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Comment

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A woman harvesting paddy.

*The Malay proverb *Ikut resmi padi, lagi berisi lagi tunduk* suggests humility at all cost*

HUMILITY is a highly valued virtue in many communities, especially in Asia.

Mahatma Gandhi, for example, said that attempting to sustain truth without humility is doomed as an "arrogant caricature" of truth.

Management consultant and author Jim Collins and his colleagues found that a certain type of leader, whom they termed Level 5 Leader (L5L), possesses humility and fierce resolve.

It appears that humility is making its way back into the Western perspective of leadership.

However, it is disheartening to hear a veteran politician reportedly say: "So, don't be too humble because I have learnt my humble lessons of being too humble."

Humility is a funny thing — the moment you feel you're too humble, it is gone.

One definition of humility is the quality of being modest, reverential, even politely submissive, and never being arrogant, contemptuous, rude or even self-abasing.

Not surprisingly, humility is widely regarded as a virtue in many religious and philosophical traditions, being connected with notions of transcendent unity with the universe or the divine, and of "egolessness".

It is a state that is not easily achievable, especially for those who are on a quest for power, fortune and fame — in short, wanting to be a "hero" of sorts.

In his study, Collins regards humility as a trait that can enhance the effectiveness of leadership.

The study suggests that humility is multi-dimensional; takes different perspectives into account; and includes self-understanding and awareness, and openness.

Indeed, Collins refers to L5L as "the highest level in a hierarchy of executive capabilities".

While others at the levels below this could be deemed successful, they are unable to go from mediocrity to sustained excellence since they lack humility.

Collins gives a simple formula: Humility + Will = Level 5.

Collins notes that L5L is "a study in duality — modest and willful, shy and fearless".

This at once removes the assumption that transforming from good to great requires larger than life leaders.

For instance, the leaders who come out on top in his five-year study are relatively unknown outside their industries, perhaps signalling a shift in emphasis away from the hero to the anti-hero.

If this is the case, it will be a slap in the face for those who are trying all sorts of antics to be recognised as heroes.

"Empty vessels make the most noise" best describes many dubious personalities.

Collins says that L5L is "a leader who is ambitious first and foremost for the cause, for the company, for the work, not for himself or herself; and has an absolutely terrifying iron will to make good on that ambition.

"It is that combination, the fact that it is not about them, it's not first and foremost for them, it is for the company and its long-term interests, of which they are just a part. But it is not a meekness; it is not a weakness; it is not a wallflower type. It's the other side of the coin.

"They will even step away from the CEO role. They will do whatever it takes to make the company great. No matter how painful, no matter how emotionally stressing the decision has to be, they have the will to do it. It is that very unusual combination, which separates Level 5 leaders."

Collins indicates that humility is at the highest level in itself.

Either you have it or you don't. And if you have it, you do not talk about it.

To do otherwise means that you do not have it at all.

The Malay proverb *Ikut resmi padi, lagi berisi lagi tunduk* suggests humility at all cost. Humility rules!

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