Humility: What is it, and how do employees perceive it?

By Kevin Scheid

A leader's humility, or conversely, egotism, as perceived by subordinates, affects his relationships, communications and level of trust with employees and management (Gunn, 2002; Kerfoot, 1998; Kerfoot, 2001; Prestwood & Schumann, 1997). These factors in turn can affect employee commitment, engagement and performance. According to Sanford (2002), 71% of workers in America are not engaged in their work, creating inefficiency in the workplace. Christian organizations fare much better with only 46% of the workers not engaged and 8% of the employee population actively disengaged from their work (Best Christian Workplaces Institute, 2007). Although much better than the secular world, these statistics are nothing of which to be proud (this article is promoting humility, after all). In fact, the scorecard for the Christian workplace on engagement, trust and communication may lead one to believe the Christian workplace is affected more by the world, which seems to value pride over humility, than it is changing the world.

In our prosperous nation, where large Christian organizations increasingly believe they must pay higher salaries to attract top talent to run their organizations, seek out celebrities to endorse their movement or create celebrity and worldly success in the name of ministry, do Christian organizations have an issue with humility? The Best Christian Workplaces survey results over the past two years, with over 16,794 Christian

workers surveyed may give us some insight into the state of humility in Christian organizations.

To understand the affect of humility on Christian organizations we need to know what it is. Humility is an old topic with a new and emerging realization of its importance on management and leadership, but with little understanding of the definition.

Most people can readily recognize humility or arrogance when they see it in others, but seem to have more difficulty recognizing it in themselves or even providing a clear definition of the concept. This spiritual and emotional state of mind is abstract and difficult to define precisely. The Bible (NIV) provides some descriptions of what humility is: "Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble" (1 Peter 5:5) and "to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and to show true humility toward all men" (Titus 3:2).

The Bible also provides a description of what humility is not: "Haughty eyes and a proud heart, the lamp of the wicked, are sin!" (Prov 21:4) and "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves" (Phillipians 2:3).

Scholars have recently focused on humility as an important leadership and organizational issue. Some of this academic research provides insights into a definition for humility. Miller (2007) posits that charismatic or heroic leaders let their ego get in the way of what is best for the organization by cutting out employees in decision making processes and not listening to the people with knowledge while making all the decisions themselves. Not listening and making all the decisions are two of the detractors listed by Kerfoot (1998) in addition to not giving due credit to people for their accomplishments. Gunn (2002) adds isolation to this list because of the use of authoritarianism. According to Rowatt et al. (2006) very little research exists to define the exact nature of humility. For the purpose of this paper, we will use the following 5 facets as a sort of litmus test for humility. From their research, Rowatt determined facets of humility include (1) sincerity and (2) fairness. Exline and Geyer (2004) suggest humility consists of: (3) not closed-minded, but open-mindedness, (4) respectfulness of others, and (5) an absence of arrogance, egotism or conceit.

Through the brief biblical and academic research presented above and a process of face validity, the five components of humility emerge and are listed in Table 1. Since humility is a recent topic of management discussion, questions directly measuring the components of humility are not yet available and as such, premeditated direct measures of humility are not contained in the Best Christian Workplaces survey. However, questions that *are* in the survey can be identified that provide an indication of the level

of employees' perception of each of the five components of humility. The table below

illustrates the connection between the five components and survey questions.

Table 1. Association of Components of Humility to Related Questions

Component of Humility	Related Question(s) from the Best Christian Workplaces Survey
1) Sincerity	There is a high level of trust at my organization between senior management and employees.
2) Fairness	My organization's leaders behave with fairness and integrity. My organization's leaders demonstrate compassion to people at all levels.
3) Humility, modesty, down to earth, open mindedness	My organization acts on the suggestions of employees. My organization seeks the suggestions of employees.
4) Respect for others	My boss cares about me as a person. My leaders explain reasons behind major decisions.
5) Not arrogant or conceited	I have the decision making authority I need to do my job effective. I am satisfied with the recognition I receive for doing a good job. My organization involves employees in decisions that affect theme.

This preliminary study provides a basis from which we can conduct some statistical

analysis of the survey data to gain insight into what drives the perception of humble

leadership in Christian organizations. These five factors show uniformly high

correlations to employee job satisfaction, commitment and engagement. Correlations

range from 0.58 to 0.68 for job satisfaction to 0.73 to 0.85 for employee engagement.

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These high correlations indicate a close relationship between the perception of humility, as defined by this paper, and key factors related to organizational productivity. Although these correlations are not designed to determine causal relationships, reason would dictate that humility in leadership is not caused by employee job satisfaction, commitment, or engagement. Indeed, these virtues as well as organizational success more likely results in leadership pride rather than humility. Thus, it is reasonable to surmise the high correlation indicates leadership humility causes employee engagement, satisfaction and commitment.

Table 2. Correlations between Components of Humility and Employee Commitment, Engagement and Satisfaction.

	1. Sincerity	2. Fairness	3. Humble and open minded	4. Respectiveful	5. Not arrogant or conceited
Commitment	0.644	0.682	0.614	0.622	0.688
Engagement	0.725	0.793	0.769	0.787	0.850
Job Satisfaction	0.614	0.657	0.579	0.608	0.675

Chart 1 shows the average score of each of the five components on the Best Christian Workplaces survey of 16,794 participants. The scoring is on a five point Likert scale ranging from 5.0 (strongly agree) to 1.0 (strongly disagree). An ANOVA test shows the differences in values between the five components are statistically valid with a 99% confidence level. One observation from Chart 1 is that the two higher scores for components 2 and 4 are more concrete and have a direct impact on employees. This

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may be because fairness and respect both involve some positive action between leaders and employees whereas components 1, 3 and 5 are more abstract and subjective. Sincerity, humbleness, and conceit are all subjective evaluations that do not involve concrete actions. The higher scores on the more concrete components may be a sign of leaders attempting to do the right thing while the lower scores in the abstract components may point to less leadership awareness or a less favorable subjective evaluation by employees.

Chart 1. Average Survey Scores on the Five Components of Humility
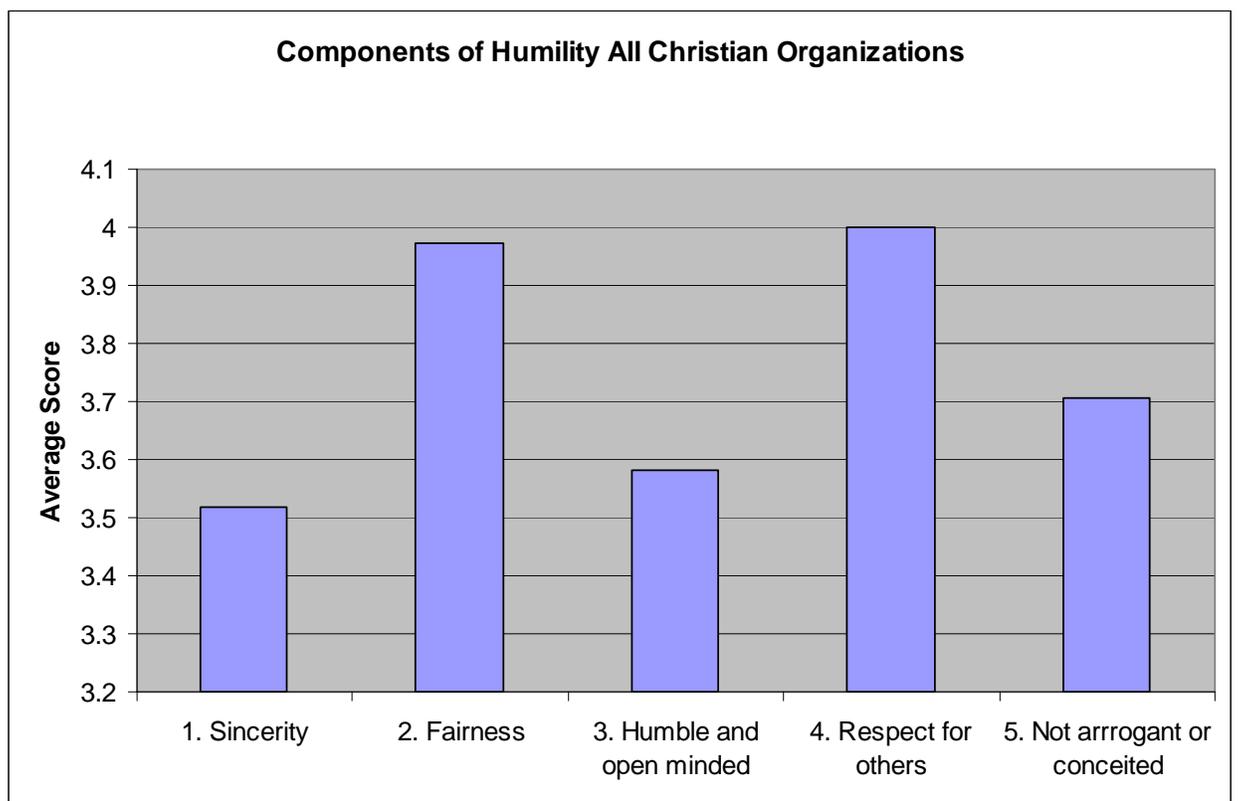

Chart 2 shows the same components with scores further broken down by ministry type. A significant statistical difference exists between the average scores of the two higher

ministry types (Products and Services; Mission and Parachurch; Churches for

components 1 & 2) and the two lower ministry types (Collegesand Media). Churches are

split with higher scores for components 1 & 2 and lower scores for components 3, 4 & 5.

A two tailed t-test shows a 99% confidence level that the differences in these two

groups are significant. Although the reason the differences between the groups is not

evident from the data, the differences in the levels of perceived humility are undeniable.

These differences in scores between ministry types may play an important role in

understanding different management cultures in ministry types. Moreover, these

differences may point to opportunities to improve ministry effectiveness since the

perception of leadership humility is directly related to employee job satisfaction,

commitment and engagement, which in turn correlate directly with organizational

effectiveness.

Chart 2. Components of Humility Broken out by Average Ministry Scores.
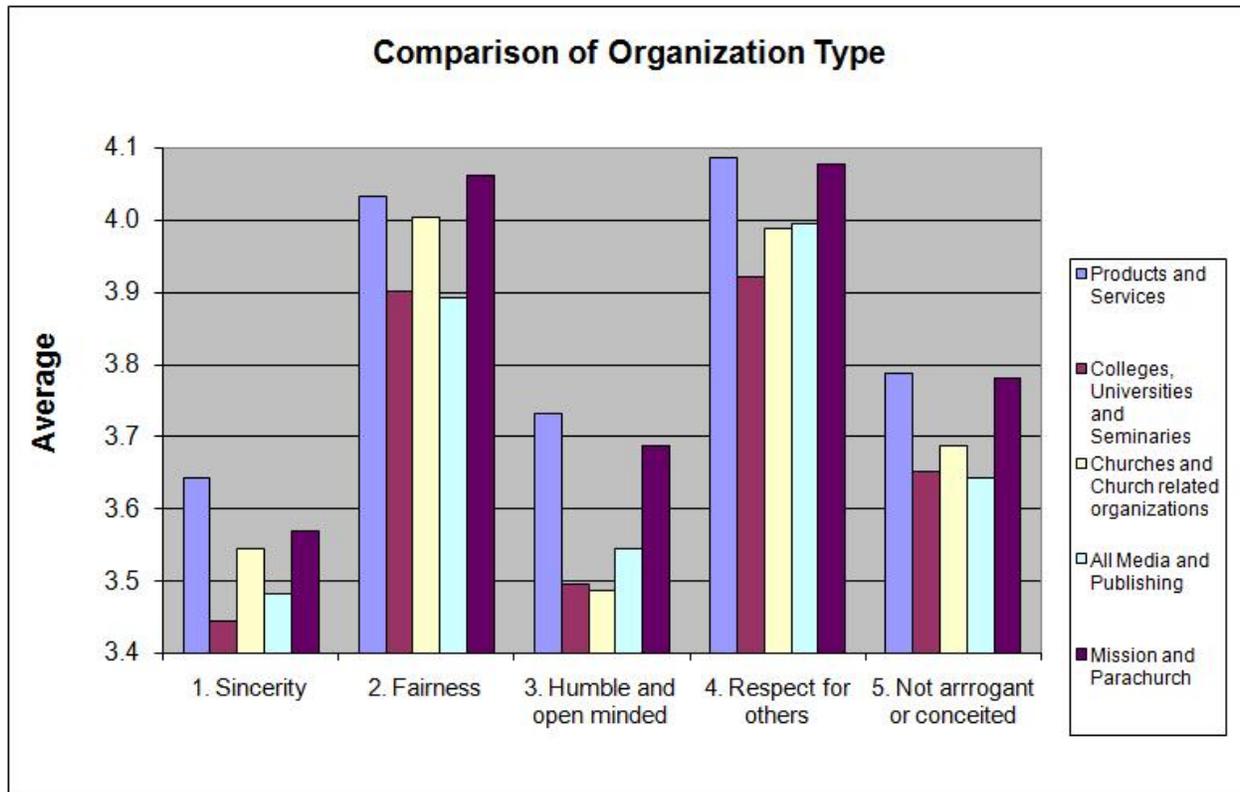
Of the demographic categories in the survey, in regard to humility tenure appears the most interesting and presents a slightly different pattern from the usual scoring trend. Normal scoring trends for tenure shows people less than one year as the most positive with a decreasing trend through six years in the company. After six years the average score begin to level and then increase towards the second most positive time frame of 15 or more years. In the case of the humility components the initial negative trend is more pronounced and extends up to 15 years as shown in Chart 3. After 15 years the trends begins to increase slightly. This unusual negative trend seems to suggest that

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employees either become more critical with time or as leaders and employees become more familiar with each other, employees see less evidence of humility. Regardless of the reason behind the negative trend, it is in the opposite direction one would expect of a truly humble Christian organization and should be of concern to Christian leaders.

Chart 3. Average Scores by Tenure of the Various Components of Humility
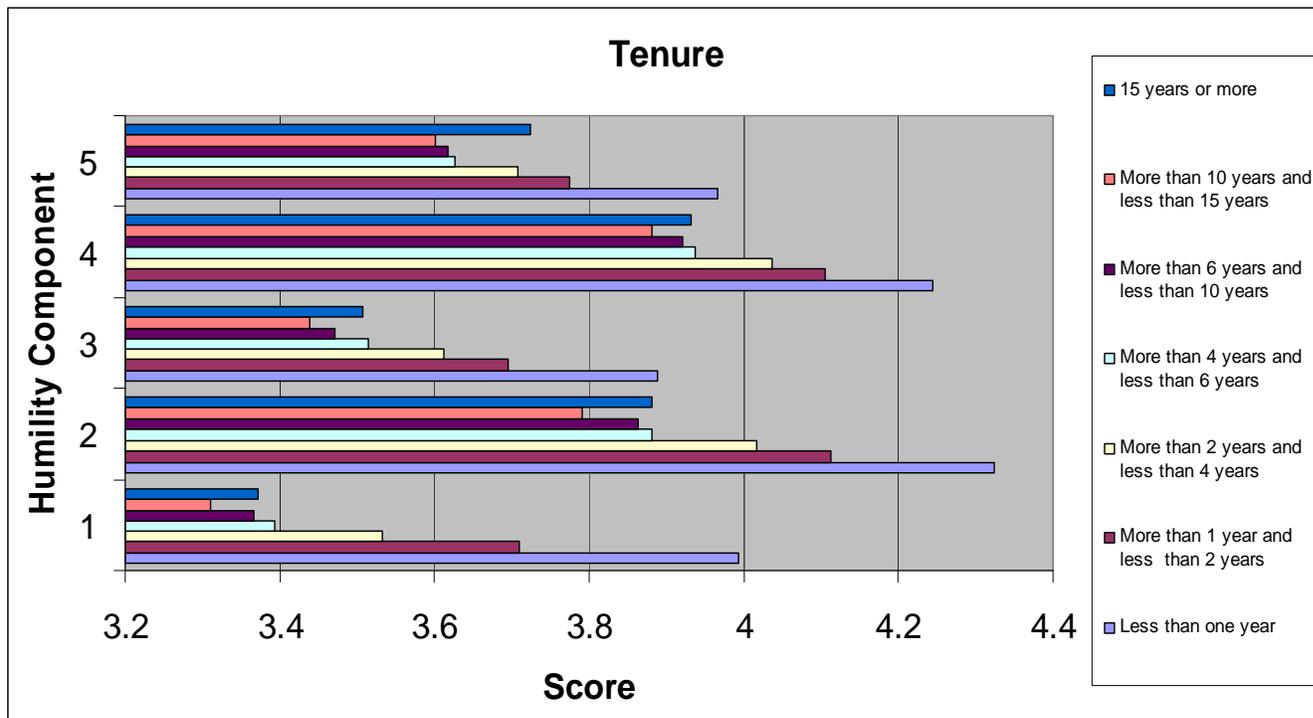
Key

1. Sincerity
2. Fairness
3. Humble and open minded
4. Respectful
5. Not arrogant or conceited

Action steps to becoming a more humble leader may seem a little counterintuitive. However, there are a few things we should all do as Christians to maintain a proper

perspective of our importance. Reading the book, <u>Humility; True Greatness</u> by C. J. Mahaney (2005), and practicing its suggestions is one place to start. One common thread of this book is simply to get closer to Jesus through prayer and scripture. A second step might be to listen more to your employees. Listening to them and understanding their concerns, ideas and opinions will not only help you keep in touch, but it will break down perceptions of divisions and separations between you and your employees.

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