Can integrate all features of humility with their natural tendencies, obviating the need to suppress personal inclinations.</p> <p>Level 5: Can inspire humility in other people.</p> <p>Level 6: Experiences and expresses gratitude effortlessly and authentically.</p> <p>Level 7: Perceives the future as vivid and certain rather than remote and hazy—and thus experiences humility in more stressful circumstances.</p> <p>Level 8: Can recognise and nullify personal biases—such as the tendency to overestimate personal capabilities.</p> <p>Level 9: Has developed the capacity to appreciate the observable qualities of diverse people—such as listening skills.</p> <p>Level 10: Has developed the capacity to appreciate the latent qualities of diverse people—such as strength spotting.</p>

Some leaders may be humble themselves but unable to foster this humility in their teams.	If leaders cannot foster humility in their teams, the staff are not as likely to thrive.
Leaders may not know how to maintain this humility during challenging tasks	<div>Humble leaders need to know how to maintain and foster humility during challenging tasks, such as when they need to</div> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• resolve conflicts,• influence staff,• redress concerns with performance• accommodate diverse staff, and so forth.

This workshop is designed to enable leaders to maintain and foster humility, as well as optimise performance, during challenging times.



How leaders should deliver feedback

If leaders or boards need to intervene and to deliver feedback, they need to recognise that many individuals—even veteran executives—may become defensive. Defensive reactions not only demonstrate a limitation in humility but can also diminish this humility in observers. Therefore, leaders, such as chairs, deputy chairs, CEOs, or indeed any manager and supervisor, need to know how to express feedback sensitively.

Did you know



Contrary to common opinion, the notion that people should insert a criticism between two complements has been refuted (e.g., Brown et al, 2002). This strategy generates a defensive response, especially from people whose self-esteem is somewhat fragile or unstable.



The following table outlines a sequence of practices you should apply or consider instead. To develop this skill,



- identify a person at work to whom you would like to deliver some unfavourable feedback,



- practice expressing this feedback—but not to this person but instead to a participant of this program,



- apply the practices that appear in the following table,
- decide how you might amend these practices in the future—and record these amendments in the table

Practice	Example	Amendments
Indicate you want to discuss a matter, but express your confidence this problem can be addressed readily	I did want to discuss a matter that I am confident we can readily address.	
Confine your comments to specific examples rather than broad concerns.	Sometimes, I sense or feel you might be able to analyse the data rather than merely enter the data.	
When you raise your concern, express this matter as either a question or intuition rather than imply your evaluation is definite and correct. Comments that seem too definitive or broad often provoke a defensive response, called psychological reactance.	That is, I wonder if you could attempt a broader range of tasks?	
Indicate that one of the strengths or talents of the person could explain a shortcoming or concern you want to discuss	Because you are so thorough and the quality of your work is so high, you might not be as willing to attempt unfamiliar methods or tasks. But this reluctance could diminish your capacity to adapt to unanticipated challenges.	



Practice	Example	Amendments
<p>Relate the concern you want to discuss to the future instead of the past.</p> <p>Staff tend to be harsher on themselves when they contemplate future, rather than past, transgressions because only the future is malleable (Sjåstad & Baumeister, 2019).</p>	<p>I feel this reluctance to adapt has not been a problem in the past—and has helped you thrive.</p> <p>But, because the workplace is changing rapidly, I feel the capacity to adapt may be more important in the future.</p>	
<p>Offer choice when delivering feedback.</p> <p>When individuals are granted the opportunity to choose, called autonomy support, they do not respond as defensively.</p>	<p>If you were going to attempt a broader range of tasks, which activities would you choose?</p>	
<p>Suggest a few specific and simple actions the staff member could initiate to address this shortcoming. Choose actions that may instill in staff a sense of momentum.</p>	<p>Perhaps you could read this manual.</p>	



Conflict resolution

Introduction

Besides delivering unfavourable feedback, leaders and boards may also need to manage other challenging settings and conversations. For example, they often need to resolve conflicts. To illustrate

- leaders may need to address a disagreement between themselves and other colleagues or directors
- or they may need to reconcile a conflict between two other individuals.

How to resolve disputes respectfully

Unless people demonstrate some humility, conflicts tend to endure. Yet, conflicts often preclude rather than foster this humility. The following table outlines a sequence of practices you can apply to resolve conflicts effectively and to foster humility at the same time. To develop this skill

- identify a minor, trivial, or even contrived difference of opinion with another participant,
- with this person, apply the practices in turn, customised to your conflict,
- then, identify a slightly more significant difference of opinion or conflict and apply the practices again,
- in the future, gradually apply this approach to more vital conflicts.



Action	Illustration
<p>Set up a meeting, preferably in person, to initiate this discussion. Individuals tend to develop better rapport and trust in person.</p>	
<p>Clarify your feelings and beliefs</p>	
<p>Allude to the emotions you have experienced since this matter transpired.</p> <p>After individuals are informed of the emotions that someone else is feeling, especially the emotions that only humans experience, they are more likely to feel empathy to this person (Vaes et al., 2002).</p>	<p>“Thanks for meeting me about this matter. I have felt a bit disconcerted as well as regretful about this issue”.</p>
<p>Outline the differences of opinion as fairly as possible</p>	<p>“From what I understand, I believe we need to purchase this equipment to improve efficiency, whereas you believe this equipment is not worth the cost”.</p>
<p>Indicate this matter is not easy to resolve—because the options vary on many interrelated attributes and these attributes are hard to measure and prioritise.</p> <p>If individuals appreciate they might need to depend, at least partly, on their intuition, they might become more flexible; otherwise, they may choose options that are easier to justify but not necessarily superior (Wilson & Schooler, 1991).</p>	<p>“I am aware, of course, that I cannot definitively verify that my option is better than your option—or vice versa. After all, the benefits and drawbacks of this equipment are hard to articulate, measure, or weigh.</p> <p>So, rather than a numerical answer, we will need to trust our intuition and experience to some extent”.</p>
<p>Indicate that you may not be able to resolve the matter today but may need more time to contemplate.</p>	

Action	Illustration
<p>Listen to one another</p>	
<p>To commence the discussion, each person, in turn, should outline the benefits of their position as well as at least one drawback of this position—to demonstrate impartiality. Do not interrupt, if possible</p> <p>If you show you are listening genuinely, the other person is more inclined to recognise the complexities of this matter, eradicating any resentment or anger they may feel. Unfortunately, many people instead feel the inclination to challenge a person who is angry—a tendency that often amplifies this emotion (Itzchakov et al., 2017).</p>	<p>“Perhaps each of us should listen to the other person in turn. Maybe each person can discuss three benefits of their position and, to show they are impartial, acknowledge at least one drawback of their position. For example, I can discuss three reasons to purchase the equipment as well as at least one complication”.</p>
<p>Each person, in turn, should share their worries or concerns about the position the other individual proposed—and clarify why this matter feels so important.</p> <p>After people consider why a matter feels so important, their resentment tends to diminish (Huynh et al., 2016).</p>	<p>“So, I think now each of us should articulate what really bothers us about the other alternative. For example, you could discuss what are your main worries if we purchase this equipment”.</p>
<p>Each person should then identify up to three arguments they feel have not been raised yet.</p>	<p>“Perhaps now we should articulate other three or so arguments that could be relevant to this decision but have not been raised”.</p>
<p>One person should attempt to summarise the key arguments thus far.</p> <p>When individuals recognise the differences in priorities between themselves and another person, they are more likely to adopt the perspective of this individual (Todd et al., 2010), potentially increasing the likelihood of resolution.</p>	

Action	Illustration
Arrange another meeting	
<p>Unless one person is willing to concede immediately, the matter should then be deferred to another meeting.</p> <p>If individuals defer their decision, the delay sometimes increases the likelihood these individuals will uncover insights that integrate more considerations (e.g., Dijksterhuis & Nordgren, 2006</p>	
<p>The second meeting should perhaps be conducted online. A sense of distance tends to orient individuals towards underlying concepts rather than specific details, often enabling individuals to recognise shared opinions (Sanna et al, 2009).</p>	
<p>The aim of this meeting is to uncover a course of action that integrates the conflicting options or grants the individuals an opportunity to test or pilot one of the options.</p>	<p>“I feel our goal now should be to consider whether we can uncover a solution that reconciles our conflicting needs—or enables one of us to test our preference. For example, could we purchase the equipment for 2 months only and test whether this equipment is worthwhile”.</p>



How to resolve anger or resentment effectively

The previous sequence of practices may help you resolve disagreements. Nevertheless, if the parties feel anger or resentment to one another, this approach is unlikely to be effective. Therefore, leaders and directors need to be aware of other strategies to dampen resentment—such as resentment between team members. The following table outlines some practices that could achieve this goal. To learn these practices,



- identify a person to whom you have felt some resentment,
- apply the practices in this table to yourself.

Action	Illustration
<p>Individuals who experience resentment should be prompted to transcribe, in private, unpleasant thoughts they feel about the other person. They should replace these thoughts with more specific, nuanced, & generous alternatives.</p> <p>This approach, called reappraisal, has been shown to temper and even override conflict and resentment (Thiel et al., 2019).</p>	<p>“One strategy I learned about that tempers resentment is to replace horrible thoughts about someone with more specific, nuanced, and generous thoughts. For example</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• rather than assume ‘this person is arrogant, you can say to yourself, “this person can be very defensive when criticised”,• this alternative thought is specific about the disliked behaviour--such as defensive instead of arrogant—and is more explicit about when this behaviour is observed...”
<p>Individuals who experience resentment should be prompted to imagine a conversation about this conflict in five years.</p>	<p>“So, imagine we meet in five years. What do you think we would say about how we managed this matter?”</p> <p>After people imagine vivid images of a future conversation, they experience less resentment but instead a more caring and responsible mindset (Huynh et al., 2016; Schacter et al., 2017; Wu et al., 2017).</p>

Decision making

Limitations to multiple-criteria decision making

To reach decisions, individuals utilise a variety of tools and techniques. One of the most sophisticated approaches is called multiple-criteria decision making. To illustrate this approach, suppose you need to decide which job applicant to select. The following table presents some numerical information about each applicant.

Name	Years of work in this industry	Years of uni study in this industry	Score on psych tests	Score from referees out of 10
Adam	5	3	105	6
Betty	4	4	92	8
Carl	12	0	103	7
Donna	4	3	112	9
Ernie	8	2	89	5



To apply a simple variant of multiple-criteria decision making, you could

- standardise the scores—so the values range from 0 to 1, perhaps by dividing each value by the maximum score,
- identify the weight or importance of each attribute, in which the weights sum to one,
- to calculate an overall preference score for each applicant, multiply each value by the weight and then sum.

The following table illustrates this approach. In this instance, Carl generates the highest preference score and would be chosen.

Name	Years of work in this industry	Years of study in this industry	Score on psych tests	Score from referees	Preference score
Weight	0.5	0.2	0.2	0.1	
Adam	0.42	0.75	0.94	0.67	0.61
Betty	0.33	1.00	0.82	0.89	0.62
Carl	1.00	0.00	0.92	0.78	0.76
Donna	0.33	0.75	1.00	1.00	0.62



A blend of deliberation and intuition

Scholars and practitioners have introduced many advances to optimise this approach. For example, they have developed techniques to choose suitable weights. Nevertheless, this approach—and indeed most quantitative approaches—are not useful in a variety of circumstances. The following table outlines these circumstances.

Circumstances in which formal decision making is not useful	Examples
The options differ on characteristics that are not quantifiable.	The degree to which an applicant seems to fit the culture is hard to quantify.
The options differ on too many characteristics to delineate.	So many other attributes differentiate the applicants, such as their confidence and so forth.
The implications of these characteristics are very uncertain	Whether you should choose confident applicants is uncertain—because confident applicants might be competent or arrogant.
The various implications of each characteristic depend on other characteristics	Whether you should choose confident applicants might depend on the experience of these individuals.



Instead, another approach, that blends deliberation and intuition, is particularly effective when

- the options, such as applicants, differ on many interrelated characteristics in which the implications are hard to quantify or predict,
- you have needed to reach many similar decisions in the past—and thus can utilise your experience.

The following table outlines this approach. Attempt to apply this approach to a decision you may need to reach soon.

Step	Example
1 Obviously collect and read information about the relevant options.	If deciding which applicant to choose, read the application and social media profile of each individual.
2 Although optional, you could complete a rough variant of multiple criteria decision making	<p>If deciding which applicant to choose, you could roughly rate the applicants on five or so measures—such as experience, fit, and so forth—on a scale of 1 to 10.</p> <p>You could then weight and sum these ratings. However, you would need to recognise these sums do not encompass all the key attributes of these individuals and, therefore, do not accurately identify the best option.</p>
3 As vividly as possible, imagine each of the most likely alternatives in sequence.	<p>For a minute or so, you could first imagine a typical meeting with the first applicant.</p> <p>You could next imagine a typical meeting with the second applicant and so forth.</p>
4 Defer your decision for at least a day if possible.	<p>While you defer this decision, distract yourself with other activities.</p> <p>That is, if possible, during this time, refrain from contemplating this decision.</p>



Step	Example
<p>5</p> <p>In a familiar setting, imagine a circumstance in the future in which you feel empowered and confident. While you maintain this image for several minutes, touch your chest.</p>	<p>You might imagine yourself in a position of power, but in a role that is not too stressful.</p> <p>Your intuition is likely to be accurate if the setting or circumstance seems familiar to you. So, perhaps complete this activity in a location that feels cosy—perhaps in a quiet corner of your bedroom, with your favourite blanket and soothing music in the background.</p>
<p>6</p> <p>Close your eyes and visualise the alternatives—such as the five applicants—as vividly as possible, one more time.</p> <p>Then, imagine the impact of these alternatives several years from now. For example, you might imagine one applicant, working at the organisation, three years now. You might imagine some changes this applicant has introduced and the impact of these changes.</p>	<p>After people consider the future impact of the various alternatives, they can more readily predict which options are likely to be effective in the future (Berg, 2019). Otherwise, some people are biased towards the option that generates immediate, but not future, benefits.</p>
<p>7</p> <p>Finally, you may experience a strong hunch or intuition about which option seems more suitable. Trust this hunch or intuition.</p>	<p>If you do not experience a strong hunch or intuition, roll some dice to determine which option to choose.</p> <p>When you roll the dice, you might experience a strong hunch as to which option you prefer. Choose this option.</p>



Although this literature is contentious and complicated (see Newell et al., 2008), many strands of evidence indicate that hunches and intuitions often culminate in astute decisions or choices, at least in particular circumstances (e.g., Dijksterhuis & van Olden, 2006; Fetterman & Robinson, 2013; Remmers et al., 2024). The following table outlines some of this literature.



When intuition is helpful

When individuals feel empowered and calm, reliance on intuition tends to be more helpful (Sharpley et al., 2014; see also de Vries et al., 2009).

Leaders who tend to trust their intuition tend to enhance the performance of their teams—but only if they feel they need to consider extensive data and information to reach decisions (Sleesman et al., 2024). This intuition is especially beneficial when leaders are introverted.



Practices that enhance the benefits of intuition

Intuition tends to be especially likely to improve decisions if preceded by careful, methodical deliberation (Nordgren, Bos, et al., 2011).

Intuition seems especially beneficial after a delay (Shin & Grant, 2020).

Vivid images tend to activate intuition (Lee et al., 2009), and closing your eyes increases the degree to which images seem vivid (Nash et al., 2015). Interestingly, when individuals point towards their heart, they tend to be more sensitive to their intuition (Fetterman, 2013).



Other benefits of intuition

After people trust their intuition and reach a decision, this choice tends to feel natural and easy, improving their mood (Remmers et al., 2024).

Contemplate biases

Although your intuitions may be accurate when you feel calm, people who depend on their intuitions can be susceptible to various biases or errors. So, before you trust on intuition, you should

- read about some or many of these biases,
- consider whether these biases could affect your decisions.

Over time, your intuition may adjust to accommodate these biases. The following table outlines a sample of biases you may consider. Consider how these biases might affect the decision you need to reach.

Bias	Example
People tend to underestimate the duration that is needed to complete a task (Kruger & Evans, 2004).	When deciding between two or more alternative plans, assume the plans will demand about 20% more time than anticipated.
People tend to overestimate their capacity to shape or control an outcome (Gino et al., 2011)	When deciding between two or more alternative plans, assume you may not be able to shape or affect the outcomes or circumstances to the degree you hope.
People overestimate the degree to which other individuals are likely to agree with their position (Marks & Miller, 1987).	When deciding between two or more alternative plans, assume that you will receive more resistance or disagreement than anticipated.
People tend to underestimate the value of delayed benefits—and instead choose options that attract more immediate benefits (Soman et al., 2005)	When deciding between two or more alternatives, imagine the future benefits as vividly as possible—diminishing the likelihood you discount these benefits.



Shared decision making

The blend of deliberation and intuition enhances the decisions of individuals in many circumstances. However, even if all leaders and directors apply this approach, they may not arrive at the same decision. So, teams and boards often need to reconcile conflicting decisions. To achieve this goal, leaders and directors often incorrectly assume that



- if a team considers a decision carefully enough, the consequences of this decision will always be favourable,
- when debating a decision, the most experienced or accomplished individuals should speak first,
- conflict always impairs team performance.

Interestingly, all these assumptions—and many other beliefs about how to reach decisions—have largely been refuted. Instead, teams tend to be more effective when they apply the principles in the following tables.



Assumptions



Assume that whatever action the board chooses will generate some unforeseen complications—and introduce some measures in advance to manage these complications.



Because complications are inevitable, test these actions as soon as possible rather than seek consensus.



Indeed, embrace actions in which the consequences are most uncertain—because these choices are likely to enhance learning or, if successful, are likely to be the most profitable.



Practices



To diminish conformity, occasionally ask direct to anonymously distribute their position on these actions before each debate; use generative AI to summarise these positions.



For every debate around these decisions, assign one person the role to investigate likely problems or complications; rotate this role after each decision.



If the matter as important—and each member has acquired distinct knowledge about this matter—these debates should be convened in person, rather than online, whenever possible. In person, individuals can interpret the mannerisms and thus comments of another more accurately, improving discussions and decisions (Javalag et al., 2024).



Identify the % of members who should agree before an action is initiated; for example, perhaps 75% should agree if the action consumes significant resources and 50% should agree otherwise,

