

# Leading with humility in tumultuous times: evidence from the United States

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times

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Received 14 March 2020  
Revised 2 April 2020  
Accepted 6 April 2020

## Abstract

**Purpose** – Wicked problems, cross-sectoral and transregional collaborations, emerging technologies and calls for innovation generate exciting but unpredictable transformations in governance. Emerging research suggests humility, rather than certitude, represents a promising ethos for public leaders working to solve problems in tumultuous times. This study examines the nature, value and practice of humility in public administration (PA) leadership.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This study reviews cross-disciplinary research on the nature and value of humility and emerging findings and debates on humility assessment measures. It analyzes discourse among graduate students in US PA classes and uses ethnographic analysis from workshops with local government leaders to identify institutional dynamics that may influence leaders' willingness to act with humility.

**Findings** – Findings suggest that although PA students and leaders may value humility, they encounter institutional constraints related to public sector legitimacy and narratives about expertise and risk. The author proposes a framework to guide future research and practice in humility and public leadership.

**Research limitations/implications** – Potential constraints emerged from a modest study of courses and workshops; further research is required to test the prevalence of themes across public leadership environments.

**Practical implications** – Public leaders, teachers and coaches may apply these practices and assessment measures to cultivate humility in PA classes and organizations.

**Originality/value** – This study is among the first to explore leadership humility with attention to how PA context may influence practice.

**Keywords** Humility, Administration, Leadership, Organization

**Paper type** Research paper

Social and technological acceleration have placed new, sometimes untenable, demands on public institutions and leaders. According to Rosa (2013), modernity's bureaucratic structures, methods of scientific inquiry and emphasis on rational expertise paved the way for explosive economic and technological developments that generated a degree of complexity, uncertainty and change that threatens to outpace institutional capacity. This understanding echoes Arendt's (1958) concern that *sciences of process* unleashed forces with rapid and unpredictable outcomes that humans are ill-prepared to understand or control. Public problems such as climate change or human trafficking do not follow predictable patterns and often defy rational problem-solving. This proliferation of wicked problems – and corresponding public reaction – is an important point of reference for the exploration of humility that follows.

Political theorists have argued that technological innovation and globalization simultaneously destabilize communities and nations while creating paradoxical demand for local populism or retribalization in the face of institutional instability, radical change and uncertainty about how to address wicked problems. Barber (1996) warned that this dynamic undermines democratic governance and related institutions and notes a tendency to seek familiar patterns and certain answers in unstable times. Former US Ambassador to the Ukraine Marie Yovanovitch (Rev, 2020, para. 11) recently echoed this warning as she spoke of



“the tension between a globalizing world and a trending nativism.” A RAND analysis (Kavanagh and Rich, 2018) of factors that contribute to declining public trust in expertise and government suggested that people embrace current beliefs with increasing certitude to minimize threats to identity and anxiety in the face of uncertainty and information overload. Certainty and closure threaten curiosity and adaptability as people turn to powerful leaders, tribes and ready answers to anchor their worlds.

In many countries, these dynamics are the backdrop against which public administration (PA) leaders strive to maintain legitimacy and solve wicked problems with sufficient public support. They must forge new partnerships and experiment with unfamiliar solutions – often with a high degree of uncertainty about outcomes. This dynamic makes it crucial for PA leaders to identify positively with their roles and expertise without resorting to overconfidence in their existing knowledge or institutional practices. The following analysis draws on cross-disciplinary research to show why PA leaders who practice productive humility may be in a better position to help their institutions and communities adapt and respond to complex problems.

This study is not a definitive empirical account of humility for PA leaders nor a normative call for specific action. Rather, this study draws on multiple scholarly perspectives and findings, and student and practitioner discussions about leadership, to advance a preliminary framework for studying and practicing productive humility in the public sector.

### Defining humility

PA literature occasionally addresses the subject of humility, but few scholars have sought to define or study its origins, characteristics or acquisition in the context of PA leadership. Therefore, this section examines cross-disciplinary definitions of humility before exploring conceptions of humility related to the work of PA leaders. It is important to note that, for the purposes of this study, *leadership* refers to both leadership and managerial activities that rely on effective interpersonal interaction and influence in support of organizational goals. Algahtani (2014) conducted an extensive literature search to compare and contrast fundamental definitions of *leadership* and *management* and discovered substantial differences, but also significant overlap relative to leaders’ and managers’ need to effectively interact with and influence others. Therefore, this study assumes that humility is a relevant social concept for those who engage in both managerial and leadership roles in PA.

Kellenberger (2010) drew on literature from philosophy, religious studies and psychology to define humility as a polythetic concept constituted by a common resemblance but not necessarily one that meets all aspects of a single definition. In short, there are various ways to be humble. Nonetheless, most definitions of humility involve a modest opinion of our own importance, position or rank (Flanagan and Flanagan, 1996; Roberts and Wood, 2003) as well as a proper perspective on our abilities (Richards, 2001). According to Davis and Hook (2013), the foundation of intrapersonal humility is accurate self-perception, whereas interpersonal humility relies on an *other-oriented* view. Those who act with humility are cautious not to exaggerate their strengths and aware of their limitations.

However, this conception of humility does not require individuals to hide or downplay their knowledge or skills as too much humility may indicate a lack of fundamental self-worth (Snow, 1995). Weidman *et al.* (2018) cautioned against conflating humility based in *self-abasement* and humility based in a more curious and *appreciative* stance. Those who act with humility reflect on how others speak of their strengths and abilities as they apply themselves to a goal or pursuit. An awareness of this search and its imperfection is required to meet most definitions of humility (Kellenberger, 2010).

The ability to acknowledge uncertainty and error is also central to most conceptions of humility (Snow, 1995; Kellenberger, 2010). Leary *et al.* (2017, p. 793) defined intellectual humility as “the degree to which people recognize that their beliefs might be wrong” and found that study participants high in intellectual humility were more open to other viewpoints and more accepting of people who expressed alternative perspectives.

According to Snow (1995), being humble in relationship to the world around us also requires cognitive and affective engagement and can involve a personal – or *narrow* – humility or a broader form of *existential* humility. Narrow humility does not necessarily represent self-absorption or pride, but it fails to connect with the broader universe of human accomplishments and tragedies, or larger forces in the world or within spiritual traditions. Thus, humility defined as a polythetic concept more closely represents an *ethos* rather than a particular formulation of behavior or beliefs such that individuals in varied contexts might exemplify humility in both mundane and significant ways.

More recently, researchers across disciplines have begun to define humility within the context of institutional behaviors and outcomes. For example, research on *cultural humility* according to Prasad *et al.* (2016) requires medical providers to engage in constant self-reflection relative to their awareness of how a patient’s culture might impact their health practices. Clark (2018) drew on a similar conception of cultural humility to describe how awareness of implicit bias is key to searching for equitable public participation processes.

For Yanow (2009), humility concerns approaching or practicing policy and administrative work from a place of inquiry. Yanow addressed what she terms *passionate humility* with the assumption that PA practitioners often act in the face of uncertainty with limited information and an imperfect understanding of the world. Yanow (2009) does not discourage PA practitioners from acting, but suggested that humility requires them to acknowledge they may be wrong in interpretation or action. For Yanow and Willmott (1999, p. 450), such humility is essential to the role of PA in democratic systems because “conviction becomes dogmatic and oppressive unless it is tempered by humility.” Schein and Schein (2018) also view humility as rooted in curiosity about how others experience the world and suggest humility requires leaders to narrow their psychological distance from others and acknowledge interdependence.

### Value of humility

Research across disciplines indicates a relationship between humility and positive organizational and interpersonal outcomes with relevance for PA. For example, multiple studies suggest that followers are more likely to trust and respect leaders who demonstrate humility (Nielsen *et al.*, 2010). Organizational studies also establish a link between leadership humility and follower perception of leader authenticity, which is correlated with several important employee outcomes such as motivation and engagement in work (Oc *et al.*, 2019). Owens and Hekman (2012) found humble leaders helped enable teams to adapt to their environment more effectively. These leaders were more likely to support ongoing and incremental improvement through trial and error and a willingness to revisit options in a changing context (Owens and Hekman, 2012). Davis and Hook (2013) found that individuals demonstrating humility gained greater status and acceptance in newly formed groups and that humble actions may contribute to the maintenance and repair of social bonds.

Recent research also raises the possibility that cultivating intellectual humility may help ease ideological conflicts (Leary *et al.*, 2017) and promote openness to new information to combat the *truth decay* analyzed by RAND (Kavanagh and Rich, 2018). Additionally, multiple studies indicate that we may be more likely to approach the perspectives and foibles of others with compassion if we explore our own perspectives and failings more critically (Snow, 1995).

Research also suggests that a humble approach in judicial practice leads to more thoughtful and effective legal interpretation and a more balanced perspective on competing ideals (Nava, 2007; Scharffs, 1998). Philosophers who study humility often equate this value with an intrinsic sense that self-knowledge is essential for individual and social growth (Snow, 1995) consistent with Dweck's (2006) research on the power of a *growth mind-set*. In the PA context, Yanow and Willmott (1999) argued that practitioners who seek to learn about public experiences with government in humble ways will be more likely to understand the constraints and affordances of local context and anticipate challenges. These findings suggest humility has much to offer PA leaders working to address wicked problems in a world characterized by significant diversity and partisan conflict.

### Practicing humility

The polythetic nature of humility poses thorny challenges to identifying and cultivating humility in practice. Individuals demonstrate humility in myriad ways, and differences in context may influence what constitutes humble action or how actors perceive the authenticity of humble gestures. Despite this complexity, literature points to ways PA leaders might practice and cultivate humility.

#### *Situated inquiry*

An emerging body of work identifies inquiry as central to humility. Scholars seeking to understand intellectual humility identified a combination of three characteristics centered around inquiry and openness to new information: (1) ongoing motivation to learn, (2) awareness of intellectual limitations and (3) corresponding discomfort with those limitations (Whitcomb *et al.*, 2017). Healthcare educators stress the importance of questions as a means of practicing cultural humility:

True understanding requires curiosity. Self-questioning can well impact the way practitioners care for patients. . . we encourage healthcare professionals to first and foremost ask oneself in relations to others: what are the specifics that constitute your background? What are the assumptions you make about the world? From what sources and based on what facts do these assumptions come from? (Chang *et al.*, 2012, p. 274)

Schein (2013) focused on how organizations and those they serve benefit when leaders, and members, become skilled at asking questions from a place of curiosity. He showed how organizational leaders frequently offer solutions without learning how others experience the world. Schein stressed the importance of distinguishing between inquiry intended to solve an immediate problem and inquiry designed to reveal alternative possibilities: different question types may be posed from a humble orientation, but a hallmark of humility is reflection about how the questions we ask shape our understanding of the world and our relationships with others.

Yanow (1997, p. 173) argued that PA practitioners and scholars often apply conceptual tools and metaphors that frame the public as passive recipients of policies and services. She shows how practitioners and scholars might engage in ground-level inquiry to reintroduce clients' everyday lived experience and urges them to involve "policy relevant publics" via inquiry and dialogue. Yanow does not suggest that PA practitioners should themselves become passive objects, but her *Passionate Humility* repositions the PA contribution so it is as much about skilled *mutual inquiry* as it is about expert knowledge.

Newland (2001, pp. 649-650) also uses inquiry to enact and strengthen PA humility, but leans more on existing systems and values. He described PA leadership as in service to the larger cause of "constitutional democracy's values of an enduring search for human dignity and reasonableness, through a rule of law." He does not suggest that values and virtues are

universal or stable; yet, he argues that constitutional democracy represents our best means of pursuing publicly minded service ideals associated with inquiry about the human condition. According to Newland (1991, p. 678), this search ought not be subjective, but grounded in historical and legal knowledge – in “precedents; administrative rules and processes; scientific facts; logic; history and experience; customs; and practicality.” He calls on PA leaders to apply historical and cultural understanding as well as technical expertise at the same time they temper certitude with inquiry and exploration. This bounded approach is responsive to arguments that some shared truths and inquiry process agreements foster humility by tempering a sea of individually subjective truths and biases (Lynch, 2017).

### *Transcendence*

The relationship between humility and awe or transcendence is prevalent in research, but with limited definitional agreement or specificity about what this relationship looks like in practice (Nielsen and Marrone, 2018). In their study of CEO humility, Ou *et al.* (2014) turned away from overtly spiritual conceptions of transcendence to conceptualize self-transcendence as a continued awareness that individual knowledge and experience are modest in the face of larger communities and more complex realities than an individual can fully imagine. They argued that humble CEOs answer to continuous questions about the greater good or organizational value. Stellar *et al.* (2018) conducted a meta-analysis of five humility studies and found that humility is not just a trait, but an orientation influenced by dynamic interactions with both expansive and mundane experiences that generate awe and a corresponding need for adjustment.

Transcendence is a key path to humility that comes through interactions with the otherness of people and things (Kellenberger, 2010). According to Murdoch (1993), we may be humbled by history, nature or other people who defy our conceptions of the world. McKee (2014, p. 63) drew similar connections between history and humility, finding that public policy students may be more likely to approach policy with a reflective eye and “confident humility” when they engage in “careful study of the past.” He described how intentional historical inquiry and learning place students in humbling relationship to different and sometimes competing narratives about historical events and policy decisions.

*Design thinking* also represents a promising form of transcendence since it involves user-oriented and mutual inquiry processes to define problems from the perspective of end users. This approach favors divergent thinking and typically incorporates inquiry methods such as user perspective process mapping or *Open-to-Learning Conversations* (Mintrom and Luetjens, 2016). These conversations involve defining and redefining problem statements across diverse teams to challenge assumptions. Mintrom and Luetjens (2016, p. 3) provided an analysis of design thinking, noting questions and debates about the representativeness of end users while stressing how the approach helps public leaders transcend traditional boundaries to explore new perspectives and relationships:

Design thinking also encourages the transcendence of organisational and procedural silos, established hierarchies, or bureaucratic categories. Again, such activity might initially take those involved in policymaking out of their comfort zone, but this need not present a major barrier to greater adoption.

Similarly, encounters with paradox may generate increased humility by transcending singular perspectives. Newland (2008, p. 332) views paradox as an opportunity to extend scholarship and practice: “Public administration is enriched by paradoxes. These have widely blessed the field with disciplined experience in constructive uses of contradictions to search for informed balance and to escape narrow ideologies.” McSwite (2001, pp. 113-114) also emphasized the importance of paradox – or dialectics – as a key dimension of PA competence and instruction:



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The important implication of this idea for an applied field like public administration is not only that actions have linked consequence. . .but that actions will always tend to have an effect or effects that neutralize, over-turn, or deny the original purpose of the positive action. . .The dialectical aspect of theory analysis keeps this kind of paradox in view, and conscious awareness of it is perhaps the best starting point for avoiding its most destructive effects.

Wicked problems do not lend themselves to narrow definition or single-method analysis. Embracing paradox requires intellectual humility when complex and systemic relationships outstrip our ability to predict and control unfolding processes. Paradox, understood this way, offers a form of transcendence to aid PA leaders in navigating massive social and technological change with productive humility.

### *Reflective practice*

Scholarship also suggests that humility can be cultivated via self-reflection and reflection with collaborators, coaches and other stakeholders. Although findings on how to cultivate humble and growth-oriented mind-sets are mixed, there are indications that intentional practices coupled with reflection lead to greater humility as well as to improved institutional outcomes (Leary *et al.*, 2017; Schein, 2013). For example, Schuessler *et al.* (2012) found that reflective journaling about interactions with patients helped nursing students develop cultural humility more effectively than traditional classroom instruction.

Yanow (1997) defined passionate humility in direct relationship to reflective practice. Yanow (2009) explored work across disciplines to identify specific dynamics and behaviors that appear to facilitate *and* constitute reflective practice. She identified practices such as *openness to surprises* or a *willingness to step outside of dominant models and hierarchies* as characteristic of reflective practice. According to Yanow (2009), this reflection presupposes a mental attitude that one may not have all the answers. She suggested that scholars and practitioners who engage this way are willing to reflect on the basis of their own truth claims and examine how they would determine whether they were wrong. In this sense, Yanow viewed humility as an essential foundation for more reflexive encounters. Yet, her work also suggests those who engage with a multiplicity of views may be in a better position to challenge their assumptions or convictions. Thus, Yanow's approach hints at an intertwined, mutually reinforcing, relationship between humility and ongoing reflection.

### **Assessing humility**

Efforts to assess humility have progressed slowly despite growing interest in the topic, because, as Davis and Hook (2013) suggested, researchers have developed overly complex definitions and constructs and self-reporting on humility can represent a paradox when individuals who report a high degree of humility may do so with excessive pride. Different measurement strategies reflect debates about humility as a personality trait versus a socially learned and mediated set of practices. Several personality constructs explore humility on continuums, such as the HEXACO Honesty–Humility scale (Lee and Ashton, 2004) or the intellectual limitations-owning scale that ranges from *intellectual arrogance* to *intellectual servility* (Haggard *et al.*, 2018). Such scales provide measures of humility as a personality trait, but fail to capture the influence of social context and embedded practice over time. Kenneth Burke argued that ethical stances are shaped in relationship to specific anthropological or sociological contexts (Wolin, 2001), and this premise underlies emerging communicative approaches to understanding humility. Here, social science scholarship on humility parallels research on leadership in progressing from a strictly traits-oriented approach to include behavioral and situational perspectives.

Some humility researchers have urged methodological approaches that move beyond self-reporting to attend to exhibited behaviors and reports from others. Davis and Hook (2013, para. 6) noted that virtues related to interpersonal behavior are typically best assessed via accounts from others, suggesting that researchers are able to judge humility more accurately “when it is under strain.” And, they investigated humility in contexts in which people experience challenging transitions and come into close contact with ideological differences. This line of humility research appears particularly relevant for PA leaders who work in contexts characterized by rapid change and interpersonal conflict.

*Public administration discourse on humility*

Because people theorize – and often take cues – about what is virtuous or appropriate behavior in situated social interactions, this author examined how PA students and PA managers interacted to make sense of humble practice in classes and workshops. She asked 62 graduate students across two Management & Administration classes and one Introduction to Administration & Policy class what “one or two leadership skills or practices you hope your next supervisor will demonstrate on a regular basis.” Many of their responses touched on aspects of humility. Students emphasized *listening*, *reasonable risk taking* and *interest in others*. When they elaborated on skills such as *listening* or *risk-taking* in a follow-up discussion, they sounded like humility researchers. For example, students frequently discussed *listening* as a proxy for *taking the experiences and knowledge of employees and/or clients seriously* or *an openness to learning from people who are not like you*. They talked about risk-taking as a manager’s willingness to *make mistakes* or *let someone else use their expertise*. In multiple cases, students equated these practices with Brown’s (2015) broadly disseminated work on vulnerability, asking intriguing and challenging questions about the relationship between vulnerability, humility and shame (see Table 1).

Invariably, discussions turned to why some government managers fail to express curiosity about the capacity of others, are hesitant to admit mistakes in front of staff or appear reluctant to admit uncertainty or invite feedback. Some students suggested that

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- (1) Maximize employees’ capabilities
  - (2) Acknowledge others’ competencies – let me try my thing (long leash)
  - (3) Delegating with appropriate guidance and resources (not micro-managing)
  - (4) Effectively receiving feedback
  - (5) Encouraging others to give them feedback
  - (6) Being interested in my professional and personal development
  - (7) Listening
  - (8) Not being perpetually “on fire”
  - (9) Willing to take a risk on me
  - (10) Giving crystal-clear expectations with measurable goals
  - (11) Not undermining employees (especially in front of peers)
  - (12) Being consistent and firm but fair
  - (13) Creating (culturally competent) space for sharing diverse experiences and views
  - (14) Being flexible and taking reasonable risks
  - (15) Communicating directly/not passive aggressively
  - (16) Admitting errors
  - (17) Using emotional intelligence to get and give feedback
  - (18) Strong emotional IQ
  - (19) Being vulnerable (open to hard conversations) (Brown, 2015)
- 

**Table 1.**  
Leadership practices  
shared by PA graduate  
students

managers are hard-wired to be arrogant or narcissistic, whereas others looked to cultural or structural factors to explain behavior. In a few cases, students demonstrated humility in reflecting on how their own practices might make it easier or harder for managers to invite feedback or admit limitations.

Government managers in a series of workshops shared similar interests and insights. The author shared her early research in three municipal workshops on *Effective Leadership Practice* and invited approximately 60 participants to react to graduate students' responses and questions about what makes it challenging for them, as government managers, to engage in the humble practices students identified. Several leaders discussed their perceptions of vulnerability and the factors they believe make them more or less likely to reflect on – or acknowledge – limitations. The constraints they cited most frequently were:

- (1) A sense that government legitimacy is derived from expertise and would be undermined by admissions of uncertainty or error

Legitimacy echoes tensions outlined in the introduction to this analysis. Managers described increased public scrutiny and a volatile and unsympathetic social media environment that made it difficult – even *terrifying* – to admit error. Several managers in a California city described wanting to reassure an increasingly skeptical public that government could handle complex problems and changes. Managers also noted that elected officials in their community sought to convey a sense of certainty that data did not always support. They described feeling caught between these officials who wanted – even demanded – decisive, expert answers and employees who craved *honesty* or *humility*. Research provides limited guidance on how different stakeholders and institutional contexts influence leaders' enactment of humility.

- (2) The responsibility to minimize risk to public investments/taxpayer dollars

Managers in all workshops discussed risk and failure – how much risk is acceptable, the challenges of separating fact from fiction in assessing risk and what it means to fail – and admit failure – with public dollars. Managers who had recently transitioned from private to public sector roles referred to *culture shock* in describing the low tolerance for risk and failure they perceived in public agencies to ask: “how can you learn without some failure?” Other participants noted that failure is not an option with taxpayer dollars. Future research might explore whether expanded conceptions of public value influence leaders' tolerance for taking reasonable risks in line with [Moore's \(1995\)](#) call for a definition of public value that moves beyond traditional cost–benefit calculations to capture important civic principles such as equity, transparency or fairness. Scholars might also study whether externally funded initiatives reduce risk anxieties and support humble practice. For example, in the United States, Bloomberg Philanthropies ([2015](#), p. 2) partnered with city mayors' offices to spur and fund innovative solutions to complex problems when existing institutional dynamics make it difficult for PA leaders to take risks:

A tension exists between “putting out fires” and managing day-to-day responsibilities and finding the time and space needed to think, plan, and launch new solutions. . . New programs that fail tend to attract more attention than those that succeed. And when it comes to innovation, there will inevitably be efforts that do not work as planned.

Bloomberg Philanthropies' Innovation Teams program was created to provide cities with a method to address these barriers and deliver change more effectively to their citizens. Using the Innovation Delivery approach, innovation teams (i-teams) greatly reduce the risks associated with innovation...

- (3) A lack of resources to support reflective practice



Participants discussed the lack of resources – time and money – to support reflective practice. They used phrases such as *putting out fires* or *just reacting* to indicate how little time they had to reflect on accomplishments and limitations or to debrief work with teams and seek alternative viewpoints. Future research might ask if and how resource affordances or constraints – real or perceived – influence the degree to which leaders demonstrate and cultivate humility.

Although this analysis clearly represents a modest sample of student and practitioner discourse on PA humility, it points to how unique aspects of PA context may influence humble practice. The framework in [Table 2](#) moves beyond conceptual understandings of humility as a virtue to provide a foundation for more intentional practice, mutual inquiry and methods of evaluating individual and institutional activities that support *productive humility* in PA.

### Implications and call to action

A public service ethos grounded in humility offers an anchoring virtue and practical guide for PA leaders working to strengthen public trust and address wicked problems. Leaders can enact productive humility via practices such as mutual inquiry, design thinking and acknowledgment of paradox. PA researchers might further explore how institutional or cultural dynamics support or constrain humble behavior among PA leaders and investigate whether humility can be cultivated via specific coaching, teaching or feedback techniques and whether particular research methods influence cultural humility. Ultimately, humility is not about stepping back. PA leaders and scholars must be able to serve and communicate powerfully about the greater purpose and institutions of democracy ([Metzenbaum, 2019](#)). However, to be successful, they must do this with both the conviction and doubt [Yanow \(1997\)](#) described and in partnership with policy-relevant publics and other stakeholders. This author sees an opening for PA leaders to become more engaged in building public knowledge about the role and contributions of government, the nature of wicked problems and the value and limitations of expertise. As the Coronavirus pandemic unfolds and governments around the world react, there will be opportunity to interrogate governmental responses and civic responsibility with a proper dose of humility as prescribed for the United States by a staff writer at *The Atlantic*:

What if it turns out, as it almost certainly will, that other nations are far better than we are at coping with this kind of catastrophe?...The problem is that American bureaucracies, and the antiquated, hidebound, unloved federal government of which they are part, are no longer up to the job of coping with the kinds of challenges that face us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Global pandemics, cyberwarfare, information warfare – these are threats that require highly motivated, highly educated bureaucrats; a national health-care system that covers the entire population; public schools that train students to think both deeply and flexibly and much more. . . The question, of course, is whether this crisis will shock us enough to change our ways. ([Applebaum, 2020](#), para. 15–16, 23)

Humility suggests that we are often, paradoxically, stronger when we admit and interrogate our limitations and call on others to act when we cannot. It also reminds us that service represents a continuous and essential search characterized by partial and imperfect answers. We will stumble and face perilous times. Reclaiming the value of public service will be no easy task, but public servants – especially leaders – must find ways to demonstrate and communicate with humility about how and why public service matters.

<i>Definitional features</i>	<i>Value/benefits</i>
(1) Modest opinion of importance, position or rank <sup>a,b</sup>	(1) Improved follower/team respect <sup>k</sup>
(2) Proper perspective on abilities <sup>c</sup>	(2) Increased compassion for others' failings <sup>e</sup>
(3) Acknowledgment of uncertainty, limitations and error <sup>d,e</sup>	(3) Improved learning capacity <sup>l, m</sup>
(4) Curiosity about others' experiences <sup>d,e,f,g</sup>	(4) Improved ability to lead through trial and error <sup>n</sup>
(5) Awareness of how others' perspectives influence actions <sup>h,i</sup>	(5) Increased sensitivity to how culture impacts practice <sup>h, i</sup>
(6) Cognizance of interdependence <sup>j</sup>	(6) Correlation with increased follower motivation and maintenance of social bonds <sup>y</sup>
<i>Practices</i>	<i>Assessment methods</i>
(1) Asking curious questions <sup>g,m</sup>	(1) Self-reporting humility surveys based on personality constructs <sup>w,x</sup>
(2) Involving policy-relevant publics in mutual inquiry <sup>m</sup>	(2) Reports from others (colleagues, supervisors, coaches) <sup>y</sup>
(3) Making technical, cultural and historical understandings transparent <sup>o,p</sup>	(3) Behavioral observations and interviews <sup>y</sup>
(4) Actively seeking alternative perspectives <sup>d,e,f</sup>	(4) Behavioral studies during transition or strain <sup>y</sup>
(5) Exploring historical events and policy from multiple perspectives <sup>q,r</sup>	
(6) Applying design thinking methods <sup>s</sup>	
(7) Examining paradox <sup>q,t</sup>	
(8) Admitting error; welcoming advice <sup>d,e</sup>	
(9) Journaling about personal strengths and limitations <sup>u</sup>	
(10) Reflecting on how behavior invites or constrains others' contributions <sup>g,h,i,m</sup>	
(11) Partnering with funders to support higher-risk innovation <sup>v</sup>	
<i>PA context constraints</i>	
(1) Belief that government legitimacy is undermined by admissions of uncertainty/error	
(2) Concern with minimizing risk to public funds	
(3) Lack of resources for reflective practice	
<sup>a</sup> Flanagan and Flanagan (1996)	
<sup>b</sup> Roberts and Wood (2003)	
<sup>c</sup> Richards (2001)	
<sup>d</sup> Kellenberger (2010)	
<sup>e</sup> Snow (1995)	
<sup>f</sup> Murdoch (1993)	
<sup>g</sup> Schein (2013)	
<sup>h</sup> Clark (2018)	
<sup>i</sup> Prasad <i>et al.</i> (2016)	
<sup>j</sup> Schein and Schein (2018)	
<sup>k</sup> Nielsen <i>et al.</i> (2010)	
<sup>l</sup> Dweck (2008)	
<sup>m</sup> Yanow (2009)	
<sup>n</sup> Owens and Hekman (2012)	
<sup>o</sup> Lynch (2017)	
<sup>p</sup> Newland (1991)	
<sup>q</sup> Newland (2008)	
<sup>r</sup> McKee (2014)	
<sup>s</sup> McSwite (2001)	
<sup>u</sup> Schuessler <i>et al.</i> (2012)	
<sup>v</sup> Bloomberg Philanthropies (2015)	
<sup>w</sup> Lee and Ashton (2004)	
<sup>x</sup> Haggard <i>et al.</i> (2018)	
<sup>y</sup> Davis and Hook (2013)	

**Table 2.**  
Productive humility  
framework

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