

Humble leaders are better leaders

By Alison Maitland

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The summer of 2017 will be remembered for extraordinary displays of provocation from attention-seeking world leaders obsessed with power. The megaphone diplomacy between North Korea's Kim Jong Un and Donald Trump has been as chilling as it is childish.

How sad, then, that the summer also brought news of the untimely death of Dame Helen Alexander, one of Britain's most prominent business women, whose leadership style was marked by calm determination, discreet diplomacy, and a large degree of humility.

Dame Helen was effective and successful, leading The Economist Group through a period of global expansion and increased profits before being appointed first female president of the Confederation of British Industry, the lobby group for big business, in 2009.

She was a champion of gender balance on boards and senior management teams, speaking out on the subject and co-leading the Hampton-Alexander Review to get more women into top roles. Her death from cancer aged just 60 is a loss for business, diversity, and exemplary leadership.

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Humility is, unfortunately, not taught or prized as much as it should be. As the *Economist* wrote in its obituary: ‘Her success owed much to a leadership style that lacked fireworks and did not seek fame, but deserved more recognition, for both its humanity and effectiveness. Helen relied on a quiet wisdom: listening, not lecturing.’

Considering her achievements, she was not well known outside business circles. That was her style. Kate Grussing, managing director of the search firm Sapphire Partners, who knew her well, told me: ‘She was a very distinctive and

unassuming leader, a real presence, an incredibly good listener, very generous, so down to earth and modest given her accomplishments.’

Richard Lambert, who was director general of the CBI when she was president, wrote in the *Guardian* that ‘Hers was a calm, even self-effacing, personality. There was not an ounce of pomposity in her.’

She was undeniably a role model, but she did not necessarily see herself that way, as Dame Helena Morrissey, founder of the 30% Club that promotes women on boards, told BBC Radio 4. ‘It wasn’t Helen first, and the rest of us second,’ she said.

Why does humility work in leaders? It’s because humility makes room for others to step forward and shine, rather than be frustrated or scared by the long shadow of an overbearing or egotistical boss. That in turn enables organisations to draw on all their talents – essential for sustainable success in our complex and uncertain world.

In his bestselling book *Good to Great*, published 16 years ago, Jim Collins demonstrated compellingly how CEOs who led their companies to superior results combined resolute determination with deep humility, giving credit to others and valuing the good of the organization over personal advancement.

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Collins countered the view that great organisations need larger-than-life personalities at the top.

Subsequent studies underlined the importance of humility. Research published in 2012 by the University of Washington Foster School of Business found that humble people are more likely to be high performers, individually and in teams, and to make the most effective leaders.

Michael Johnson, co-author of the [research](#), said it suggested that employees were more engaged by ‘quieter’ leadership – listening, being transparent, being aware of limitations, and appreciating others’ strengths and contributions.

With admirable prescience, he pointed to the dangers of the rise of narcissism, encouraged by social media, saying that cartoonish shows featuring ‘me-first’

bombast, such as Donald Trump's *The Apprentice*, threatened to become cultural touchstones.

Delving deeper into the impact of humility, a [study](#) of managers in private companies in China found that the empowering behaviour of humble CEOs created greater cohesion in top management teams. As a result, middle managers also felt more empowered, positively affecting their engagement, commitment and performance.

This is all about exercising power *with* people, not power *over* people. Leaders who do this, supporting their teams and bringing out the best in others, keep their egos under wraps. Their skills tend to be appreciated less when they are present than when they are absent – when people notice the big gap they leave in a team or organization.

Such leaders deserve greater recognition. Despite all the evidence of its effectiveness, humility is currently out of fashion. The need for it is more urgent than ever. I expect its time will come, and I hope it will be sooner rather than later.

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