

# Humility as a force enhancer: developing leaders and supporting personal resilience and recovery

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Humility is the first step in the search for truth, in that it establishes the truth about ourselves. It is a wise and balanced self-knowledge that does not lead to narcissism or self-obsession but, crucially, to compassion.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

This article advances the concept of humility, in the context of character, virtue and Defence values, as a key choice in support of resilience and understanding of personal reality and recovery. For both leaders and the injured, there is a need to be as fully informed as possible on reality and adverse contexts—however challenging—so that responses can be fully effective.<sup>2</sup> The article intentionally seeks to inform matters to do with leadership cultural change, retention and mental health resilience.

Humility can be considered a value-adding, self-assessment and choice-driven approach to reality and courses of action. As a conscious trait to inform oneself and act appropriately, it is remarkably related to the Defence Leadership Framework's expectation that development is based on an 'understanding of individual and team strengths, capabilities and weaknesses'.<sup>3</sup> Given its focus on moral character, humility also forms part of what Army so strongly espouses in its values, namely:

The moral and physical courage to act in the best interests of the nation and the Army; including the moral strength and professionalism to balance the will to win with compassion, and mateship with duty.<sup>4</sup>

A common misunderstanding is that humility is about low self-worth or a sense of lowliness. However, in reality, humility can be about knowing one's reality in the context of professionalism and human development. It is a key character trait that enables emotional management and 'protection from excess', and acting well despite setback and failure. This is because it 'involves an accurate self-assessment, recognition of limitations, keeping accomplishments in perspective, and forgetting of the self'.<sup>5</sup>

A force has a fitness/readiness status. Yet there are also personal, more spiritually-oriented inner types of fitness which are alluded to in the concept of moral strength. These can include mental agility, an ability to honestly self-reflect and self-assess, and to recognise in non-judgmental ways the reality of circumstances, and to learn from failure.

The working hypothesis is that humility is an enabler of rigorous self-assessment for leadership and personal recovery. This means honest self-assessment and facing up to incompleteness and failure. For Defence, acceptance of reality—even when things are incomplete—can assist and augment the fully 'fit to act, to fight and to adapt' concept. On a personal level, accurate self-assessment and self-acceptance are crucial for healing and recovery of a suffering individual, and relate to seeking and maintaining treatment.<sup>6</sup>

In a Defence context of total force fitness, Mark Bates' model of recovery, reset and resilience (Figure 1 overleaf) is foundational in acknowledging times of injury, reset and total fitness. Note too, such fitness is not merely the absence of illness; rather, it is a continuum from 'not ready' to 'ready', whereby those who are injured or ill are treated respectfully and comprehensively in order to return to work or be reassigned or retired.<sup>7</sup>



Figure 1: A model of total force fitness <sup>8</sup>

## Aim

The aim of this paper is to examine how humility can support resilience choices, cultural change recovery from illness and setbacks, and sensible reaction to unexpected (even traumatic) events and change. Humility is key because such actions relate to personal choices based on an appreciation of personal and group resources and, where necessary, an admission of incompleteness. This can lead to re-equipping, the allocation of additional resources or altering courses of action, as well as support for retention strategies.

Methodologically, the paper briefly distills selected scholarship on humility to produce a synthesis useful to support leadership and personal recovery and reset intents. To achieve this objective, self-awareness, self-care, understanding failure and non-judgmental self-acceptance and detachment will be considered, each of which relates to the notion of humility.

## Definitions

In taking a self-reflecting, accepting and non-judgmental stance, this article adopts Mary Margaret Funk's definition of humility as 'standing in the truth of being'.<sup>9</sup> Funk speaks of humility as being a form of modesty and not a lack of confidence, although she does note its problematic modern reception by those who mistake it for weakness.

Humility also relates to acceptance of reality. Yet it is not about being humiliated and oppressed. This is about personal courage in values-based organisations. As Saint Teresa of Avila says, it is about 'walking in the truth of who we are ... [and] accepting our weaknesses and our limitations, as well as our strengths and talents'.<sup>10</sup>

## What humility is not

Humility, which since ancient times has been considered a primary virtue, could be defined as 'lowliness or submissiveness', since it is derived from the Latin *humilitas*, meaning 'from the earth'. In these terms, humility is often portrayed as making people feel inferior. The term humiliation is also unhelpful since it is not about a healthy self-knowledge or self-sufficiency, nor self-acceptance of incompleteness as the starting point to growth and healing.<sup>11</sup>

## Key concepts

Humility is about sensible self-knowledge and recognition of human frailty. Such sound self-awareness and realistic thinking does not abolish true self-respect. It also reduces the chances of coming across as arrogant and helps maintain perspective. Humility is therefore an attribute of modest people who are able to admit mistakes. This is also helpful to teamwork, as such people are unlikely to take undue credit for another's work.<sup>12</sup>

Humility is beginning to have its presence felt in business. For example, a US study in 2014 found that humility 'empowered organizational climate, and [was] associated with work engagement, effective commitment, and job performance'.<sup>13</sup> It is also emerging in the military environment. For example, US Marine Corps General John Kelly contended in 2010 that the officer corps is made by the 'humility, honesty, moral courage, trust and allegiance manifested by honorable men and women'.<sup>14</sup> Kelly also speaks about humility in the command sense, linking it to the appropriate use of power, the environment and personnel retention.

In Australia, the RAN contextualises courage in terms of humility, asserting that 'courage drives responsibility, humility and personal example'.<sup>15</sup> Not dissimilarly, albeit in a religious context that could readily be adapted to the military, Joseph Tetlow contends that humility is about 'a strong sense of self and, the greater the humility, the stronger the sense of self'.<sup>16</sup> This calls leaders to a mindfulness of their own style and the effect of their actions.

### **Self-awareness/self-knowledge and self-acceptance**

In commenting on performance and relationships, Michael Austin notes that:

Empirical research on humility shows that this trait has great value. Humility has been linked with better academic performance, job performance, and excellence in leadership. Humble people have better social relationships, avoid deception in their social interactions, and they tend to be forgiving, grateful, and cooperative. A recent set of studies also shows that humility is a consistent predictor of generosity.<sup>17</sup>

Although it is receiving more attention in leadership research, surprisingly little psychological literature cites humility as a key trait and choice in relation to resilience and personal recovery.<sup>18</sup> Spiritual writers are more forthcoming. For example, Jonah Wharff highlights that 'humility enables us to be receivers of right desire and affect towards others, which has implications for collective as much the personal'.<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman see humility as a key virtue, and one which addresses excesses.<sup>20</sup> Everett Worthington contends that a realistic sense of oneself, combined with the realisation that one is not better than others, leads to forgiveness.<sup>21</sup> But what about its effect on compassion? In this light, Kristin Neff talks about forgiveness as 'forgiving one's failings and foibles and respecting oneself as fully human and, therefore, as a limited and imperfect being'.<sup>22</sup>

Saint Bernard taught that humility centred on self-knowledge is grounded in a truthful confrontation.<sup>23</sup> He also showed a raw and transformative honesty about self-scrutiny and its relationship to compassion when he stated that 'I am not ashamed to admit that in my early days I had coldness and hardness of heart'.<sup>24</sup> This stark self-recognition is a key response factor. Again, in terms of Bates' recovery-resilience fitness model, factual information about gaps and developmental or healing steps are key issues, especially if one is to overcome unhelpful rumination, speculation or misinformation.

The writings of Thomas Merton could be appropriated for the Defence environment. Merton offers some interdisciplinary and practical benefits of humility's focus on self-awareness and knowledge, asserting that:

Humility is absolutely necessary if man [sic] is to avoid acting like a baby all his life. To grow up means, in fact, to become humble, to throw away the illusion that I am the centre of everything and that other people only exist to provide me with comfort and pleasure.<sup>25</sup>

Bernard Haring adds that decisions direct the way we live our lives, and these choices are either a firm commitment to the positive ethos of life towards love or they are not.<sup>26</sup> June Tangney also sees humility as a realistic choice related to self-assessment and recognition of failure as a catalyst for change, involving:

- An accurate assessment of one's abilities and achievements;

- An ability to acknowledge one's mistakes, imperfections, gaps in knowledge, and limitations;
- An openness to new ideas, contradictory information, and advice; and
- Keeping one's abilities and accomplishments—one's place in the world—in perspective.<sup>27</sup>

Such self assessment-based choices can augment strategies that seek to develop emotionally-reflective and change-oriented leaders. In the mental health and treatment and resilience areas, such research into humility and its relationship to imperfection and self-acceptance can support treatment plans and engender an environment where people can ask for help and support in order to restore capacities.

Consistent with Bates' recovery and fitness model, humility is a non-defensive willingness to see the self accurately including strengths and limitations. Honest self-assessment is important to holistic mental health care, especially where humility gives rise to compassion.<sup>28</sup> Again, identifying limitations and even failure requires knowing and accepting where things are. As Andre Delbelcq says:

Humility begins with the daily willingness to accept criticism and be open to modification of one's own thinking as one's concepts are subject to examination in exchanges with others.<sup>29</sup>

However, over-thinking and disproportionate self-assessment can also be problematic when it becomes rumination.

### **Rumination**

Rumination and excessive self-reflection can develop into defeatist thinking and exacerbate suffering. As noted by Susan Nolen-Hoeksema and colleagues:

Rumination does not lead to active problem-solving to change circumstances surrounding these symptoms. Instead, people who are ruminating remain fixated on the problems and on their feelings about them without taking action.<sup>30</sup>

Studies have established that work-related rumination is a risk factor for poor recovery and ill-health.<sup>31</sup>

### **Detachment**

Leaders enmeshed in high-tempo activity, as well as suffering individuals, may find it difficult to step back and reassess settings, reactions and choices.<sup>32</sup> 'Detachment', which is related to humility because it is about not being overly-enmeshed in either failure or success, can be viewed in both spiritual and positive psychology terms. Spiritually, attachment is a self-concept based on not identifying too closely with the ego, performance goals and so-called needs.

Psychological detachment comes close to this spiritual focus by focusing on 'holding one's painful thoughts and feelings in balanced awareness rather than over-identifying with them'.<sup>33</sup> Spiritual detachment or standing aside from the egocentric self is what Richard Rohr and Mary Beth Ingham call humility.<sup>34</sup> This may seem countercultural in a military setting but he is talking about unhealthy attachment to goals and performance. This has potential implications for character development because it is about self-reflection and not getting caught in rumination and remaining attached to problematic demands.

### **Developing practical applications**

Humility can augment self-review, ultimately addressing unattainable performance desires, conflicting demands and the many difficult setbacks that will be experienced in every role in Defence. The focus on self-knowledge, detachment and acceptance of incompleteness and imperfection is useful for a chaplain supporting people to recover from adversity and failure, and

derive personal, inner meaning. It is also useful for a leader in basing honest assessment of reality as a key starting point.<sup>35</sup>

People who are self-evaluative are able to notice failure, review their plans and work, and be more receptive to constructive criticism. Those who are overconfident may only focus on positive feedback and ignore the negative. But to be the best in oneself, there is a need to learn to be one's own critic and take the advice of others. It is in this context that Basil Pennington not dissimilarly said that:

Once we realize that we have bought into the construct of the *false self* and have come to identify ourselves foolishly with what we do, with what we have and what others think of us, we have made the first step towards freedom.<sup>36</sup>

Charles Dumont has argued that humility could be re-phrased as emotional honesty and self-truth.<sup>37</sup> The humility examined here is a positive value given best effect in adverse conditions. Being aware of and, therefore, being able to counter such unrealistic expectations and self-centredness can have significant implications for leaders and those who are in recovery, particularly for the leader, so that they do not over-react, and for the recovering, so that they do not get overwhelmed—which again speaks to the key theme of rumination and over-considering and dwelling too long on issues and emotions.

### **Humility and detachment assists personal reset and recovery choices**

In a 2015 article in this *Journal*, it was argued that:

People experience, feel and suffer at unexpected times and for unplanned reasons. At their core, when they are laid bare by trials and humbled by failure and life, inner joy and conviction seem far away. Clearly, early intervention is a key goal and it must not exclude any action that alleviates suffering, improves personal outcomes and builds personal capacity to function and hopefully return to full functioning.<sup>38</sup>

Humility is a personal trait and a choice that can underpin healing because honest self-assessment can lead to self-acceptance and seeking appropriate support. Pastorally speaking, this is the call to know and accept our incomplete selves as much as we are moved to know and accept others. In the words of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux:

The value of our imperfections ... provided we are reflective about and active in our lives, is that they help us to deepen in self-knowledge, and they impel us to change where change is needed.<sup>39</sup>

Such a trait could augment the way Defence's values are enacted, as it calls for personal and collective honesty. Rohr and Ingham too note that humility supports courage, resilience and recovery in the individual, although it is not often contained in treatment plans or assessment tools. Certainly, from the literature, humility is a choice to come to terms with failure and incompleteness by meaningful self-knowledge, which can aid in growth, change and recovery processes.

In high-tempo environments, where failure is not necessarily tolerated, humility has the potential to ensure an individual does not cling to a self-image that exacerbates resistance or suffering. This concept has been used therapeutically to assist in healing, albeit not without some controversy.<sup>40</sup> It is about 'learning to recognize [that] emotions can take hard work, [so] ... reserve moments of reflection to ask yourself what you are really feeling in the moment and what you have been feeling recently'.<sup>41</sup>

Humility is having a clear, detached and realistic self-perception.<sup>42</sup> In terms of an ill or injured person, it is the supported and hopefully inner-awareness of reality and healing actions that assists in recovery and the return to wellbeing. Again, recalling Bates' recovery to fitness model, humility is a rigorous and honest self-assessment process, where the goal is to avoid maladaptive forms of self-reflection, enhance acceptance of reality, and come to recovery and growth. In other

words, in accepting that 'I know that I need support and treatment, I will take these recovery-oriented steps without question'.

All-in-all, the literature establishes the potential of humility as a personal resilience tool as much as it appears relevant to Bates' model. In the sense that it is as contradictory as it sounds, it means that the recovering soldier can come to know and accept their incomplete or failed selves as a platform on which to build their recovery responses. Practical steps include listening to one's emotive state, suspending judgment where possible, and building in reflective space in which to consider the options. It is also related to building self-acceptance capacity as the following vignette from a recovering veteran shows:

Self-worth and self-acceptance follow each other: if you can't accept your situation you can go no further. I believe reflection and education are the key to let people know that PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder] is real. It took me ages to face reality and get my self-worth and ride back. I enjoy volunteering and anything that I can do to help others. I lead a life that is worthwhile and fulfilling. Believe in yourself! Not easy but it can be done.

### **Assistance to personal recovery**

In a way that could well apply to any pastoral carer tending to a suffering person and connecting it to compassion, humility need not suggest weakness or self-abnegation. Quite the contrary; humility requires toughness and emotional resilience; it can manifest as unflinching self-awareness, empathetic openness to others and a keen appreciation of, and gratitude for, the privilege of caring for sick persons.<sup>43</sup>

It follows, therefore, that in terms of first responses to a mental health or medical issue, whether it be injury, anxiety, mood or a disaffection issue, a key goal is urgent conveyance to medical and psychological assessment and treatment. However, from experience, we know that chaplaincy/pastoral responses can also assist a person to be self-aware in a non-judgmental sense of their condition and its treatment.

A practical example may assist. The author was speaking to a soldier who presented with concerning mental health symptoms, who was also being very hard on himself and his condition. To encourage the soldier to seek assistance, the chaplain maintained an accepting stance of the current reality and encouraged the person not to be harsh and self-judgmental. Assistance was not only framed in medical terms but also in terms of self-care and that we all at times need periods of reset and recovery. In these terms, the soldier acquiesced to obtain the requisite treatment.

### **Humility supports leader growth**

Humility can also form part of command considerations because humility focuses on reality and an awareness of limitations. This relates strongly not only to understanding adverse circumstances and weaknesses but, as importantly, it means acting differently because of them. Humility guards against false perceptions, harsh self-criticism and self-aggrandisement. For commanders, this is about the type of review that notes and works through failure as an 'improve' idea, which helps build total force and an individual's fitness. The literature also links humility to generosity and one's disposition towards others, which points to collective effort and even altruism.<sup>44</sup>

Humility is a leader's choice to stand back and make sense of reality. It also enables the leader to see themselves and the team effort in truthful relief. Such a deliberate choice for modelling rigorous self-assessment can also be modelled for a leader's relationship with their subordinates. This leads to actively seeking comments, even if they are critical; accepting when others have more information and skills; and admitting when they do not know something.

Some researchers call humility at work potentially useful and certainly counter-cultural to normal business imperatives, where self-promotion and self-aggrandisement are often the norm.<sup>45</sup> Yet, recalling Rohr and Ingham, humility is an inspirational and long-practised virtue. In



its practical operation, it guards against personal excesses and over-inflated ideas of what is possible—all of which are perennial and problematic issues in the workplace.

Some positive research is emerging that revisits humility and champions it by pointing to its efficacy. Organisationally, Donald Goergen sees humility as a noble trait oriented towards self-giving; yet he does not overlook the proper place of self-denial, which has potential corporate benefits.<sup>46</sup> This could be reframed as activities that see a leader placing their own needs aside in the service of overall, higher collective intent. It also relates to resilience and readying.

### **Detachment**

The literature shows an emerging sense that physical detachment in itself may not be enough because negative emotions, workplace suffering and responses are often very subjective and deeply personal. Rumination is also deemed a key risk. An approach is needed that actively re-orientates rumination towards non-judgmental reflection, where detachment is about humbly looking at our needs, addictions and pain from slightly further away.

This recalls the 'stable witness' who notes the emotions and situation but does not get overly enmeshed in the pain or over-rumination.<sup>47</sup> In a Defence context, such endeavours have been under-examined because the suffering or disaffected self, let alone leaders, are not necessarily able to detach reflectively in times of failure, change, suffering or need. This research posits that such assessment provides scope for living with failure and ambiguity in order to create a platform for meaningful change.<sup>48</sup>

### **Rumination**

Positive humility is arguably a protection factor against rumination and exaggeration (overstating a human experience or need, theme or condition). In character development terms— which arguably could be applied to the support and encouragement of those who are suffering illness—humility is advanced as not being for the faint-hearted, as it is described as 'a sign of great courage and deep spiritual understanding'.<sup>49</sup>

From the literature, humility is a key human orientation and choice, although it has been largely unexplored in military workplace settings. Humility seeks to address some of the often chronic effects of failing to meet expectations, and failure and loss. It also seeks to address at least two of the emotionally-charged responses to pain, disaffection and hardship, namely rumination and exaggeration, both of which can occasion suffering and inhibit the movement to recovery and eventually thriving.

Humility is deemed a key fitness and recovery-type concept because it is about awareness and acceptance of and detachment from problematic conditions. That is, seeing and noticing (witnessing) in non-judgmental ways and then living meaningfully with change, uncertainty and imperfection. Recall that Tangney too sees humility as being about realistic choices related to reality, self-assessment and, where necessary, the recognition of failure—all as a catalyst for change.

This makes it useful in the development of doctrine about honest, self-assessing leaders who take stock, own up and learn from mistakes. It is also hypothesised that this can ensure enhanced resilience and a forgiveness of failure, provided the consequences of such are noted, taken up and not given as a mere excuse for bad behaviour or poor performance. Reflecting pastorally, comments on humility are related to concepts of personal recovery and holistic fitness. For example:

- Liberative quality: being truly ourselves. In those seeking to be themselves and acting with integrity, humility offers an opportunity to be heard and understood even in the midst of failure, pain or loss; and

- Encouraging the person to face his or her limits. How many times do people suffer as they face uncertainty, loss, retirement, being overlooked, or missing promotion? More broadly, facing limits is a daily occurrence in all planning environments.

Again, to be clear, humility is not simply about accepting inadequacy; rather, it involves a movement—a choice to own up and to develop personally and collectively. Lest it be taken as feebleness, Joseph Doty and Daniel Gerden (drawing on the former's experience as a battalion commander), assert that:

Humility must never be viewed as a weakness. Quite the contrary; a leader who can maintain an unpretentious disposition will likely inspire a sense of camaraderie and *esprit de corps*.<sup>50</sup>

## Conclusion

This article has proposed humility and, to some extent, detachment as key supports for honest self-assessment and reorientation in the midst of recovery, adjustment and the movement to thriving. It began by locating the term humility in the context of courage and resilience. It has advanced the concept of humility as a self-care choice for the Defence community to manage the incompleteness, change and performance issues that service life will inevitably occasion. It has also advanced the concept in terms of assisting leaders to accurately self-assess, without over-ruminating, in order to engage, retain and develop their teams.

The article has concluded that honest, yet self-kindly inner awareness and rigorous self-knowledge can assist in leadership engagement. It has also highlighted the emerging evidence that humility as a personal choice can support holistic mental treatment regimens as people take stock and make appropriate recovery action based on sound information. However, as this is a reflective paper, extensive quantitative workplace-related research will be needed to confirm humility's significant potential and to embed it appropriately in Defence's training continuum, and in leadership development and treatment and recovery strategies.

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## Notes

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