

HUMILITAS

By John Dickson, Zondervan, 2011, 183 pages.

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John Dickson defines humility (rooted in the Latin *humilitas*) as “the noble choice to forego your status, deploy your resources or use your influence for the good of others before yourself.” From that definition he sets forth a roadmap for successful leadership with multiple examples of humble leaders in sports (with a wonderful tale about Joe Louis) science (Einstein) ministry (Schweitzer) and music (Bono), among many others.

He defines leadership as “inspiring others in a team to contribute their best toward a goal,” and believes that leadership needs four tools: (1) ability, or the leader’s track record, (2) authority, the leader’s structural powers within an organization, both of which are important; but Dickson reminds us that without the capacity to (3) persuade others to follow, along with a sufficiently good character to set (4) a good example, a leader will not succeed. He returns to these themes throughout the book.

The author writes with a cheery, self-deprecating manner I found infectious. His story about learning to play the didgeridoo, the Australian aboriginal instrument, by a kindly old Aborigine who first coated the mouthpiece with a generous

bit of frothing saliva that dribbled down the pipe and onto the ground, then handed the instrument to the author with the instruction “...just blow real slow and smooth” made me laugh. Dickson describes this event as something like a forced humility, where he was put on the spot and hardly wanted to put the drooling, wet mouthpiece into his own mouth but did not want to insult his kind host. His point in this example is that although the author was uncomfortable, in fact the old gentleman had prepared the instrument for play, and Dickson, a professional musician, rose to the wet invitation, wrapped his lips around the mouthpiece, blew, and subsequently perfected his ability and incorporated the instrument into his repertoire. He took the risk that brought about an altogether satisfactory conclusion to an uncomfortable and potentially embarrassing beginning.

I found the author’s five suggestions on *learning* humility to be my favorite part of the book. “*We are shaped by what we love*” is a call to community, where the instruction and interconnection with a community of believers keeps us on the straight and narrow. “*Reflect on the lives of the humble*” admonishes us to pay attention to

those who have gone before us and set an example for us to follow, including Jesus and the saints, but estimable business leaders as well. “*Conduct thought experiments to enhance humility*” advises us to practice our responses before we are in the heat of battle, much as a military commander thinks through his strategy before he faces the enemy. “*Act humbly*” is the practice-makes-perfect suggestion; one cannot achieve modesty or integrity without training. “Invite criticism” is a simple performance evaluation that is demanded and taken seriously.

A report of the musician Bono’s behavior when asked for an autograph is a fine example of humility, but it is no less a sign of graciousness or kindness. Similarly, the example of Janet and Daniel Matthews, whose work on behalf of Australian aboriginal people is no less remarkable than that of William Wilberforce’s work against slavery, shows nobility and conscience more than humility. The fact that they worked anonymously indicates that they were humble, but suggests that humility played only a small role in what they did and was not their driving force.

Other examples seem superfluous. The author’s varied background includes being a senior research fellow in ancient history. He cannot resist bringing Aristotle, Flavius Josephus and the Emperor Augustus into the mix, and their writings seem not to fit particularly well with the general context of the book. He also references Jesus, although not at length, but I think a similar book contrasting the teachings of other ancients to those of Jesus might be interesting, and the author’s light touch and lively manner might capture the attention of undergraduates far better than the hodgepodge of new and old, light and serious, sports and science that is this book. Steve Farber did a better job in *Greater Than Yourself*.

Some comments are trite, such as “... in the end, nothing is more valuable to us, and value-

adding, than good relationships.” My response to that was, ‘gosh, I never heard that before.’

On the other hand, a few comments are notable. Dr. Dickson recounts an old joke reminding us that knowledge in one area of life is no guarantee of proficiency in another, and calls this “*competecy extrapolation*”, a term I found comical and memorable, reminiscent of a similar Latin proverb: *caveamus expertum* (we must beware the expert) which I committed to memory years ago as a fine Latin phrase to describe a physician interested in an investment: although she may be a brain surgeon, she knows nothing about investments, but that won’t stop her from extrapolating that she is an expert on the stock market and commercial real estate as well.

Happily, Dickson has some suggestions on how one might learn to be more humble, and these suggestions seem fair enough, and worthy of undergraduate or graduate business majors, entrepreneurs or executives looking for a quick read on how to be a better leader. My first thought was one of skepticism: how does one practice being humble? In fact, however, as Christians we are called to practice the seven cardinal virtues: prudence, justice, restraint (temperance) and courage (fortitude), along with faith, hope and charity. Practice means, in fact, practice. Work on it. Keep trying till you get it right. Humility, like the practice of the virtue of restraint, for instance, can and should be learned. Parents teach their children restraint. Likewise if one need not practice the virtue of courage, why boot camp or SEAL training?

Unfortunately there is little new information here. Specifying the virtue of humility as the centerpiece of a book on leadership is a stretch. One could as easily substitute nobility, modesty, hospitality, courtesy, integrity or simple good manners for humility and deliver a similar message.