

humility in learning

The surprising leadership capability for a digital age

Can we continue to rely on theories of leadership that were developed many decades ago, long before the widespread adoption of the Internet? What makes a leader successful in highly volatile business environments, like those associated with digital disruption? IMD's Global Centre for Digital Business Transformation recently completed a research study to find the answers.

A number of attributes emerged that differentiated successful from less successful leaders, such as adaptability, a clear sense of vision and a high level of engagement with internal and external stakeholders. But one attribute to emerge from the research came as a surprise: humility. In a series of face-to-face interviews with executives from both start-ups and large incumbents, the words 'humble' and 'humility' frequently cropped up. This finding was subsequently reinforced by a survey of over 1,200 executives from a cross-section of geographies and industries.

However, this humility was not simply that embodied by a 'humble leader', but was instead allied to learning or knowledge – what we'll term 'humility in learning'.

On humility in general, CS Lewis remarked *"Humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less."* This quote applies usefully to 'humility in learning'. Successful leaders

Humility IS NOT
THINKING
less of yourself;
BUT **THINKING**
of yourself less

— C.S Lewis —

in volatile environments spend less time relying on what they already know, and proportionally more time on exploring new concepts and ideas. That is, humility in learning is not thinking less of what you already know, but thinking of what you already know, less.

In a constantly changing world, it is simply not possible that the leader will know the answer. Being open to new ideas requires listening to others actively, gathering information broadly, and not allowing perceived wisdom or prior belief to constrain your thinking. Recent psychological studies have indeed shown that the 'intellectually humble' are better able to spot their own errors, and positively correlates with the ability to discriminate ideas in memory.

If humility in learning is so important, it should probably be visible in leaders of the world's digital giants.

Let's start with Google's Sundar Pichai, the Indian born engineer responsible for Chrome, Android, and Google Apps. Pichai has been described as being humble by Caldwell Partners, *Huffpost* and *The Times of India*. He has remarked that leadership is *"...less about trying to be successful (yourself) and more about making sure you have good people, and removing roadblocks so they can be successful in what they do – let others succeed"*. Pichai is not alone, Lazlo Bock, former SVP of People Operations, emphasised the need for intellectual humility; *"Without humility, you are unable to learn."*

At Microsoft, Satya Nadella operates from an office over-run with books. His personal mantra is 'learn it all, don't know it all'. Since his promotion in 2014, he has been credited with defusing the highly combative, silo-orientated organisation of his predecessor by building a culture

of listening, communicating, learning, and sharing view-points. Even before his appointment as CEO, he was identified as possessing a key quality for a modern, dynamic leader – humility.

If humility in learning is so important, it should probably be visible in leaders of the world's digital giants.

Amazons' Jeff Bezos has a reputation for single-mindedness, even arrogance. But in a recent interview, Andy Jassy, previously Bezos' technology assistant, and now head of Amazon Web Services, gave an insight into Bezos' approach to learning: *"He's just an amazing learner."* Bezos, himself is quoted as saying *"Thinking you know exactly where you're going is a lack of humility that doesn't let you invent."*

So, behind the sound-bites and the resolve required to run the biggest technology companies on the planet, these influential CEOs exhibit humility in learning. As AirBnB's Brian Chesky has said, it's time for all leaders to *"Take a step back and have some humility."*

Take a step back and have some humility.

Professor Michael Wade is Professor of Innovation & Strategy at IMD Business School, and co-author of *Digital Vortex: How Today's Market Leaders Can Beat Disruptive Competitors at Their Own Game*.

[back to contents](#)



CRF will be exploring the implications of digital disruption for leaders in 2019. Click here to register your attendance at our forthcoming [London](#) and [Lausanne](#) masterclasses.