

Comparative Analysis and Future Prospects of Humble Leadership Style

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Abstract: With the advent of the artificial intelligence era, the limitations of leaders' knowledge and skills have become increasingly apparent, emerging as a critical constraint on organizational progress. Consequently, organizations are placing greater emphasis on the importance of humble learning for leaders and fostering humble qualities in leadership. In previous research, humble leadership has garnered widespread scholarly attention, yet few studies have systematically compared it with other similar leadership styles, leading to lingering questions among researchers. To deepen the understanding of humble leadership, this paper reviews its developmental trajectory, conducts a detailed comparison with related leadership styles, and proposes future research directions. The aim is to provide insights and inspiration for further exploration and practical application of humble leadership.

Keywords: Humble leadership; Style comparison; Future prospect

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1. Introduction

In the face of increasingly complex external environments, traditional “top-down” and “command-and-control” leadership styles are proving inadequate for organizational sustainable development. Instead, leadership styles that emphasize open communication, freedom of expression, and employee participation in decision-making, such as transformational, authentic, servant, and platform leadership, are gaining popularity in organizations. Among these leadership approaches, humility serves as a positive trait that facilitates interactions between leaders and employees. Humble leadership refers to a style where leaders appreciate subordinates' strengths and contributions, acknowledge their own limitations, and remain open to new perspectives^[1]. Humble leaders excel at identifying problems and seeking solutions with modesty. Their demonstrated “reverence” and “active listening” can enhance employees' self-esteem, skills, and psychological empowerment, thereby exerting a non-linear impact on organizational performance. Furthermore, leaders with humility can improve employees' work performance and innovation capabilities by boosting their psychological capital, while also positively influencing team performance

through social influence mechanisms ^[2]. In summary, humility as a virtue not only fosters employee trust, thereby increasing their loyalty and contributions to the organization, but also creates a reliable team atmosphere that elevates team status and promotes long-term organizational development.

Although numerous empirical studies on humble leadership exist, few have conducted detailed comparisons with other similar leadership styles. Therefore, this paper reviews the evolution of humble leadership based on current research trends and compares it with related leadership approaches, aiming to provide insights for future research in this field.

2. Origins and connotation of humble leadership research

Research on humble leadership originated from Western scholars' in-depth exploration of humility as a personal trait, undergoing four distinct conceptual transformations: historical, monotheistic, negative, and modern perspectives. Notably, the modern perspective has gained particular prominence by redefining humility as an acquirable personal quality that plays a crucial role in individual development. To date, scholars worldwide have developed diverse understandings of humble leadership. From the trait perspective, most researchers recognize humility's positive effects, emphasizing the importance of self-awareness and self-positioning, where leaders must understand both their strengths and limitations while accepting their imperfections. The behavioral approach, however, suggests that humble leadership is cultivated through leadership behaviors rather than being an innate characteristic. This perspective defines humble leadership as a "bottom-up" leadership style where leaders relinquish their position as supreme authority and instead establish equal, mutually beneficial, and harmonious relationships with team members to collectively drive organizational progress.

As research advances, an increasing number of scholars have embraced this behavior-based definition of humble leadership-viewing it as a leadership approach that gradually develops through ongoing interactions and communications with subordinates. This dynamic process of leadership formation has become widely recognized in contemporary leadership studies.

3. Structural dimensions of humble leadership

Although academic research on leadership styles continues to advance, there remains no definitive conclusion regarding which leadership approach is most effective. In past studies, humility had not received sufficient attention in leadership research and was often considered merely as a partial characteristic of servant leadership or Level 5 leadership ^[3]. However, as research has progressed, scholars have gradually recognized the importance of humility in leadership, now regarding it as a crucial feature of effective leadership.

In a comprehensive analysis of domestic and international scholarly research on humble leadership, it was found that the three-dimensional model of humble leadership proposed by Owens and Hekman in 2012 has gained widespread recognition and application ^[4]. These three dimensions are: self-awareness, appreciation of others, and openness to learning. Beyond these three dimensions, Owens and Hekman's 2012 study also emphasized two key contingency conditions, making a total of five factors to ensure the effectiveness of humble leadership behaviors. These conditions are categorized into leader factors and environmental factors.

4. Comparative analysis with similar leadership styles

In the field of leadership research, humility is recognized as a common trait among bottom-up leadership styles such as servant leadership, authentic leadership, and transformational leadership. These leadership approaches consistently demonstrate care for subordinates and commitment to collective growth, which aligns with the core essence of humility. However, this commonality has simultaneously led to confusion regarding their distinctive characteristics.

It is noteworthy that the shared emphasis on humility across these leadership styles has created conceptual ambiguity, making it challenging for researchers to clearly delineate their respective theoretical boundaries and practical applications. Specifically, servant leadership emphasizes leaders' selfless dedication to followers, authentic leadership focuses on the transparency and moral integrity of leaders, while transformational leadership aims to inspire and enhance team performance. Despite their different focal points, all three leadership theories consistently incorporate humility as a key behavioral component.

4.1. Comparison with servant leadership

Servant leadership is a people-centered leadership approach. Leaders primarily position themselves as servants first and leaders second, with the core purpose of promoting the growth and advancement of organizational members, rather than merely pursuing management or organizational goal achievement.

Similar to servant leadership, humble leadership also focuses on employees, caring for their growth and development. However, between these two leadership styles, servant leadership acts more like a selfless assistant dedicated to providing needed support and help to subordinates. In contrast, humble leadership not only focuses on employee development and building close collaborative relationships with subordinates but also places greater emphasis on continuous self-improvement through introspection, recognizing one's own shortcomings, and persistently pursuing personal and professional growth^[5]. In summary, there are clear differences between the two in terms of leadership approach: servant leadership emphasizes employee-centered, unidirectional support, while humble leadership stresses bidirectional communication and collaboration to achieve mutual benefit. In other words, servant leadership tends to independently meet subordinates' expectations and needs, whereas humble leadership involves working with subordinates through dialogue and exchange to jointly plan future directions.

4.2. Comparison with authentic leadership

Research scholars pointed out that authentic leaders utilize their internal psychological capital to demonstrate positive self-regulatory behaviors to employees, create an uplifting organizational atmosphere, enhance both their own and employees' self-awareness, thereby stimulating employees' self-development^[6]. Essentially, Authentic leaders inspire employees by modeling their true values through exemplary behavior^[7].

Both authentic and humble leadership styles are willing to demonstrate their true selves and seek "win-win" outcomes, expecting to grow together with subordinates by developing their own leadership styles. However, there are significant differences between the two. The core concept of authentic leadership lies in leaders guiding employees to adopt correct behaviors by setting positive role models, using their moral standards and values as guidelines for action, thereby creating a vibrant and positive organizational environment. In contrast, humble leadership honestly shows employees their own shortcomings, humbly seeks opinions from staff, and hopes to stimulate employees' enthusiasm through their humble and learning attitude, thereby encouraging employees to demonstrate stronger personal capabilities in their growth.

4.3. Comparison with transformational leadership

Transformational leadership is commonly defined as: Leaders who make subordinates aware of the importance of their tasks, inspire higher-level needs in subordinates, demonstrate the organization's future vision and long-term strategic goals, enable employees to prioritize the organization's overall interests, and enhance subordinates' confidence in creating value for the organization ^[8].

Transformational and humble leadership both fulfill employee needs to drive mutual growth. However, they differ in their implementation approaches. Transformational leadership focuses more on inspiring employees to realize their self-worth by clearly articulating the organization's long-term vision and strategic goals to guide their behavior. It motivates employees to make personal sacrifices for organizational objectives, thereby driving sustainable organizational development. In contrast, humble leaders gain employee support and recognition by demonstrating humble leadership qualities and engaging in effective communication and learning with employees, encouraging them to voluntarily contribute to the company's growth. This leadership approach places greater emphasis on building strong interpersonal relationships, enhancing teamwork, and increasing employee loyalty.

5. Conclusion and future prospects

The comparative examination of humble leadership alongside servant, authentic, and transformational leadership styles demonstrates its distinctive advantages in facilitating two-way communication, enabling continuous self-enhancement, and promoting co-development between leaders and employees. In contrast to the unidirectional support characteristic of servant leadership, the exemplary modeling of authentic leadership, or the vision-oriented approach of transformational leadership, humble leadership distinguishes itself through its foundation in humility, openness, and collaborative problem-solving—qualities that render it particularly valuable for contemporary organizations operating in complex and volatile environments.

While current research on humble leadership has made significant progress, achieving its deep integration with organizational management practices still requires further exploration.

5.1. Combining qualitative and quantitative research approaches

Current studies predominantly employ quantitative methods and questionnaire surveys, with qualitative approaches being significantly underutilized. While quantitative methods and surveys provide measurable data, they often fail to capture the full complexity and diversity of humble leadership. In contrast, qualitative research methods—such as in-depth interviews, observations, and case studies—can offer richer insights into the behavioral patterns and underlying mechanisms of humble leadership.

To advance the field, future research should adopt a mixed-methods approach that integrates both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. This dual approach would not only enhance our understanding of humble leadership but also provide a more comprehensive and nuanced perspective on this critical leadership style.

5.2. Expansion of research levels

Current research on humble leadership has predominantly focused on its impacts at the employee and team levels, with particularly extensive investigations from the employee perspective that have well-documented its positive effects on individuals and team members. However, organizational-level examinations remain relatively limited, and in-depth analyses of leaders' individual behaviors are notably scarce.

When leaders appropriately demonstrate humility, it can foster subordinates' trust and psychological safety,

thereby enhancing their loyalty and generating positive organizational outcomes. Nevertheless, according to ego depletion theory, an individual's resources are finite. If leaders' humble behaviors exceed appropriate boundaries, it may lead to excessive resource depletion, resulting in negative consequences such as excessive workload.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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