RobbinsNextGen



The Most Dangerous Moment Is When You Think You Already Know

There's a strange paradox in leadership:

The more experienced you become, the easier it is to stop learning.

You've seen the patterns. You've made the mistakes. You've developed judgment. You've accumulated knowledge and experience. And, eventually, people start coming to *you* for the answers.

That's all good.

But all of that experience can eventually become the very thing that prevents you from getting better.

One of the leadership topics I talk about a lot - and coach even more - is having a **Growth Mindset**.

I consider it one of just three pillars of great leadership:

1. **Strategic Vision**
2. **High Emotional Intelligence (EQ)**
3. **A Growth Mindset**

Professor Carol Dweck, who popularized the concept, describes a Growth Mindset as the belief that our abilities can be developed through dedication, learning and effort. Talent and intelligence are starting points, not fixed limits.

But there's another concept that I think captures an essential part of Growth Mindset particularly well:

Intellectual Humility.

And the more I think about it, the more I believe intellectual humility becomes *more* important as you become successful, not less.

For Individuals

Intellectual humility does **not** mean believing you're stupid.

It doesn't mean constantly questioning your competence, living with imposter syndrome, or walking into every meeting assuming everyone else knows more than you.

You can - and should - be confident.

You should use your knowledge. You should trust your experience. You should develop strong opinions and use your pattern recognition to make decisions.

But intellectual humility means holding all of that confidence alongside another belief:

There may be a better way.

There may be something I haven't considered.

Someone else may know something I don't.

New information may require me to change a belief I've held for twenty years.

That's the balance.

And I think it gets harder as we become more experienced.

When you're 25 years old and three years into your career, nobody expects you to have all the answers. Asking questions is safe.

When you're 45, running a company, sitting on Boards, or leading thousands of people, the psychological equation changes.

People expect answers from you.

More importantly, perhaps, **you start expecting answers from yourself.**

Your experience becomes part of your identity.

And that's where confidence can quietly turn into certainty.

Intellectual humility is the ability to prevent that from happening.

Practically, for leaders, that means prioritizing questions - authentic questions - and actually listening to the answers.

It means actively seeking feedback and then doing something with it.

It means noticing when your ego is defending an old belief rather than evaluating new information.

It means looking outside your role, your company, your industry and your existing circle for perspectives that challenge the way you think.

And it means being willing to replace a long-held belief when the evidence tells you it no longer works.

Importantly, I'm not talking about learning for learning's sake.

There are people for whom acquiring knowledge is an objective in itself. That's great, but it's not what I mean here.

This is **active learning with an objective**: to be better after the learning than you were before it.

A better leader. A better decision-maker. A better colleague. A better person.

Simply put:

The second you stop learning, you start limiting your ability to lead.

When Success Becomes the Problem

Ironically, intellectual humility may be hardest when things are going well.

Failure forces you to question your assumptions.

Success validates them.

If you've just had three terrible years, you're probably asking:

What are we doing wrong?

But if you've just had three record years, the question can quietly become:

Why would we change anything?

That is a very different psychological state.

Success takes “this worked” and quietly turns it into “this is right.”

And eventually:

“We know what we're doing.”

That's why intellectual humility isn't merely a useful characteristic for people who are struggling.

It may be even more important for the people who are winning.

And the same is true for teams and companies.

Teams and Companies

Does intellectual humility scale?

Absolutely.

In fact, I think a team or company that loses its intellectual humility eventually loses its ability to grow.

One of the activities I've done multiple times is bring very smart, relatively young and inexperienced people into senior-level conversations.

There are some preconditions.

They need to be brave enough to speak.

And, much more importantly, the senior leaders need to create enough psychological safety that speaking doesn't feel career-limiting.

But when those conditions exist, something fascinating happens.

The inexperienced person asks the “naïve” question.

Why do we do it that way?

Why can't the customer do this?

Why do we sell through that channel?

Why does this process require seven steps?

Why couldn't a competitor simply do *this*?

And then comes one of the most dangerous phrases in business:

“Everyone knows…”

Everyone knows customers won't pay for that.

Everyone knows this industry doesn't work that way.

Everyone knows we've tried that before.

Everyone knows that would never work.

Maybe.

But sometimes “everyone knows” really means:

“We stopped questioning that assumption ten years ago.”

I've seen this happen countless times.

A bright but inexperienced person asks a question, and the experienced people initially dismiss it because they know all the reasons the idea won't work.

And sometimes they're right.

Experience does have value.

But if you dig into the question - the assumptions underneath it and the different perspective that caused someone to ask it in the first place - there is very often a nugget of gold in there.

Or perhaps, in today's terms, a GPU.

The naïve question may not contain the answer.

But it may expose the assumption that prevents you from finding the answer.

That's intellectual humility at the organizational level.

It doesn't mean ignoring expertise.

It means refusing to let expertise become a prison.

The people with the deepest knowledge of an industry are often exceptionally good at explaining why the industry works the way it does.

The outsider doesn't have that baggage.

They can focus on first principles because they haven't yet learned all the things that “can't” be done.

That is why companies need to deliberately create the culture and infrastructure to listen and learn.

Question.

Stay curious.

Invite disagreement.

Reward the person who respectfully challenges the consensus.

Look outside your industry.

Ask what another company, another sector, another technology or another generation is doing differently - and whether some part of it could apply to you.

Being intellectually humble as an organization means being confident in your strategy without becoming so confident that you can no longer see another one.

Because history is full of companies that didn't fail because they were stupid.

They failed because they became **too certain that what had made them successful in the past would continue to make them successful in the future.**

Does This Apply to a Country?

This is where I sometimes get myself into trouble.

I've been fortunate to live and work directly in seven very different countries, work indirectly in another 20 or so, and visit many more.

One of the most valuable things that experience has taught me is this:

No country has a monopoly on good ideas.

Every country does some things exceptionally well.

Every country does some things badly.

And every country - regardless of how successful, wealthy, safe or developed it is - has something it can learn from somewhere else.

That sounds obvious.

But in practice, national identity can make intellectual humility surprisingly difficult.

People are often proud of their countries. National identity is powerful. We grow up with stories about what makes our country special, what our values are, what we do well and why “our” system works.

There's nothing wrong with that.

The problem comes when pride turns into certainty and then stagnation.

When “we do this well” becomes “we do this best.”

Or worse:

“We have nothing to learn from them.”

Canada is a useful example for me precisely because I know it, I was born and raised there, and I think it is an amazing country.

When I tell people around the world that I left Canada, one of the most common reactions is:

“Why would you ever leave?”

Fair question.

Canada is safe, stable, beautiful, prosperous and offers tremendous opportunity. It performs extremely well on many measures of quality of life. There are very good reasons Canadians are proud of their country.

But that's exactly what makes it an interesting example.

When you're already good, where does the motivation to become better come from?

Canada has historically compared itself heavily with the United States.

That's understandable. It's the giant country next door. The economies and cultures are deeply intertwined, and comparisons are inevitable.

But intellectual humility asks a different question:

Why should the country next door always be the benchmark?

If you're thinking about healthcare, why not ask which countries anywhere in the world deliver the best combination of quality, access, transparency and cost - and what could be learned from them?

Which countries have built better digital government services?

Which have better innovation ecosystems?

Which have found smarter approaches to taxation, education, infrastructure, housing, communication or public administration?

Canada may be better than some countries in each of those areas.

It may be among the very best in others.

That's not really the point.

The intellectually humble question isn't:

“Are we better than them?”

It's:

“Who is better than us at this, who is doing this differently - and what can we learn from them?”

That's a fundamentally different mindset.

And Canada certainly isn't unique.

I've seen versions of the same phenomenon all over the world.

Countries compare themselves with their neighbours, historical competitors or countries they consider peers.

If they're doing better, they're satisfied.

If they're doing worse, they find reasons the comparison isn't fair.

Human beings are remarkably talented at choosing benchmarks that make us feel good about ourselves.

Countries are collections of human beings, so perhaps we shouldn't be surprised that they do the same thing.

But “better than the neighbour” is a terrible standard for improvement.

Even if you're literally the best country in the world at something, does that mean there's nothing left to learn?

Of course not.

Someone may be doing one small component better.

Someone may have tried an approach you haven't considered.

A poorer country may have developed an ingenious solution precisely because it lacked your resources.

A smaller country may move faster because it has fewer institutional barriers.

A completely different culture may have approached the same human problem from a perspective you would never naturally consider.

Intellectual humility says:

Go look.

Not because your country is bad.

Because it can be better.

The Opposite of Intellectual Humility

The opposite of intellectual humility isn't ignorance.

It's **intellectual arrogance**.

And intellectual arrogance is particularly dangerous because the more successful you are, the more evidence you can find to support it.

The successful leader can point to their career.

The successful company can point to its financial results.

The successful country can point to its rankings.

See? We're good.

Maybe you are.

But Jim Collins famously argued that **good is the enemy of great.**

The real danger isn't being bad and knowing you're bad.

That creates urgency.

The danger is being good enough that you stop looking.

That's a Fixed Mindset at an individual, organizational or even national level:

This is who we are.

This is how we do things.

This is what works.

Intellectual humility replaces those statements with questions:

What don't we know?

What are we assuming?

Who sees this differently?

Who does this better?

What could we learn from them?

And what would we need to change if they're right?

Those questions work whether you're leading yourself, leading ten people, running a global company or governing a country.

The scale changes.

The psychology doesn't.

The Intellectual Humility Test

So here's a simple challenge.

Think about one area where you consider yourself genuinely good.

Not an obvious weakness.

A strength.

Something where your experience tells you that you know what you're doing.

Then ask yourself:

Who is better than me at this, and what are they doing that I'm not?

Ask the same question about your team.

Ask it about your company.

And yes, ask it about your country.

Then pay attention to your immediate reaction.

If your brain starts explaining why the comparison isn't valid, why their circumstances are different, why their approach wouldn't work for you, or why you're actually better when you consider *all* the variables…

Maybe you're right.

Or maybe that's exactly the moment intellectual humility matters most.

Because the objective isn't to diminish what you've accomplished.

It's to make sure your success doesn't become the thing that prevents the next stage of your growth.

The moment you believe you've become too good to learn from someone else is probably the moment you most need to.

There's an irony in writing an entire newsletter about intellectual humility:

It's much easier to see someone else's blind spots than your own.

So I've created a free diagnostic around the three leadership pillars I use in my work: **Strategic Vision, Emotional Intelligence and Growth Mindset.**

It doesn't just give you an assessment. It helps identify where you may have opportunities to develop and gives you some ideas for strengthening those areas.

Which is really the point of this entire newsletter.

The objective isn't to prove you're a great leader. It's to discover where you can become a better one.

I'll send the diagnostic directly to my email subscribers. If you'd like a copy, subscribe here. Subscribe to the RobbinsNextGen newsletter (takes 10 seconds).