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).

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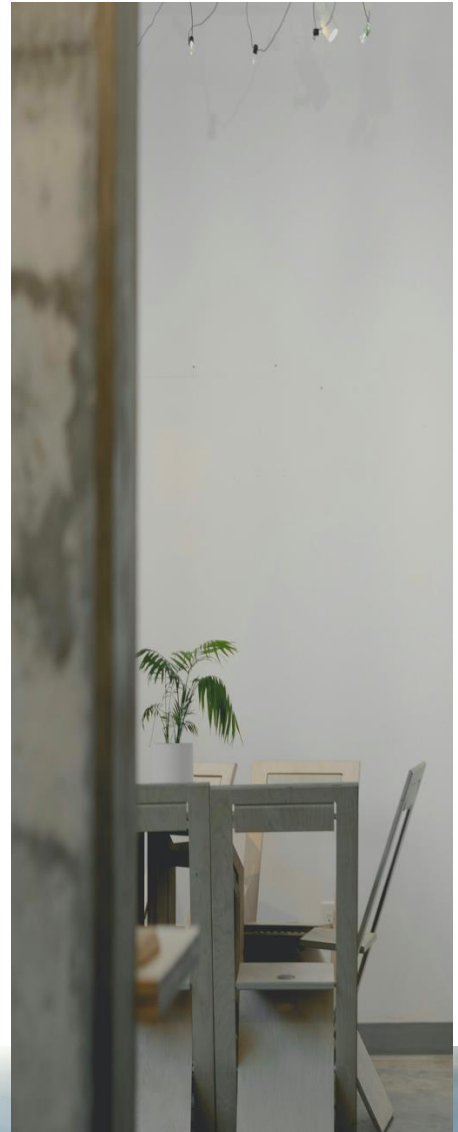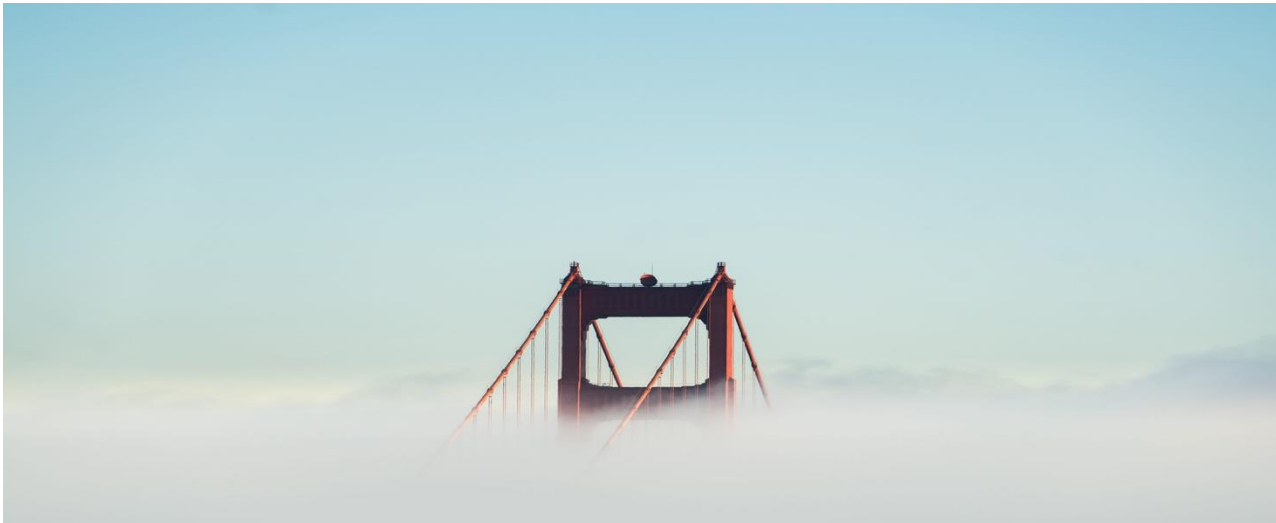
In the following table, the left column outlines some perceived drawbacks of humility. The right column outlines the evidence that challenges these perceptions. Scan this table to determine whether this information tempers some of the apparent drawbacks of humility.

Perceived drawback	Reality
People who are narcissistic, arrogant, or entitled—rather than humble—often display unmitigated confidence and may thus impress customers and investors	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). 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).
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).

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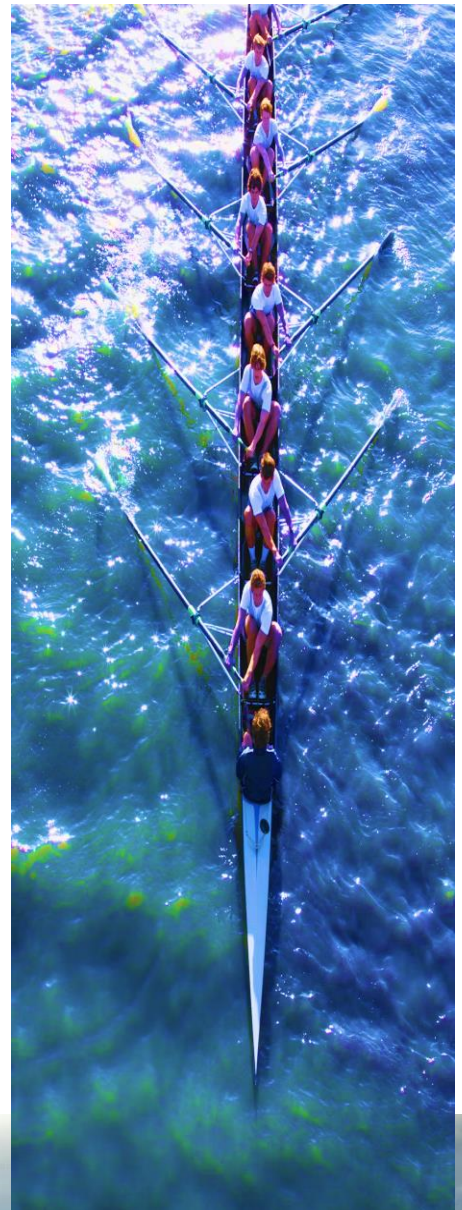
First, identify a vivid, significant moment or event you experienced in your past that is still relevant to who you are today—a moment and event that benefited your life and you remember often. To illustrate

- 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:
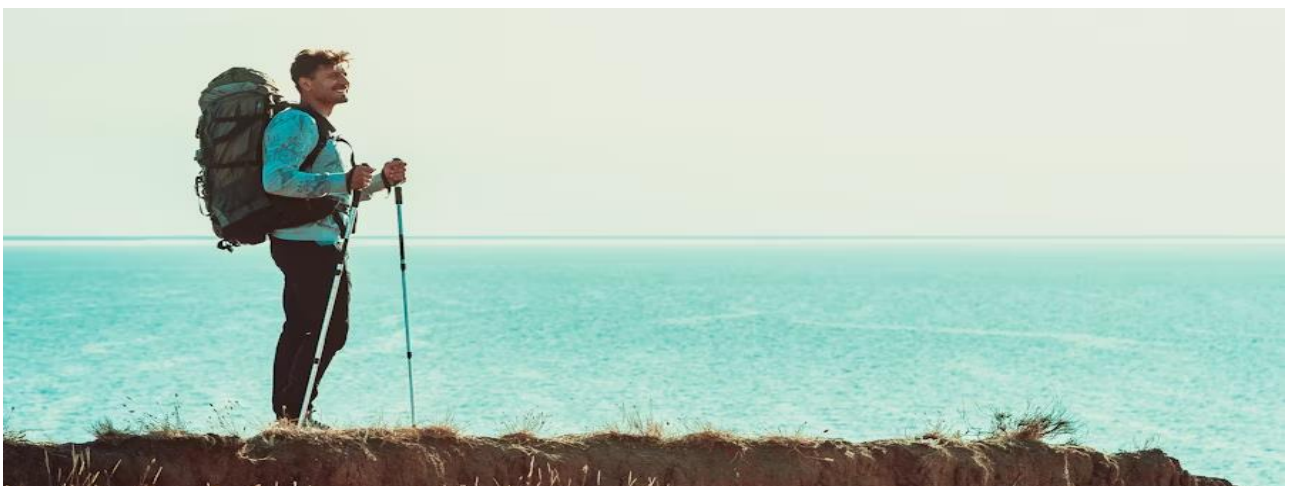

- you might accumulate some responses to emails that may be useful if you are granted these roles,

- 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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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
Relate the concern you want to discuss to the future instead of the past. Staff tend to be harsher on themselves when they contemplate future, rather than past, transgressions because only the future is malleable (Sjåstad & Baumeister, 2019).	I feel this reluctance to adapt has not been a problem in the past—and has helped you thrive. But, because the workplace is changing rapidly, I feel the capacity to adapt may be more important in the future.	
Offer choice when delivering feedback. When individuals are granted the opportunity to choose, called autonomy support, they do not respond as defensively.	If you were going to attempt a broader range of tasks, which activities would you choose?	
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.	Perhaps you could read this manual.	

The hubris of executives

As many studies have revealed, when executives, especially CEOs, exhibit hubris, a range of problems in the organisation are more likely to unfold.

- How would you define hubris?

- Which of the following words do you feel are most related to hubris?

conceited   overrated

narcissistic   powerful

overconfident   toxic
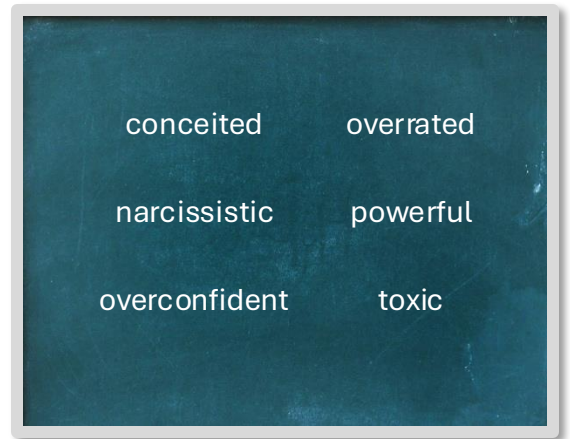
A useful definition of hubris

Hubris is the tendency of executives, to exhibit unwarranted overconfidence in their capability to achieve some outcome (Owen & Davidson, 2009; Roll, 1986). This hubris is more likely whenever

- executives have been granted positions of power for an extended duration, often with limited accountability

- these executives have generally been successful in the past.

Did you know

Despite some overlap, hubris is distinct from narcissism. For example,

- unlike narcissism, hubris is not a personality trait and, therefore, will not persist after the executives relinquish their positions of power,

- unlike narcissism, hubris does not emanate from the need to be important but are tendencies people exhibit when they experience a sense of power.

Consequences of hubris

Some research suggests that, in specific circumstances, hubris can benefit the organisation, such as foster innovation. But usually, when executives, especially the CEO, demonstrates hubris and overconfidence, many problems are likely to unfold.

- Attempt to guess these problems.

- Compare your answers to the problems that past research has uncovered.


When the CEO demonstrates hubris

- the executives are more likely to overlook trends and opportunities in the industry; the strategy and priorities of the organisation may thus be obsolete (Li & Sullivan, 2022),

- conversely, the organisation is more likely to invest in risky ventures (e.g., Li & Tang, 2010), such as untested technology

- the organisation is more likely to initiate socially irresponsible behaviours (Tang et al., 2015) as well as misconduct, such as financial misreporting (Cormier et al., 2016),

- at the organisation, the operations as well as the research and development tends to be less efficient (Lin & Lin, 2025),

- because of these reasons, financial performance tends to deteriorate (Park et al., 2018).

When should boards be concerned about hubris?

The following two lists outline the circumstances in which hubris is especially likely and consequential (see Hayward & Hambrick, 1997; Li & Tang, 2010; Park et al., 2018).

- Indicate which items on each list are true of your circumstances.

- You should be very concerned about hubris if at least two items on each list are true of your circumstances—circumstances in which CEOs are not as accountable.
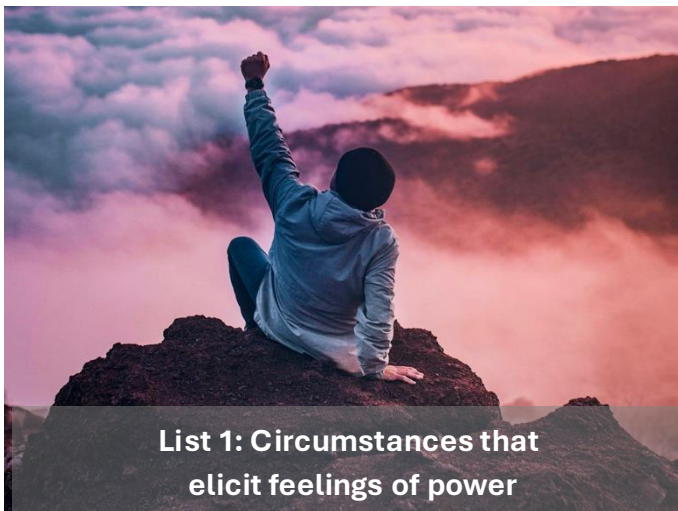
List 1: Circumstances that elicit feelings of power

List 2: Circumstances that grant executives more discretion

- The CEO has occupied the position for 2+ years—or has been CEO at other organisations for 5+years.

- All the executives have occupied similar positions for over two years

- Sales, market share, and other measures of performance have steadily and significantly improved during the tenure of this CEO.

- The revenue in this industry has increased significantly and steadily over the past five years.

- The level of competition in this industry is strong; other rival organisations enter the market often

- The level of tangible resources and intangible resources, such as patents, has significantly increased over the past five years.

- The organisation is nimble and has changed appreciably in recent years.

How to manage hubris

If you are concerned about hubris, the board needs to govern and monitor the CEO and executives more closely than usual. For example,

* when the CEO submits a significant proposal, a team of staff and board members should be tasked with the goal to identify all potential complications,

* rather than present one proposal, the CEO must also submit at least one genuine alternative—as well as the benefits and drawbacks of each option,

* every six months, the board should compare previous forecasts with actual outcomes as well as organise listening tours of management, staff, and customers,

* at least 80% of the board members should not be staff members of the organisation,

* the board should check that all executives feel entitled to challenge each other.

What other strategies do you feel could improve governance?
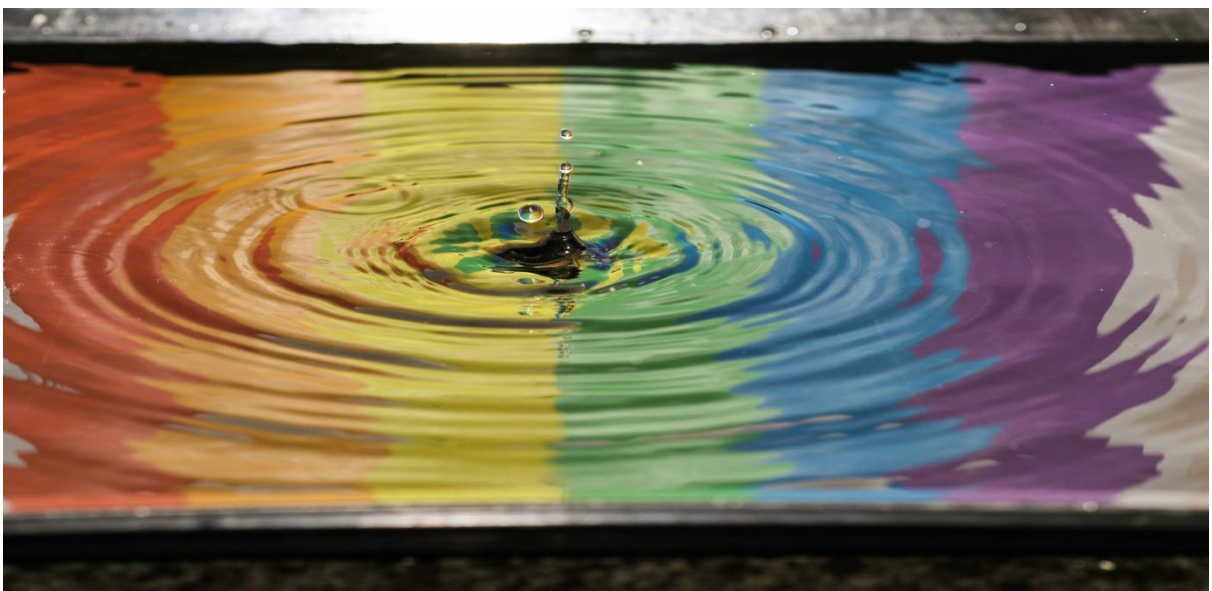
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Conflict resolution

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
Set up a meeting, preferably in person, to initiate this discussion. Individuals tend to develop better rapport and trust in person.	
Clarify your feelings and beliefs	
Allude to the emotions you have experienced since this matter transpired. 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).	"Thanks for meeting me about this matter. I have felt a bit disconcerted as well as regretful about this issue".
Outline the differences of opinion as fairly as possible	"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".
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. 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).	"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. So, rather than a numerical answer, we will need to trust our intuition and experience to some extent".
Indicate that you may not be able to resolve the matter today but may need more time to contemplate.	

Action	Illustration
Listen to one another	
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 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).	"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".
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. After people consider why a matter feels so important, their resentment tends to diminish (Huynh et al., 2016).	"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".
Each person should then identify up to three arguments they feel have not been raised yet.	"Perhaps now we should articulate other three or so arguments that could be relevant to this decision but have not been raised".
One person should attempt to summarise the key arguments thus far. 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.	

Action	Illustration
Arrange another meeting	
Unless one person is willing to concede immediately, the matter should then be deferred to another meeting. 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	
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).	
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.	"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".

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
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. This approach, called reappraisal, has been shown to temper and even override conflict and resentment (Thiel et al., 2019).	"One strategy I learned about that tempers resentment is to replace horrible thoughts about someone with more specific, nuanced, and generous thoughts. For example • 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…"
Individuals who experience resentment should be prompted to imagine a conversation about this conflict in five years.	"So, imagine we meet in five years. What do you think we would say about how we managed this matter?" 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).

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	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. 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.
3 — As vividly as possible, imagine each of the most likely alternatives in sequence.	For a minute or so, you could first imagine a typical meeting with the first applicant. You could next imagine a typical meeting with the second applicant and so forth.
4 — Defer your decision for at least a day if possible.	While you defer this decision, distract yourself with other activities. That is, if possible, during this time, refrain from contemplating this decision.

	Step	Example
5	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.	You might imagine yourself in a position of power, but in a role that is not too stressful. 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.
6	Close your eyes and visualise the alternatives—such as the five applicants—as vividly as possible, one more time. 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.	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.
7	Finally, you may experience a strong hunch or intuition about which option seems more suitable. Trust this hunch or intuition.	If you do not experience a strong hunch or intuition, roll some dice to determine which option to choose. When you roll the dice, you might experience a strong hunch as to which option you prefer. Choose this option.

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,