

# **Leadership and Spirituality in Practice: Literature Review on Humility as Distinctive Mark of Transformational Leadership**

**Hendjena Tchanaga Richard**

*BA, MA and PhD Student, Adventist University of Africa, Nairobi – Kenya*

**Prof. Nyakora Musa O.,**

*PhD, GIOD, KIM, IHRM, AKSIM,  
HOD, and Director of MA and PhD in leadership.  
Adventist University of Africa, Nairobi – Kenya*

---

**Abstract:** Humility is key to a successful transformational leader that needs to be admired, inspirer, motivator, innovative, creative, and genuine concerned to the followers. The supreme self-reliance of the magnanimous man implies the lack of two others traits: humility and piety.

The greatest leaders of our world, those that have left their mark on history in transformative ways, understood the deep link between their leadership calling and their humility in seeing themselves as servants to something much greater than themselves. This paper aims to review several literature materials and relevant contributions reflecting on the subject of leadership and spirituality.

**Keywords:** Transformational, Humility, Leadership, Spirituality, Practice.

---

## **Introduction**

Aung San Suu Kyi from Burma, Martin Luther King from America, Mahatma Gandhi from India, Nelson Mandela from South Africa... are well known leaders who left a distinctive mark of humility in their lasting change in the world. For all of them, humility was foundational for transformative leadership. Blummer (2013), Tampa Bay Times Columnist was impressed and acknowledged that Nelson Mandela possessed a preternatural humility. Mandela inspired the world with his example.

Humility is that noble trait of character that made distinctive men and women in the various fields of politics, business, religion, psychology, sociology, experimental sciences, etc. Knowing as a distinctive mark of great leaders who changed the world, what is it?

## **Definition of humility**

Humility is the quality of being humble and means putting the needs of another person before personal interest, and thinking of others before oneself. It also means not drawing attention to oneself, and it can mean acknowledging that someone is not always right (Your Dictionary, 2018). From Mother Teresa's point of view, quoted by Singh (2013), humility is the mother of all virtues; purity, charity and obedience. It is being humble when love becomes real, devoted and ardent.

From the Catholic Dictionary, humility is the moral virtue that keeps a person from reaching beyond himself... that restrains the unruly desire for personal greatness and leads people to an orderly love of themselves based on a true appreciation of their position with respect to God and their neighbours (Catholic Dictionary).

Humility involves an accurate assessment of one's own characteristics, an ability to acknowledge limitations, and a forgotten of the self and involves relinquishing one's own arrogant or narcissistic tendencies and viewing oneself realistically in relation to others (Powers et al., 2007).

Humility finally refers generally to an approach to life that lacks egocentricity and actively seeks a "low-profile" lifestyle lacking wealth and social pretence and most often involves service to others (AlleyDog.com, 2018).

Marshall & Broome (2017), authors of the book entitled *Transformational Leadership in Nursing: From Clinician to Influential* understands humility as not a simple antithesis of these. It is much deeper. Humility is modesty, without pretence, or genuinely not believing you are superior to others. It includes being courteous, gracious, and respectful.

### **Definition of the word distinctive**

Distinctive simply means characteristic of person and so serving to distinguish him from others; quality that makes a person different. ([www.merriam-webster.com](http://www.merriam-webster.com)).

### **Definition of the word mark**

A mark is a sign of character that differentiates a person from another.

### **The Importance of Humility to Transformational Leaders**

Goodman (2017), speaker and Team Building Expert from USA, sustains in his article that humility is key and is the most precious and most elusive traits for transformational leaders, because:

- **Humility is a form of authenticity.** People want to follow a leader who can be real about his or her own shortcomings, and who gives team members permission to be likewise.
- **Humility leads to a collaborative, team-driven approach.** The humble leader will delegate, empower, and encourage other team members to contribute their own great ideas.
- **The humble leader will promote others.** A humble leader will help team members rise to new levels of influence and prestige.
- **Humble leaders are grateful.** Humility allows you to step back and acknowledge how much you depend on the other members of your team.
- **Humility suggests integrity.** Leaders are more likely to be people of integrity if they rose to their leadership role through hard work and humility.

### **Humility and the four components of the transformational leadership**

The Transformational Leadership is made up with four well known components: Idealized Influence (II), Inspirational Motivation(IM), Intellectual Stimulation(IS), and Individualized Consideration(IC).

- The Idealized Influence leader is defined as role model, the admired leader because he walks the talks.
- The Inspirational Motivation leader shows ability to inspire and to motivate followers.
- The Intellectual Stimulation leader challenges the followers to be innovative and creative.
- The Individualized Consideration leader demonstrates genuine concern for the needs and feeling of followers. He or she shows personal attention to each follower by bringing out their very best efforts and developing in his or her followers' leadership potential (Schieltz, 2018).

### **Humility: A Distinctive Mark of Transformational Leadership (TL)**

The TL may be distinguished by other qualities like visionary, proactivity, adaptability, organizational consciousness, willing to take the right risks, accountability, etc. (Hogg, 2012), but in this work, the emphasis is put on humility. Why? From the biblical perspective, humility is the mark of honour and elevation recommended by Jesus himself in Matthew 20:27. "Whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant" (KJV). The New International Version (NIV) makes it plain by saying: "whoever wants to be first must be your slave" and the NKJV adds: "Whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave".

Humility has a powerful impact on ethical behaviour, helps leaders to be less corrupted by power, claim excessive privileges engage in fraud, abuse followers, and pursue selfish goals (Craig, 2018, p. 79). Craig (2018) identified that humility is made up of three components: 1) **Self-awareness**- a humble leader can objectively assess her or his own strengths and limitations; 2) **Openness**- knowing one's weaknesses, being open; and 3) **transcendence**- humble leaders acknowledge that there is a power greater than the self.

#### **1- Humility and the Idealized Influence Leaders**

Humility is of itself a virtue, and can be seen contained within servant, authentic and spiritual leadership (Huizinga, 2016). Being a role model and admired leader requires humility. Jesus was an example of role model while leading his disciples (followers). Who is a role model? According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, it is "a person whose behavior in a particular role is imitated by others."

##### **- Humility and the role model leader**

Humility plays in favor of role model. Being a good role model requires confidence balanced out by humility. Without humility, the role model may become arrogant and self-centered, and then not focused on individual growth at all.

A good role model says the Columnist Brown (2014), should strive to make the world they live a better place, should be able to admit their mistakes and truly makes amends for them, and should have the passion and desire to inspire people. According to the Swiss community builder & entrepreneur in NYC Pförtmüller (2017),

everyone in the community observes the good role model. Everyone foremost looks at the behavior of their informal or formal leaders; humility is an important value for any community.

- **Humility and the Admired Idealized Influence Leader**

The humility makes the Idealized Influence leader to be admired. Leaders with exceptional character earn a lot more respect and admiration (Keijzer, 2018). Keijzer (2018) has identified five essential traits that qualify the admired leader:

- He or she promotes and acknowledges others.
- He or she is collaborative- views the entire team as equals.
- He or she shows integrity- earning respect through humility and integrity has a long impacting effect on team because they know you are a person of your word.
- He or she is appreciative- welcomes diversity in people and values each and everyone in the team.
- He or she cultivates the spirit of humanity- leader who presents himself or herself as everyone else i.e. as humans.

- **Humility and inspiring leader**

Leader who inspires may be humble. If humility misses in one's leadership, this means he or she misses success. According to Eurich (2018), an Organizational Psychologist and best-selling author, the humble people are more successful than their overconfident counterparts and a humble CEO is "a genius with a thousand geniuses".

Taylor (2018), cofounder of Fast Company and the author, reports in Harvard Business Review reports from a recent management column in the Wall Street Journal appeared under the appealing headline, "The Best Bosses Are Humble Bosses" that humble leaders "inspire close teamwork, rapid learning and high performance in their teams." In humility are sincerity, modesty, fairness, truthfulness, unpretentiousness, honesty, etc. humility cannot match with arrogance. Where arrogance makes headlines but humility makes a difference, concludes Taylor (2018).

## **2- Humility and Inspirational Motivation Leaders**

These are leaders who show ability to inspire and motivate followers. To inspire and motivate followers, humility is needed and key. When a leader expresses humility it opens the door for greater levels of understanding and productivity. Do you wish to rise? Asked St. Augustine. "Begin by descending. You plan a tower that will pierce the clouds? Lay first the foundation of humility." (Baldoni, 2012).

- **Humility and the ability of leader to inspire followers**

To inspire is to have the ability to do or feel something, especially to do something creative. Creativity is important: it is necessary to generate lot of ideas to find great ones (Eikenberry, 2007, p.174). To do so, this needs a humble attitude.

Because of humility, Jesus came down, put off his divinity and glory, and put on the humanity and poverty of human beings (Philippians 2: 7). Jesus demonstrated a method in the process of transforming common people being fishermen, tax collectors, farmers, and so on, to becoming effective spiritual leaders (Bell, 2014, p.370). He embraced his humanity fully because he knew that God's plan was to defeat Satan through his humility, not his power (Denton, 2011, p. 101). He maintained an attitude of humility in whatever He did (Denton., p. 180). That's why He was followed by people from lower, middle and upper class. Baldoni (2012) continues to argue that leaders who value humility are the ones other people want to follow.

- **Humility and the ability of leader to motivate followers**

To have the ability to motivate is understood from Merriam Webster Learner's Dictionary as to give (someone) a reason for doing something (Merriam Webster Learner's Dictionary). A good motivator has to identify the real needs of his followers and humbly provide to those needs knowing that motivation is not simple subject, but followers' motives are rooted in their needs (Lee, 2003, p. 137).

To try and keep workers or followers happy, an inspirational motivation leader should make sure that he or she allows them to fulfill Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Business Dictionary). Humility as openness to followers' well-being, considers the physiological needs for survival (to stay alive and reproduce including food, water, sleep, shelter), security needs (to feel safe emphasizing personal security, financial security, health and well-being), social needs (for love and belonging taking into consideration friendships, intimacy, family), self-esteem needs (to feel worthy, respected, and have status), and finally the self-actualization needs (self-fulfillment and achievement including mate acquisition, parenting, utilizing ability, utilizing talents, pursuing a goal, seeking happiness, etc.) (Business Dictionary).

All these needs can be fulfilled only by a leader who has a loving and humble heart that works for the good of followers by integrating this biblical recommendation made in Philippians 2:4: "Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others."

### **3- Humility and the Intellectual Stimulation Leaders**

Innovative and creative leaders need to be humble; because humility is the foundation on which all other values stand (Rosales, 2018).

#### **- Humility and Innovative Leader**

The innovative leadership is the ability to both think and influence others to create new and better ideas to move towards positive results (George, 2016). Humility helps to recognize that ideas can come from other people, being willing to change of the mind, being able to admit mistakes, being willing to learn from mistakes of others, rather than punishing them (New & Improved, 2015). The innovative leader needs passion, integrity, tenacity, courage, curiosity, and Humility. Those qualities are resumed in the acronym: P.I.T.C.C.H. However, to get better performance and innovation from organization, the leader should start the foundation: humility. Like a building, leadership needs a strong base on which to build, which brings to the cornerstone of innovation leadership (New & Improved, 2015).

#### **- Humility and creative leaders**

Creative leadership is the ability to create and realize innovative solutions especially in the face of structurally complex or changing situations (Vernooij & Wolfe, 2014). Guthrie (2012), a professor of International Business and Management at the George Washington University School of Business, argued that Humility and the ability to admit error might be two of the most important qualities a truly creative leader must have.

### **4- Humility and the Individualized Consideration leader**

The individualized consideration leader considers the subordinates' personal needs and desires, both professionally and in private life (Martin, 2016). The education director of the Greater Good Science Center, Zakrzewski (2016), acknowledges that the ability to put the growth of others first comes from a belief in the intrinsic value of every human being. This attitude demonstrates a humble transformational leadership.

Jesus is a model of Individualized Consideration leader. He came down and identified himself with poor, outcasts, women, men, tax collectors, people from all classes paying to each of them a particular attention and especial consideration to their needs (Luke 4: 18).

Leaders sometimes may be humble just externally and in the situations that make their happiness. They may be humble just during the time that things are happening for their interests. How to gain the true humility?

### **The Source of True Humility**

Humility that can make a leader role model, admired, inspirer, innovator, creative, genuine concern to others, etc., is the true humility and is not from vacuum. Spirituality is the true source of humility. Being spiritual leader means to be connected to God, and depending on him who is the source of true humility.

Moses for example was connected to God, and the Bible says: "Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone." (Num. 12:3). At various times in the Old Testament, Moses falls face down and protests that he is "not worthy to lead." (Woolfe, 2002, p. 71). White (1953), an American eminent writer gives this comment about Moses' humility:

"Moses was a humble man; God called him the meekest man on earth. He was generous, noble, well-balanced; he was not defective, and his qualities were not merely half developed. He could successfully exhort his fellow-men, because his life itself was a living representation of what man can become and accomplish with God as his helper, of what he taught to others, of what he desired them to be, and of what God required of him. He spoke from the heart and it reached the heart. He was accomplished in knowledge and yet simple as a child in the manifestation of his deep sympathies. Endowed with a remarkable instinct, he could judge instantly of the needs of all who surrounded him, and of the things which were in bad condition and required attention, and he did not neglect them" (White, 1953, p. 1113).

The king David also was connected to God and demonstrated humility in his life as leader of the people of Israel: "Who am I? And what is my life or my father's family in Israel..." (1 Samuel 18: 18). Scott (1999),

one of the writers of Christian Library, argues in his article that during his reign, David humbled himself before God; even though he had sinned grievously, David was still able to remain humble before God. David's greatness was not in his bravery, even though he was very brave. It was not in the battles that he won, even though he won many. It was not in the glory of his reign, even though he had his share of glory. It was in his willingness to submit to the will of God and to humble his heart in repentance when he sinned.

Another emblematic biblical character that shew humility was Solomon. When he was called to lead the great Kingdom of Israel as successor of his father David, he expressed himself before God: "I am only a little child . . . For who is able to govern this great people of yours?" (1 Kings 3:7-9). The Lord was testing Solomon. He placed in his mind a desire for the things that would enable him to rule wisely the people of Israel. . . Only the prayers of those whose hearts are not filled with self-exaltation and haughtiness will the Lord hear (Isaiah 58:9). Ellen G. White asserts that God commended Solomon's prayer. In addition, he will today hear and commend the prayers of those who in faith and humility cry to Him for aid (White, 1953, p. 1026).

Woolfe (1999), author of the book titled *The Bible on Leadership*, asserts that some of the most successful, hard-hitting, goal-oriented, and ambitious executives have tempered those traits with humility. Their leadership styles may not be exact copies of those of Moses or Jesus, but they are exhibiting humility nonetheless.

This kind of humility which is the fruit of total dependence to God is key to transformational leadership so that it can influence people by example for their better life. Under such leadership that inspires, motivates, considers people needs, and develops people, etc., followers become gradually leaders and are prosperous in their activities for the organization, society, etc.

To be a true humble leader and transformational leader, these biblical recommendations from Jesus are key: "Therefore anyone who becomes as humble as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." (Matt. 18:4). "Jesus called them to him and said, you know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave." (Matthew 20: 25-27, ESV).

Jesus is the living model of humility of all ages that can be followed by those who need to change their families, organizations, societies, nations, even their continents like Africa. Competencies, skills, knowledge, techniques, etc. are important to whom who wants to change his followers, but being humble like Jesus is better.

This world needs humble leaders, because, as said Fanning (2016), the CIO at iThlone Enterprises, humility is the acceptance of living to serve a greater purpose. Being humble is literally the panache of the greatest leaders. It is the trait of character that highly and successful people use to effectively communicate, give direct orders and delegate tasks.

In fact, a transformational leader uses humility to improve performance, and helping others to grow and wishing them the prosperity in becoming leaders. John the Baptist is a good example when he made comments about the prosperity of Jesus in his ministry: "He must become greater; I must become less" (John 3: 30, NIV) or "He must increase, I must decrease" (John 3: 30, NKJV). This continent Africa needs leaders who allow their followers to increase. Contemporary society full of pride needs to learn from those models of humility. Those who want to become real transformational leaders should learn from those models of humility to change their milieu and followers.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, humility that is putting the needs of another person before personal one, and thinking of others before oneself, should be the key distinctive characteristic or mark of transformational leaders who aim to change people around them. They need to be humble in order to influence, motivate, inspire, consider others, be genuine by considering the interests of others or followers.

To be a true humble leader, they need to be like Moses, David, Solomon, and Jesus who gave the main place in their life to God who is the source of true humility. Spirituality that generates true humility is being connected to God. Jesus is the ultimate example of spiritual leadership. Spiritual and humble leadership involves humbling oneself and doing task that no one else wants to do. Jesus did it; let transformational leaders follow his steps.

### **References**

- [1]. AlleyDog.com (2018). *Definition of Humility*. Retrieved from <https://www.alleydog.com/glossary/definition.php?term=Humility>
- [2]. Baldoni, J. (2012). *Inspire People to Follow: Practice Humility*. Retrieved from <https://www.inc.com/john-baldoni/humility-is-something-leaders-should-practice-not-fear.html>

- [3]. Bell, B. (2014). *Servants and Friends: A Biblical Theology of Leadership*. Michigan, MI: Andrews University Press, p. 370.
- [4]. Blumner, R. E. (2013). *Blumner: Nelson Mandela's Greatness and Humility*. Retrieved from <https://www.newsday.com/opinion/oped/nelson-s-greatness-and-humility-robyn-e-blumner-1.5589708>
- [5]. Bobb, D. J. (2013). *Humility: An Unlikely Biography of America's Greatest Virtue*, Nashville, NA: An Imprint of Thomas Nelson, p.26.
- [6]. Brown, J. (2014). *Good Role Models are Humble, Inspiring, Honorable*. Retrieved from <https://uisjournal.com/opinion/2014/02/12/good-role-models-are-humble-inspiring-honorable/>
- [7]. Business Dictionary. [www.businessdictionary.com/definition/Maslow-s-hierarchy-of-Col Gurnam Sigh, 2013 needs.html](http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/Maslow-s-hierarchy-of-Col-Gurnam-Sigh,2013-needs.html)
- [8]. Catholic Dictionary. *Definition of Humility*. Retrieved from <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/dictionary/index.cfm?id=34023>
- [9]. Craig E. J. (2018). *Meeting the Ethical Challenges of Leadership: Casting Light or Shadow*, Six Edition, Washington, DC: SAGE Publications, Inc., p.79.
- [10]. Denton, A. (2011). *Christian Outdoor Leadership: Theology, Theory, and Practice*. USA: Smooth Stone Publishing, Fort Collins, p. 101.
- [11]. Eikenberry, K. (2007). *Remarkable Leadership: Unleashing Your Leadership Potential One Skill at a Time*, San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., p. 174.
- [12]. Eurich, T. (2015). *Why Humble Leaders Inspire Loyal Teams*. Retrieved from <https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/249102>
- [13]. Fanning, M. C. (2016). *Humility: The Acceptance of Living to Serve a Greater Purpose*. Retrieved from <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/humility-acceptance-living-serve-greater-purpose-michael-c-fanning>
- [14]. George (2016). *The Principal of Change: Stories of Learning and Leading*. Retrieved from <https://geogecouros.ca/blog/archives/5921>
- [15]. Goodman, R. (2017). Humility is key to Transformational Leadership. Retrieved from <https://www.business2community.com/leadership/humility-key-transformational-leadership-01912016>
- [16]. Guthrie, D. (2012). *Creative Leadership: Humility and Being Wrong*. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/douguguthrie/2012/06/01/creative-leadership-humility-and-being-wrong/#6675ae44403b>
- [17]. Hogg, B. (2012). *7 Must Have Transformational Leadership Qualities*. Retrieved from <https://www.billhogg.ca/7-must-have-transformational-leadership-qualities/>
- [18]. Huizinga, R. B. (2016). *An Understanding of Humility-Based Leadership Impacting Organizational Climate*. Retrieved from <https://www.regent.edu/acad/global/publications/elj/vol9iss1/2ELJ-Huizinga.pdf>
- [19]. Keijzer, P. (2018). *5 Reasons Why Humility is an Essential Leader Leadership Trait*. Retrieved from <http://www.paulkeijzer.com/5-reasons-humility-essential-leadership/>
- [20]. Lee, H. W. (2003). *Effective Church Leadership: A Practical Sourcebook*, Silver Spring, USA Pacific Press Publishing Association, p. 137.
- [21]. Marshall, E. S. & Broome, M. E. (2017). *Transformational Leadership in Nursing: From Clinician to Influential Leader*, Second Edition, New York, NY: Springer Publishing Company, p. 36.
- [22]. Martin (2016). *Transformational Leadership Guide: Definition, Qualities, Pros & Cons, Examples*. Retrieved from <https://www.cleverism.com/transformational-leadership-guide/>
- [23]. Merriam Webster Learner's Dictionary. *Definition of Motivate*. Retrieved from [www.learnersdictionary.com/definition/motivate](http://www.learnersdictionary.com/definition/motivate)
- [24]. New & Improved (2015). *Humility is the Ultimate Innovation Tool*. Retrieved from <https://newandimproved.com/2015/10/20/humility-innovation-tool/>
- [25]. Pfortmüller, F. (2017). *Community= an Organization Optimized for Trust?* Retrieved from <https://medium.com/@pforti/community-an-organization-optimized-for-trust-4c74999a6c97>
- [26]. Powers, C., Nam, R. K., Rowatt, W.C. and Hill, P.C. (2007). *Associations between humility, spiritual transcendence, and forgiveness*. Retrieved from <http://booksandjournals.brillonline.com/content/books/10.1163/ej.9789004158511.i-301.32>
- [27]. Rosales, P. (2018). *The Value of Humility in Innovation Leadership*. Retrieved from <https://inusual.com/en/blog/the-value-of-humility-in-innovation-leadership>
- [28]. Schieltz, M. (2018). *Four Elements of Transformational Leadership*. Retrieved from <https://smallbusiness.chron.com/four-elements-transformational-leadership-10115.html>

- [29]. Scott, G. (1999): *David, the King who Walked Humbly Before God*. Retrieved from [www.christianlibrary.org/authors/Grady-Scott/david2.htm](http://www.christianlibrary.org/authors/Grady-Scott/david2.htm)
- [30]. Sigh, C. G. (2013). *Humility is the Essence of Spirituality*. Retrieved from <https://www.speakingtree.in/blog/humility-is-the-essence-of-spirituality>
- [31]. Taylor, B. (2018). *If Humility Is So Important, Why Are Leaders So Arrogant?*<https://hbr.org/2018/10/if-humility-is-so-important-why-are-leaders-so-arrogant>
- [32]. Vernooij, M. & Wolfe, R. (2014). *The Need for Creative Leadership*. Retrieved from <https://www.thnk.org/insights/the-need--for-creative-leadership/>
- [33]. Watson, C. (2015). *Spirituality and Transformative Leadership*. Retrieved from [https://m.huffingtonpost.co.uk./caroline-watson2/spirituality-and-transfor\\_b\\_7637984.html](https://m.huffingtonpost.co.uk./caroline-watson2/spirituality-and-transfor_b_7637984.html)
- [34]. White, G. E. (1953). *S.D.A. Bible Commentary* Vol. 1, p. 1113.
- [35]. White, G. E. (1953). *S.D.A. Bible Commentary* Vol. 2, p. 1026.
- [36]. Woolfe, L. (2002). *The Bible on Leadership: From Moses to Matthew—Management Lessons for Contemporary Leaders*, New York, NY: American Management Association, p.71, 72).
- [37]. Your Dictionary (2018). *Examples of Humility*. Retrieved from <https://examples.yourdictionary.com/examples-of-humility.html>
- [38]. Zakrzewski, V. (2016). *How to Cultivate Humble Leadership*. Retrieved from [https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how\\_to\\_cultivate\\_humble\\_leadership](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_to_cultivate_humble_leadership)