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## Arrogant leadership can undermine the mission, success of a business

By Ed Brenegar

REAL LIFE LEADERSHIP

Question: I'm a take-charge guy. I believe that strong leadership requires assertiveness. I know what I expect from my people. I've been told that I'm too arrogant. I don't see my leadership style as arrogant, just confident. Am I wrong about my approach?

Answer: The practice of aggressive leadership is so widespread it is difficult to imagine any critique that could effectively challenge it. But it is worth considering what the role of humility is in effective leadership.

In his book "Speak Softly," Ira Williams makes the point that we often compliment people who are humble but never imagine ourselves in their role. Is this because we actually see humility as a greater challenge, a higher calling than the way we understand ourselves functioning as leaders? Williams writes, "In order to be humble, you have to be strong." His point is that it requires tremendous strength and character to place others' needs before your own. He writes of moving our "self-orientation to the background and focusing on others." The benefit of this leadership approach is a balanced perspective and personal fulfillment.

Williams takes the title of his book from the African proverb that Teddy Roosevelt made famous: "Speak softly and carry a big stick; you will go far." The idea behind this bit of wisdom is that our actions carry greater weight than our words. The problem for most of us is that we are in such a hurry to achieve our goals we think all we must do is tell people what they are to do. In reality, when our words and actions are not congruent, we are seen as inadequate leaders who can't be counted on to do the right thing at the right time.

Humility and trust are connected: If you are told you are arrogant, you are also being told you are not to be trusted. Your employees are telling you that your own self-interest, not the business or customers, is at the heart of your actions. This is not a good image to have. Arrogance, therefore, weakens your business.

A business that exists only for the owner is on shaky ground. A more humble perspective is to recognize that your business exists to positively affect others. If your employees are constantly assaulted by your assertiveness, then you are negatively affecting them. If you constantly send the message to your customers that they exist only to buy your products, then you give them no reason to be loyal or share their love of your company with their friends.

Humility is a mindset that promotes, in Williams' perspective: "Self-examination. Self-criticism. Self-help. Self-improvement." If you can model this kind of humility with your actions, then it will be translated throughout your company. Your "people" will become a team, and your customers, friends. To be humble is to be strong. To be humble is to go far.

This is the opinion of Ed Brenegar, president of the Community of Leadership, a leadership development and transition-planning consultancy. He writes the Leading Questions blog at <http://edbrenegar.typepad.com>. Send questions to him at [ed@edbrenegar.com](mailto:ed@edbrenegar.com).