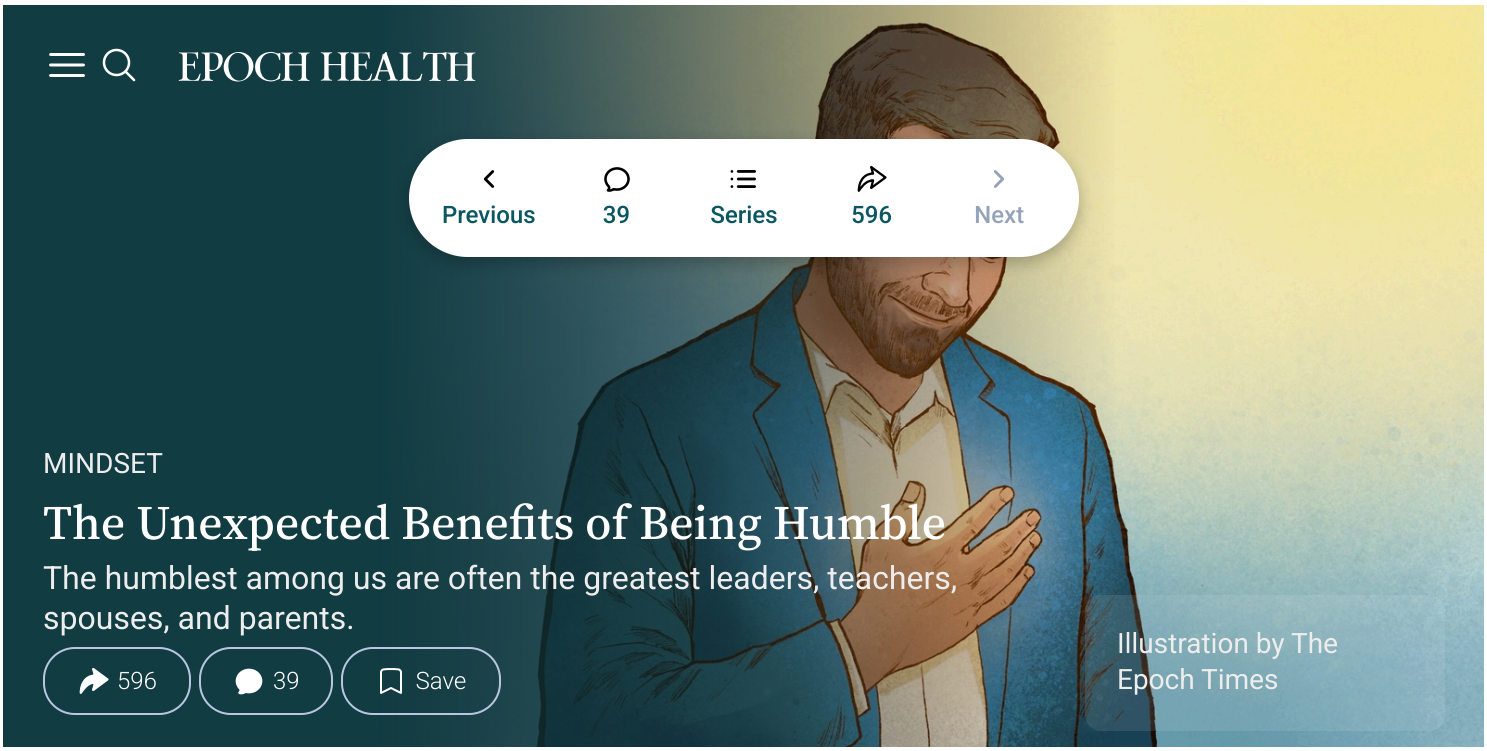


MINDSET

The Unexpected Benefits of Being Humble

The humblest among us are often the greatest leaders, teachers, spouses, and parents.

Illustration by The Epoch Times

By Makai Allbert | May 18, 2025 Updated: May 19, 2025

This is part 12 in "Virtue Medicine"

What medicine is safe, effective, free, and requires only a subtle shift in perspective? We welcome you to explore the neglected link between virtue and health—'Virtue Medicine.'

As a young man, Benjamin Franklin rejoiced in debating with others. Well-honed in the skill, he took great pride in his victories. Even when he was technically wrong, he was always rhetorically correct. As he matured, he realized those triumphs came at the cost of alienation and animosity.

Reflecting on his prideful whims, Franklin wrote in his autobiography, "I determined, endeavoring to cure myself, if I could, of this vice or folly." His breakthrough came through following a simple maxim: "Imitate Jesus and Socrates."

Franklin endeavored to embody the humility of Jesus and Socrates. By softening his language with phrases like "it appears to me," Franklin turned his interlocutors, including those who were enemies, into

friends. His change in demeanor created the diplomatic genius history now celebrates.

Yet, humility's quiet strength extends beyond diplomacy. Emerging data shows that living with humility greatly benefits both oneself and others, and even leads to exceptional success.

Embracing Uncertainty

Humility begins with an honest recognition of one's limitations—both in ability and knowledge. It involves an accurate view of oneself, free from self-inflation or false modesty.

Most of us fail at this basic self-assessment.

In studies where participants are given questions and later asked to estimate their performance, even modest people with low confidence radically overrate themselves. They might claim up to 70 percent accuracy when their actual score is closer to 35 percent.

Such overconfidence isn't exclusive to the bold or prideful—it's human nature, said Mark Leary, psychology and neuroscience professor at Duke University, who researches humility. Accordingly, we need to adapt and adjust to it. It begins by acknowledging—like Socrates—that, "I know that I know nothing." Psychologists call this awareness of one's own fallibility "intellectual humility."

“Intellectual humility is simply recognizing that everything you believe may not be certain or true,” Leary told The Epoch Times, pointing out that while this realization may initially sting, it opens doors to an unparalleled potential to learn, improve, and succeed.

A series of studies published in Learning and Individual Differences found that in controlled laboratory settings, intellectually humble people are more likely to embrace challenges and persist in the face of failure.

The researchers then turned their investigation to the real world. They measured high schoolers’ intellectual humility and observed how they reacted to their math test scores. Students with higher intellectual humility demonstrated grit and a growth-mindset, expressing: “For my next test, I will try to determine what I don’t understand well.”

On the contrary, students lacking intellectual humility succumbed to helplessness, agreeing to statements like: “give up studying” and even “try to cheat.”

What drives the difference? The researchers point to curiosity as a key factor. Drawing on existing evidence, they suggest that intellectually humble people genuinely enjoy learning for its own sake. They also learn more as they double-check their assumptions, stay open to advice, and embrace uncertainty.

Elizabeth Krumrei-Mancuso, professor of psychology at Pepperdine University and humility researcher, has found similarities in her research. “We found that even though intellectual humility isn’t directly related to IQ or how smart people are, it is related to how much knowledge they possess,” she told The Epoch Times.

Mancuso breaks down the simple mechanism: “If you’re willing to admit to yourself and to others what you don’t know, then you’re also more likely to absorb and take in new information.”

Teachers who say “I don’t know” also benefit the whole classroom. A 2024 study found that when teachers openly acknowledge gaps in

their knowledge, admit mistakes, and learn from their students' perspectives, the students feel more accepted and are more likely to engage in class discussions. The change in atmosphere translated directly into better performance—grades improved by 4 percent for each standard deviation increase in teacher humility.

Humility Outperforms IQ

The role of humility in academic achievement is relatively self-explanatory. What about humility in the workplace?

Traditionally, experts recognize two primary predictors of success: mental ability—your intelligence—which determines your performance ceiling, and conscientiousness—your work ethic—which determines how you're motivated to perform. However, research published in Organization Science introduced humility to the equation, measuring how readily people take remedial action after poor performance.

The study found that humility predicted better performance than mental ability and conscientiousness. Notably, high humility could compensate for low mental ability. Those with lower cognitive ability but high humility achieved performance scores comparable to, and in some cases better than, those with higher mental ability but low humility.

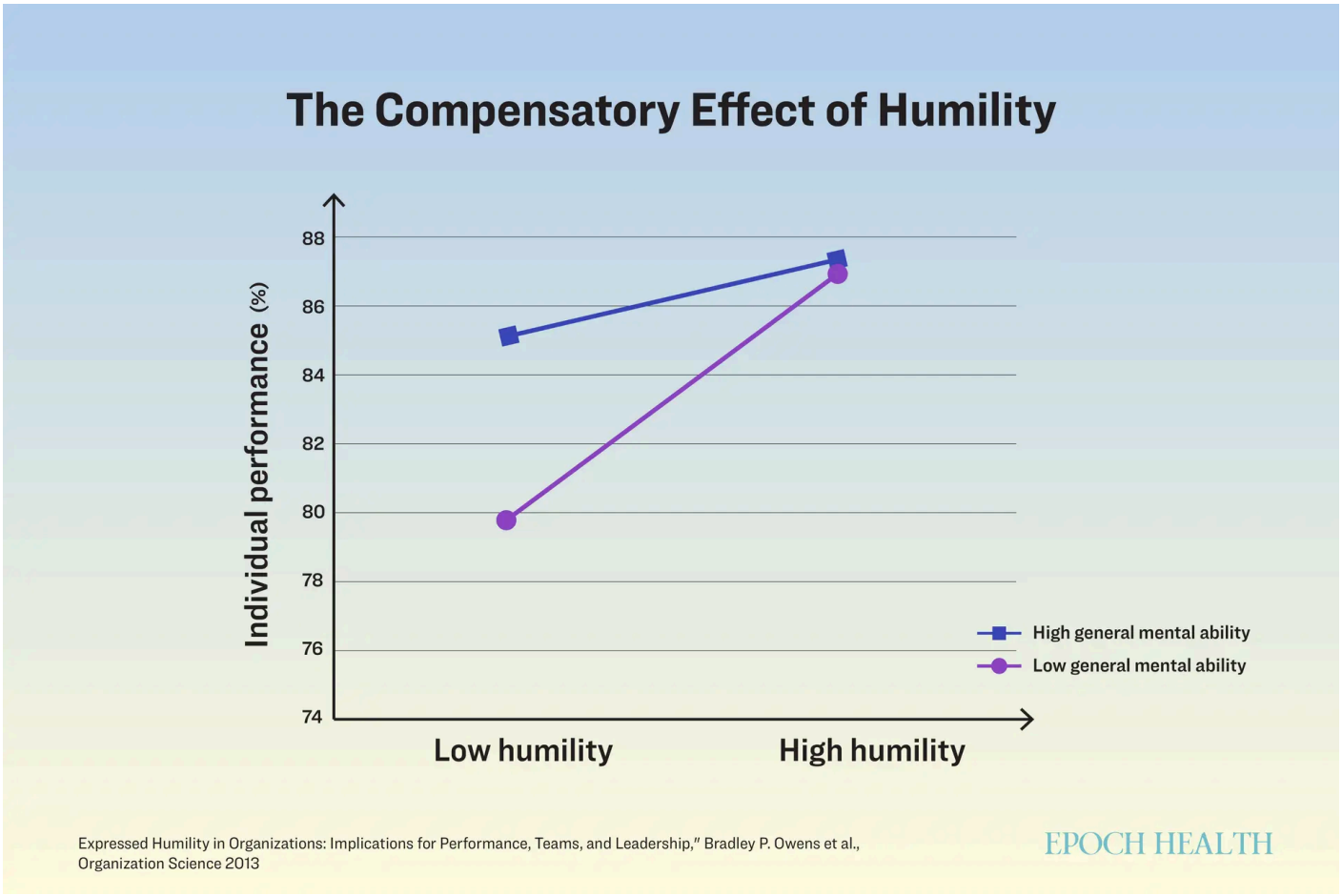


Illustration by The Epoch Times

The researchers explained that the "compensatory effect" of humility can be attributed to the open willingness to learn and grow from mistakes.

What about those in leadership positions? Leaders are often touted as confident and vision-driven. Wouldn't humility be a disadvantage in roles where projecting certainty is expected?

As it turns out, the most effective leaders embody a surprising paradox.

The Inconspicuous Leaders

Jim Collins, researcher and business consultant, and his team dug through nearly 1,500 companies, looking for patterns that could explain why only a handful ever make the leap from average to

extraordinary. Collins wrote his findings in his best-selling book "Good to Great."

After combing through decades of data, the team found just 11 companies that met their criteria. These companies weren't startups or lucky tech giants. They were companies like Walgreens, Kimberly-Clark, and Nucor—industries that had quietly outperformed the likes of Coca-Cola, Intel, and General Electric.

The team turned their sights upwards and analyzed the leaders of these companies.

Every single one of these "great" companies had a leader with a rare and paradoxical blend: outstanding personal humility and fierce professional will.

Collins called them level 5 leaders.

Level 5 leaders are the rarest kind. Like other managers, they are effective in organizing people and resources to meet goals. The sole difference is that they shun the spotlight and deflect credit to others—they are humble.

When pressed to talk about themselves, they said things like, "I don't think I can take much credit. We were blessed with marvelous people."

When things went wrong, they took full responsibility. When things went right, they pointed out the window—never in the mirror.

What stimulated the remarkable outcomes?

Leary explained that humble leaders motivate others to contribute more ideas, gathering more viewpoints and evidence before taking action, which, in the long run, allows them to make better decisions.

People are also more inclined to trust someone who displays humility because it implies honesty and a lack of ego-driven motives. Even after just 30 minutes of conversation, people can determine who is humble, and those individuals are viewed more positively.

An organizational study examining humility versus competence in coworkers found that “humble fools”—those high in humility but lower skill—were rated as more likable than “competent jerks”—those with low humility but high skill.

When given the choice, participants consistently preferred working alongside less experienced but humble colleagues rather than highly skilled but arrogant ones.

By contrast, of the hundreds of companies Collins studied, many that were identified as “failures” had high-profile, celebrity-style CEOs—leaders who built their own legacies but not necessarily their company’s future.

“The great irony,” Collin writes, “is that the most powerful leaders often appear the least powerful. They are not larger than life. They are, in fact, often hard to spot.”

Behind the Spotlight

Perhaps the true test of humility isn’t found in boardrooms or classrooms, but in our most intimate circles—where no stockholders are watching and no corporate legacies hang in the balance. It’s in these everyday moments that humility should blossom from one’s heart.

For Leary, a lesson in humility emerged during a typical evening with his two sons, who were around 12 and 8 years old. He recalled finding himself in a common standoff: It was bedtime, but the kids didn’t want to turn off the TV. “I was in this parenting mode a lot of parents have,” Leary said. “They object, and you say, ‘I told you to turn it off.’”

His sons sometimes pointed out that the show had just five minutes left, and they could finish it, and Leary began to question whether his insistence was necessary.

So, he changed his approach.

“I sat them down and said, ‘From now on, if you think I’m telling you the wrong thing, you get one chance to object. Tell me why you think you shouldn’t have to do it. I’ll listen. I might still say no, but I might change my mind.”

To his surprise, he did change his mind—about 20 percent of the time.

Leary’s approach reduced household conflict and modeled for his children that being in charge doesn’t mean being infallible. “It showed them that it’s okay to admit you’re wrong sometimes,” Leary said.

It’s similar in friendships. Research shows that people describe their humble friends as more relatable, trustworthy, and simply more enjoyable to be around.

Humility enriches romantic relationships, too—especially during stressful times. A study published in The Journal of Positive Psychology found that after the birth of their first child, couples in which both partners displayed humility showed depression scores 64 percent lower than other couples. When researchers asked couples to discuss ongoing disagreements about household chores, finances, or in-laws, they found that blood pressure was 18 percent lower in mutually humble pairs.

Humble people are more likely to engage with opposing perspectives and are “more likely to actually hear what the other side has to say,” Mancuso said.

On the other hand, Leary added, “To live with somebody who is convinced that they’re always right about stuff really creates an awful lot of disagreement.”

Leary’s most recent study showed that less intellectual humility was associated with less satisfaction in romantic relationships. Intellectually humble couples are less likely to derogate their partner’s intelligence during conflicts, avoiding the common trap of assuming someone who disagrees must be incompetent.

Humility's buffering quality in this context is referred to as a "social oil." Akin to how oil prevents an engine from overheating, humility is theorized to buffer wear-and-tear generally caused by competition or conflict. This social amiability may also come from humility's positive association with other virtues such as empathy, altruism, and benevolence.

Never Too Much

"You will never err in the direction of too much intellectual humility," Leary advised. "Even the most intellectually humble people are still more sure of themselves than they probably should be."

Assuming that you might be wrong offers a buffer. "Your track record as a human being is you've been wrong a hell of a lot," said Leary. During conflicts, he suggests asking: "Am I sure I'm right? Do I have all the relevant information? Is my information biased?"

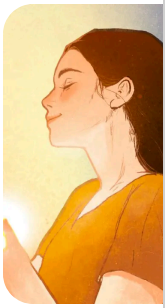
Practicing gratitude and self-reflection also nurtures humility. More practically, research shows that adults who wrote daily reflections from a third-person perspective, stepping outside their ego-centered viewpoint, showed significant growth in intellectual humility after just one month.

Mancuso sums it up: "If you have no awareness that you could be wrong, then you're closing the door to getting closer to the truth."

"Pride is the barrier, and humility is the pathway."

Virtue Medicine



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