

Hallmarks of LEADERSHIP *Series*

#1- Humility

On the occasion of his first inaugural address, President Ronald Reagan, began by stating that to the nation, “this changing of the President is a commonplace occurrence.” In so doing, he shifted the world's attention away from himself and onto this Republic, founded more than two-hundred years ago, in which presidents come and go peacefully, at the will of the people. This is true, because we are a people living under that wondrously resilient document, our Constitution, guaranteeing a land of liberty and law.

By this opening statement, Reagan placed himself not at the pinnacle of America, but rather as its servant-leader, acting under the authority of the Constitution. Doing so, at the very moment which marked the zenith of his own career, revealed a essential attribute of great leadership, the mark of humility.

Humility is one of the central hallmarks of excellent leadership. As a leadership trait, humility makes it possible to resist self-centeredness and, instead, to look to the needs of others. Humility is freedom from pride and arrogance. However, today, this may seem an oxymoron to many. After all, whether in government or the corporate world, aren't our leaders supposed to be charismatic, self assured, virtual super men and women? And don't the humble get run over on the climb to the top? If, as Jesus said, “the meek will

inherit the earth,” why do the self-seekers get the promotions?

Unfortunately, in some cases the selfish and arrogant do get promoted, but promotion does not necessarily equate to great leadership, as almost all of us have realized at one time or another in our careers, working under a boss that could only demand but not command respect. Nor is humility an indication of weakness, but rather of true strength. Humility is based in strength of character and self-confidence, not focused on self-aggrandizement in order to maintain a sense of inflated self worth.

Humble leaders are not threatened by the success of co-workers nor do they find it difficult to be able to openly and frequently praise peers and those working under them. They do not “fear” sharing the glory. In fact, they find satisfaction, even joy, in seeing others around them gain recognition and reward. This makes them valuable mentors, as they truly do seek the best for others.

I have had the privilege of knowing leaders who were strong, self-confident and charismatic, but who were also truly humble. They were known for putting the well-being of the organization ahead of their own self-interest. Quick to encourage, appreciate, and promote others, they were not known for being the center of attention. And yet, they unintentionally commanded the attention of those who chose to follow their example, not out of duty, but rather deep respect.

One cold winter day during America's Revolutionary War, a Corporal had ordered his

men to cut some trees in order to make a bridge. As there were insufficient men for the work, it was a laborious task. Sitting astride his horse, the officer shouted to his men, urging them to work faster. Presently, another officer rode up out of the woods, his uniform concealed by a long overcoat. Seeing the men's predicament, he addressed the Corporal, "You haven't enough men for the job do you?" No sir," the Corporal replied, "We need some help." "Why don't you lend them a hand," the newly arriving officer inquired. Shocked and affronted, the Corporal replied, "Me sir? Why, I am a corporal." "Ah, true," replied the second officer. Then dismounting, the second officer began helping the men in their work. When the task was completed, he remounted his horse. Riding away he called out, "Corporal, the next time you have a job to put through and too few men to do it you had better send for the Commander-in-Chief, and I will come again." And with that General George Washington disappeared into the woods!

Humility is a leadership hallmark that strengthens our purpose and helps maintain a proper focus on the responsibilities and deepest satisfactions of our work, rather than our personal desires. It allows us the freedom to fully enjoy what we do and the gifted people with whom we work. Humble leaders are those with the maturity to leave the striving and grasping to others, and wholeheartedly pursue the significant aspects of their life and work.