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**VALUABLE LEADERS STAND OUT WITH A SURPRISING  
COMPETENCE FOR THE DIGITAL AGE:  
"HUMILITY IN LEARNING"**

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**ABSTRACT**

Humble leaders are not, as one might think at first sight, servile, humble, with low self-confidence and modesty which implies the denial of their own worth. On the contrary, they know exactly what their value is, but do not trump it. They know where their place in the organization is and what their purpose is in their lives and that of others. Moreover, their responsibility is to encourage the autonomy and uniqueness of others, creating their own sense of conscience and responsibility. Starting from this sketch, we will find the answer to the question: "does the humble leader in Romania look different from the universal one?"

Mark Zuckerberg, the founder and CEO of Facebook, is one of those who are experimenting with this concept in the "year of travel", which started in 2017. He combines engagement with humility learning. It seems that precisely this slightly anachronistic concept, drawn from theology books, makes a leader successful and maintains its value in highly volatile business environments, in the full disruptive era of digitalization, in which you are now at the top, tomorrow you can reach the bottom, falling exactly from the height you climbed. Because the power is intoxicating on itself. And the wisdom of such a leader lies precisely in the ability to stay at the high levels of success, without deceiving himself and then pushing him into the abyss. Because as it is known, the higher the height the climb, the worse the fall, if you do not know how to maintain balance.

According to this study, the humble leader is highlighted by attributes such as: wisdom, ability to adapt, vision and a high level of relationship with internal and external stakeholders.

**Keywords:** humble leaders, competence, digital age, learning.

**INTRODUCTION**

Specialty literature talks, a lot lately, about a new type of leader, the most advanced of all – "humble leader". At first glance, this slightly anachronistic term (attitude pious, submissive, respectful, humble, full of decorum) seems to be at odds with courage and visionary modern leader. But it is a paradox that actually works.

In view of specialized publications such as Harvard Business Review, the leading value is distinguished precisely by a surprising power for the digital age: "humility". This feature is one of the characteristics that distinguish these leaders from those who do not have outstanding results (Cable, 2018).

Humble leaders know how to give people energy, to motivate them, to make them feel useful, to give meaning to everything they do. It is the prototype of servant leadership, those who really believe that their goal is to provide employees with a safe environment where they can explore, experience, where staff can develop with the support of the leader.

These servant-leaders have the courage, humility and emotional balance to recognize that they can make mistakes, they can learn from those they lead and have less power than them. Humble leaders are able to put themselves above their own egos and see positive uniqueness of each person

working. They know how to create a “learning culture” of the company in identifying and encourage “flashes of genius” in every employee.

A humble leader is a wise man who will not tell you how to do your job better, but will ask how can he help you and will support you to do better at work. It is the one that will create low risk areas where people can experience new ideas in safe conditions.

A humble leader is one who will treat as equals those working at lower levels. A very easy thing to do when you regard them as people like you and not as inferior beings. The essence of humility in fact this: to see in the other man, not just what he can do to help you. It is humanity which, as the name shows, the man is put the center. When the mind of a leader is centered on man, all else comes naturally - consideration, respect, gratitude, appreciation.

## **FROM THE INTELLIGENT EDGE AND CLOUD TO THE HUMBLE LEADER OF THE FUTURE**

Although Technology versus Humanity sounds like a declaration of war, the situation is more peaceful and away from film scenarios where people are invaded by robots. Leaders of big companies have a major role in managing the paradigm who need to reconfigure their strategies, business models and to rethink human resource policies in the context of mass digitalization era and disruptive technologies. And the ability to remain human seems a paradoxical response to the many dilemmas of these turbulent times.

“The era of intelligent cloud and edge arrived” said Satya Nadella, Microsoft CEO. “These innovations create incredible opportunities for developers and come together with the responsibility to ensure that the technology we are building is reliable and beneficial for all of us.” (Wiedemeyer, 2018). It is the same CEO who operates an office crowded with books and acting according to the personal mantra: “Do not be the one who knows everything, be the one who learns everything”. From his promotion to this position in 2014, he had been credited to have “defused” the extremely combative and organizational culture oriented towards “silos” created by his predecessor. “Silos” refers to a condition characterized by the fact that departments are isolated “sealed” from one another, not communicating with each other, and the flow of information which should exist between departments is hindered or blocked by the tacit refusal of employees from a department to give their colleagues the information they need to do their job well. Nadella has achieved this performance by building an organizational culture where people really listen to each other, communicate with each other, learn new things from each other and share their points of view. It is one of the most effective leaders, but also very humane, being cited in literature as one of those humble leaders who should give the correct image of leadership with a humane face.

In a recent study Microsoft confirms that smart devices are increasingly found in homes and businesses around the world, it is estimated that it will reach a figure of more than 20 billion such devices by 2020. These devices are so smart that make possible advanced ways of seeing, listening, reasoning and predict without constant connectivity to the cloud. This is the intelligent edge that opens opportunities for individual customers, companies and the whole industry, from the operating room to the shop floor.

At European level, the trend is that companies which adopt digital transformation benefit from a significant increase in employee productivity and innovation, especially if there is a strong organizational culture. Both start-ups and large companies adapt fast their business models to meet a variety of increasingly large needs of customers and managers know that the digital transformation is no longer just an option but an imperative.

In this context, what is the role of big business leaders in reshaping strategies, business models and reinventing / rethinking human resources policies in the context of mass digitalization era and disruptive technologies? It seems that the very ability to remain human is what we need to follow these leaders. For successful leaders are distinguished by a surprising power for the digital age: “humility in learning”.

“This feature is one of the characteristics that distinguish these leaders of those that did not have so much success”, confirms Michael Wade, Andrew Tarling and Rainer Neubauer, Professor at IMD Business School Center Global IMD for digital transformation Business. (Wade & Tarling, &

Neubauer, 2017). They argue that there are some attributes that differentiates successful leaders of those who are less successful: resilience, a clear sense of vision and a high level of relations with internal and external stakeholders. But most surprising attribute that “surfaced” was a huge surprise: humility. So, theories of leadership stand, that were designed a long time ago, before the widespread adoption of the Internet. Paradoxically, while the artificial intelligence reshapes the way we will work in the future, employers are now focusing more on the human skills and on the employees’ needs for having a job that would give meaning to their whole life, not just the professional.

A confirmation of this axiom is found in Mercer, identifying global trends related to new professional and dynamic talents who reported five such trends that dominate the labor market in 2018.

### **The class of useless people. Why is it vital to keep learning?**

Studies by the HR (Studies undertaken by the Chief Human Resources and Chief Strategy Officers) shows that, on average, by 2020, more than one third of the sets of required skills of several professions will be totally different from those which today are considered essential in the same professions. It is therefore essential to reinvent yourself in the same profession, not to change it. Not other job, but that for which you have prepared in school and in which you have excelled for years and have been appreciated and paid well. In other words, even if you work in the same firm or company in the same position, with the same people in a team, with the same bosses, what you do will be quite different in the proportion of one third. You must be alert and ready for another job. With your soul, and preparation and attitude. It will appear in this context a “class of useless people”, a term introduced by anthropologist Yuval Harari in 2013 (Enders, 2019). It's a tough term, designating a new social class of people who will not correspond anymore professional on the labor market, which is in constant motion. Automation and robotics are their main enemies. They will have no occupation and will be supported by the state aware of their inability to find a job. Financial aid directed to this effect are already introduced in Finland and Switzerland and there are much debate about MIG. Initiatives of this kind have occurred in other countries in the world, because some people have already started to become “useless”, replaced the technology.

Continuous improving technologies are responsible for changing lifestyles and moral usage of less digital skills. Becoming out dated these skills will make people, previously considered as having a high level of skills become redundant and considered useless in their profession.

Changing the paradigm of thinking is seen in the way the world is changing educational process. Digitalization education is a process that begins in primary school - many of the usual skills (penmanship, arithmetic, mechanical reproduction of information) are disappearing. The way we orient children towards a job is continuously and very rapidly changing, and the required profile jobs in the next 10 years is not similar to what we were used to think that is searched.

### **A humble leader remains human and relevant, innovative and visionary**

We believe that each stage of evolution contains, in one way or another, and all the ingredients of prior stages (still carrying in ourselves impulses and reactions of the cave men, for example). Constructive leadership is a process of influence that constructively guides the people’s attention and energy toward a common goal, a common good. The appearance Internet has led to the development of many societal processes, including processes for leadership. Internet has given a force never before to “peer-to-peer” interaction and therefore leadership processes in organizations will be re-drawn to capitalize on this strength. Otherwise, organizations will be crushed by it (flattening hierarchies and organizations is a consequence of the presence of the Internet in our daily life). In addition, of the importance of camaraderie it has been already spoken several hundred years (in wars, people cheer through interactions with comrades from them, not taking courage from their leaders). What is different now is that the intensity and extent of “peer-to-peer” interaction are so high, and people become increasingly aware of the sense of autonomy that they can enjoy, so that organizations need suitable processes of leadership to guide this energy and ensure synergies and collective processes of people. For example, companies are often asking themselves which mindset to cultivate among employees and which organizational processes could reduce managerial hierarchies and related costs. Where we see flat organizations means that there is a brave and humble

leader experiencing a leadership model based on autonomy, more "peer-to-peer" interaction and continuous learning.

***Without humbleness you are incapable of learning or finding out new things***

Psychology studies have recently shown that, indeed, people who are "humble and modest intellectually" are able to detect their own errors, and this trait correlates positively with the ability of some people to distinguish an idea the other and due consideration when they "scan" the ideas under their memory. (Deffler & Leary & Hoyle, 2016)

How much find this concept in the real world? If humility in learning is so important, it probably would be visible to the world's leading digital giants.

Let's start with Google's CEO Sundar Pichai - engineer born in India, responsible for Google Chrome, Android and Google Apps. 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". One thing that Pichai does to lead this digital Leviathan is to seek the advice of those around him, and those of the wider community of Google. Every Friday, Pichai holds a meeting with leaders from all levels of the organization, during this encounter he answers questions asked by "Googlers" from all over the company. Pichai is not alone, Lazlo Bock, former SVP of People Operations emphasized the need for intellectual humility. "Without humility, you are unable to learn." (Prime & Salib, 2014)

Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook founder and CEO has a very strong personal learning plan. He is now engaged in a "Year of Travel" which began in 2017, combining engagement with learning humility. He appeared suddenly to hear what is being discussed at a series of meetings held without fuss in halls of local communities and schools and companies, and to learn more about the world outside the "bubble" of Silicon Valley. On several occasions, he admitted that mistakes were made in the company he leads, accepting for example that some errors in the Facebook algorithms were run by the dealing spread of "fake news".

Jeff Bezos, CEO of Amazon seems to be the exception to the rule. He has a reputation as a leader who pursues only one purpose, being arrogant, caring for nothing else. But in a recent interview, Andy Jassy - that was before Bezos' assistant in technology and is now head of Amazon Web Services - made a comment that allows a deep understanding of how Bezos addresses learning: "It is simply an amazing scholar. I've never met someone to teach as he does. I mean he's coming anyway, from the beginning, with a lot of knowledge. But the way he is opened and curious to learn new things from new areas or topics and new points of view....". 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".

Steve Jobs, co-founder and former CEO of Apple is another example of a leader who does not seem to fit the profile "humble personality". Yet he is reputed to have been a voracious studios. A fascinating study published in 2015 in "Journal for Applied Psychology" reveals Jobs as an example of how the humility of a leader could counteract his narcissistic tendencies, leading to some amazing results.

So, if you look beyond "citations-pill" which were drawn from interviews and speeches of these leaders, because they reflect briefly a whole idea and behind a strong decision which they need to lead the largest technology-driven world, we see that these influential Chief Executive Officer manifest humility in learning.

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. It appears that even the most successful leaders are willing to admit that they do not have all the answers, and spend time actively seeking to learn. As AirBnB's Brian Cheskey has said, it's time for all leaders to "Take a step back and have some humility". Indeed, as Hal Gregerson from the MIT Leadership Center pointed out, "The best CEOs embrace being wrong, because the faster they recognize their faulty thinking, the faster they reframe their questions and unlock better solutions".

## THE HUMBLE LEADER IN ROMANIA LOOKS DIFFERENT THAN THE UNIVERSAL ONE?

Successful leaders are distinguished by a surprising power for the digital era: Humility in learning. This feature is one of the characteristics that distinguish them and those who fail or are mediocre.

Can we continue to rely on theories of leadership that were designed many decades ago and long before the widespread adoption of the Internet? What makes a leader to be successful in some very volatile business environments, such as those associated with disruptive change?

Our research has resulted in a number of attributes that differentiates successful leaders of those who are less successful, including: adaptability, a clear sense of vision and a high level of relations with the so-called stakeholders internal and external (groups of people who are either directly involved in conducting the company's business and / or have a vested interest in its development or influence the business or are affected by it).

But a particular attribute that "came up" when we conducted this study came as a surprise: humility. In a series of interviews face-to-face, made both with CEOs of start-ups and with executives from traditional companies, the words "humble" and "humility" appeared suddenly and frequently. What we found was further supported by a survey in which over 900 people have been involved in senior management roles who formed a representative sample of all kinds of geographies and industries in Romania.

However, this humility was not simply just one embodied by "a humble leader", but was, instead, allied with learning or our knowledge - what we call "humility in learning". About humbleness in general the writer and university professor CS Lewis observed: "Humility does not mean that when you think about yourself, to feel that you are less than you should be, but to think of yourself less".

This quote perfectly describes the concept of „humility in learning”. Successful leaders operating in volatile environments spend less time building on what they already know and spend proportionately more time to explore new concepts and ideas.

And this is a logical and pragmatic attitude. In a world that is constantly changing, it is simply not possible for the leader to be always „one who knows the answer” or even be best informed. If it is to be opened to new ideas, this attitude imposes you to listen to others actively gathering information, and not allow the wisdom that you possess - as perceived by yourself - or any belief prior to the discussion to constrain your way of thinking.

If we look at the current environment of most organizations, it is not so wrong to say: enough, come back! The cult and culture generated a bad organizational superiority like, keeping the proportions, the outbreak of the Second World War. Here we are now.

A common misconception of all people is called „error honesty” and refers to the fact that we tend to rate us positively compared to others, we see more "good" than them, especially more competent and honest. But this is fundamentally wrong. Here are some trends already widely accepted classical and somewhat overvalued: 70% of students, 80% of drivers and 90% of university professors significantly self-evaluate themselves above average. What about the managers? 90% of them not only self-evaluate themselves above average, but they consider to be in the top 10% performers. Probably it is not so wrong to say that 90% of them, suffering chronically blindness, having this self-image that distances them from all the others, are in the major slippages area, in the area of mediocrity and incompetence. Not consistent with their statements and actions, with an ego conceited, confident, pumping heavily in developing charisma and skills of influence and persuasion, „the supermen of new organizations” (leaders top) is likely to soon become the „last men”. They often trick on a short term and the inevitable occurs by itself.

The future of new organization will depend on how the new philosophy of their leadership will be dedicated to the pursuit of high ideals and noble values, to regain trust, commitment and loyalty of new employees (associates).

„The supermen of new organizations” (leaders top) are likely to become soon the „last people”.

And the new philosophy of leadership of postmodern organizations could not be imagined in the absence of right attitudes construction, which derive from power sharing personal ideals and the values of the consistency of their system. Only here you can find the source appropriate dosing

practices and behavior management, of correct motivation and of consistent will to build a healthy and sustainable organization. And the choice and practice of humbleness and of consistency of the executive force is nothing but the embodiment of values and ideals pursued by it.

## CONCLUSIONS

Management competence is expressed by its behavior, and any behavior is regulated by values and ideals. So the values and ideals are the ones which determine the success of a leader in organizational development and business.

In other words, power management is a choice between what is right and what is bad for the organization, it involves cultivating discernment between good and evil and which must be incorporated into the operation of the organization. And that means setting hierarchy, transparency competitions, open and honest competition must be made according to the truth. Good organizational is nothing but the leader's success to build a trustworthy management team which is able to develop an organizational culture authentic, meaningful, producing remarkable achievements.

And such a shared organizational culture succeeds to discern between true and false, competent and incompetent, beauty and ugliness, good and evil. Truth, good, beauty are high values because can discriminate what makes sense to nonsense. And all this can be easily deciphered if we look more closely at three aspects of leaders leadership model: mentality (conception of self, world, life, etc.), attitude (especially positioning to himself and to others) and the way it approaches things (human, in-depth or bureaucratic, surface, etc.).

Any true leader does not fall into the trap of reductionism, of increasing efficiency by reducing costs. In other words, the trap is that of maximizing short-term earnings at the expense of development. Only that many of the pitfalls of leadership at the top of organizations are caused by poor management of executives, a higher ego, vain and greedy, lacking values and noble principles, destroying everything in his path. Self-reflection exercises can help executives to clarify if it considers long-term success of companies or rather they resolved to show „who's boss”.

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