

Humble Governance: A Practical Pathway to Ethical Leadership in South Africa

Article by Dr. Ronald Eglin – 15th Sept 2025

South Africa today is seized with the project of State Reform. The NCOP recently called for submissions on the Public Sector Amendment Bill, while CoGTA is leading the process of reviewing the White Paper on Local Government. These and many other processes have been necessitated by a realisation that South Africa faces a critical challenge to its democratic promise. A crisis of trust and confidence has grown between the government and its citizens, fuelled by persistent failures in service delivery and the corrosive effects of corruption. While there has been a robust national conversation focused on the need for ethical leadership and accountability, this dialogue is narrowly focused and fails to embrace humility as an integral part of ethics. This article therefore makes a case for 'humble governance' ([Demos Helsinki](#)), arguing that this is not just a theoretical idea but a practical necessity, offering a clear roadmap for how the country can reconnect with its people, especially at the local level.

For too long, South Africa's governance has been dominated by a style we can call "arrogant governance". This model is based on a rigid, top-down structure where power is centralised and the expertise of a select few is valued above all else. It assumes that the best solutions are created at the top and simply rolled out to everyone else. The consequences of this arrogance are plain to see: expensive, large-scale projects that have failed because they didn't fit local needs; a bureaucracy that is slow and unresponsive to people's daily problems; and a lack of transparency that created the perfect environment for state capture and the theft of public money. This approach treats citizens not as partners, but as passive recipients of services, or even as obstacles. This outdated model is simply no longer working for a nation that needs dynamic, inclusive solutions.

The most urgent need for this shift to humble governance is at the local government level, where people experience governance most directly. A humble municipality would be a radical departure from the current system. Its foundation would be the simple admission that no official, no matter how qualified, has all the answers to a community's problems. Instead of pretending to know best, a humble municipality would actively seek to learn from its citizens. It would see a person struggling in a poorly serviced area not as a source of a complaint, but as a crucial source of information and insight.

This humility would be the basis for a truly collaborative governance model. A key feature of this new approach would be the fundamental reimagining of ward committees. While originally intended to facilitate broad community participation, some committees have become gatekeepers, limiting rather than enabling public engagement. A humble municipality would not merely reform these committees; it would fundamentally re-imagine them to become true facilitators of two-way communication and engagement. Municipalities must enable and recognise organic forms of citizen engagement, such as forums and civic groups that emerge from shared interests, ensuring that structures are more flexible and rooted in community realities. Furthermore, municipalities must proactively open up decision-making spaces, allowing community representatives to participate meaningfully, not just as observers but as genuine contributors. This decentralisation of power is not about the municipality giving up its role; it is a smart way of ensuring that resources are used where they can have the most impact.

A humble municipality would also transform how it creates policies and plans. The current system often treats development plans as fixed blueprints that are rarely

changed. A humble municipality would see its plans as living documents, constantly being updated based on real-time feedback from the community. Instead of launching huge, expensive projects that might fail, it would embrace a culture of experimentation. Small pilot projects could be launched to test new ideas for waste management or local economic growth. The results of these projects, whether they succeed or fail, would be openly and honestly shared with the public. Failures would not be hidden to protect the municipality's image, but would be seen as important lessons. This shift from managing an image to genuinely improving performance is a key part of humble governance and is the most direct way to rebuild trust.

The connection between humble and ethical governance is strong and clear. When a government acts with humility, it is putting ethical principles into practice. For example, ethical governance is based on accountability. A humble government shows this by creating a system of constant feedback and self-correction. The willingness to admit a failed policy and the effort to learn from it is a powerful act of accountability. It shows the public that the government is not only willing to be held responsible, but is actively looking for ways to do so. In contrast, an arrogant government often avoids accountability and hides behind bureaucracy.

In the same way, transparency is a core part of ethical governance. A humble municipality would be naturally transparent. Its operations, from financial records to policy decisions, would be made easy for the public to access and understand. The act of openly sharing the results of a failed project is a great example of transparency. This type of openness is the best defence against the kind of conditions that allowed for state capture. When budgets are open, decisions are decentralised, and the public is involved in oversight, it becomes much harder for corrupt individuals to manipulate the system for personal gain.

The benefits of this change would be felt across all of South African society. At a political level, humble governance could be the key to re-engaging citizens who have become apathetic. When people feel that their input is valued and that their government is listening, their interest in civic life is restored. This would strengthen democracy from the ground up. Economically, a humble approach would unlock significant potential. The old, arrogant model often created a dependency on the state, stifling local innovation. By empowering communities and fostering a collaborative environment, a humble municipality could help local businesses and entrepreneurs to thrive. Furthermore, the commitment to transparency and accountability in humble governance would signal to investors, both local and international, that South Africa is a reliable and safe place to do business. This renewed confidence could lead to job creation and sustainable economic development.

The path ahead for South Africa is challenging, but the solution is clear. It lies not in a search for more powerful or all-knowing leaders, but in the courage to create a more humble government. By listening to its people, by admitting its failures, and by empowering communities to be partners in their own development, South Africa can begin the important work of rebuilding its democracy, one humble municipality at a time.

Ronald Eglin, PhD, is a Sustainable Settlements Specialist at Afesis, a progressive NGO championing social justice and equitable policy solutions, based in East London. He writes in his personal capacity.