

Humble Leadership and Employee Performance: Examining A Moderated-Mediation Model

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Keywords: humble leadership; learning goal orientation; employee performance; task challenge

Abstract: This study examines the relationship of humble leadership to employee performance using learning goal orientation as mediator and also looks at the moderating role of task challenges. Results of 203 samples revealed that learning goal orientation mediated the influence of humble leadership on employee performance, including proficiency, adaptivity, and proactivity. Furthermore, employee's task challenges moderated the relationship between humble leadership and employee's learning goal orientation. On the basis of the findings, we conclude that the connection between humble leadership and employee performance yields a pattern of moderated mediation. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

1. Introduction

With employees' increasing dependence on each other and growing uncertainties at work, employee performance has involved more extensive ranges. The growing uncertainties make it impossible for employees to simply rely on due diligence to react to the changes of environment, and the increasing mutual dependence between employees require them to gain support from the social system in which they are, Griffin, etc. (2007) ^[1] divides employee performance into three parts, which are proficiency, adaptivity, and proactivity. Task proficiency refers to employees' ability to finish their regular tasks at work. For example, a nurse is expected to take care of patients and make sure they take the right medicine. Task adaptivity requires employees to adapt to the changes in their roles and working environment. For example, a nurse may need to answer the abrupt requirements of patients. And when new processes or new technologies are introduced into work, task adaptivity is especially needed. Task proactivity refers to employees' ability to actively change their roles and work environments to better adapt to their work. For example, a nurse may propose a new method to take better care of patients. In the real working environment, employees need to have all these abilities to ensure the highly-efficient and sustainable development of an organization.

As a kind of work resource, leadership style is an important situation variable of an organization that affects subordinates. Leadership style can influence the perception of subordinates and their work attitudes and behaviors, it can also make subordinates more motivated at work, thus exerting a huge impact on their performance and the output of their teams and the organization ^[2-4]. Humble leadership, as a type of leadership style, refers to leaders with three qualities: the willingness to view oneself accurately, appreciation of others' strengths and contributions, and teachability ^[5]. The willingness to view oneself accurately means one is able and willing to objectively evaluate oneself and obtain a precise, non-defensive self-awareness. Appreciation of others' strengths and contributions means appreciating the value and contribution of others, and recognizing the strengths of others without feeling threatened. Teachability means one welcomes new ideas, new ideas, suggestions, etc., and can humbly ask others ^[6, 7].

Humble leadership has a positive impact on employee performance. It has been found through empirical research that humble leadership is conducive to promoting employee performance and their work commitment ^[5], motivating them to innovate ^[8], and improve team performance ^[7]. Humble leadership tends to be strict with oneself by outdoing oneself and being an example in work.

This can have a positive influence within the organization, and subtly lead employees to improve themselves, thereby improving work performance. Besides, humble leaders attach importance to employees' personal career development and provide employees with more opportunities. Therefore, employees are psychologically motivated and believe that their efforts are paid off, which then bring about their stronger motivation for work, in order to pay back their leaders with higher performance. Finally, humble leaders allow employees to ask questions and express difficulties at work, and will patiently help employees solve problems. This creates a good communication atmosphere between leaders and subordinates, which is also beneficial to employee performance.

Previous studies have supported the interpersonal relationship between employees and leaders^[9], as well as the mediating role of core self-evaluation between humble leaders and employee performance^[8]. This paper proposes that employees' learning goal-orientation can be a new mediating variable between humble leaders and employee performance. Learning goal orientation refers to an adaptive approach to task situations associated with the motivation to understand and master the task rather than to display or prove competence^[10]. In other words, it refers to the degree to which an individual is oriented toward proactive learning, reflecting a desire to develop new competencies, master new situations, and acquire new skills. Humble leaders seek, acknowledge, and appreciate the learning and development of new abilities and skills. They would enact the humble behaviors of admitting their own mistakes and limitations, modeling teachability and openness to learning, and acknowledging the strengths and contributions of team members, which will foster a team climate in which team members are more focused on development and more willing to risk engaging in learning behaviors^[7]. And, Humble leadership will help legitimize learning and personal development and foster openness, trust, and recognition, which have had to be antecedents of learning goal orientation. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1. Humble leadership is positively related to employee performance.

Hypothesis 2. The positive relationship between humble leadership and employee job engagement is mediated by employees' learning goal orientation.

Further, the paper proposes that task challenge will weaken the effect of humble leadership on the goal orientation of employees in learning. Because challenging work itself can attract almost all of the attention of employees^[11], so, it is harder for employees to notice the humble behavior of the leaders. In addition, when the challenge at work is too great, it will exhaust most of the employee's intelligence and physical strength, and so, employees will need leaders to provide guidance and resources to solve their problems. At this point, employees may doubt the effectiveness of leaders' humility. Therefore, in the case of great work challenges, employees will not regard humble leadership as a model and will be less likely to learn from humble leaders. Therefore, the effect of humble leadership will be greatly reduced. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 3. The positive relationship between humble leadership and employees' learning goal orientation is moderated by task challenge.

Hypothesis 4. The indirect effect of humble leadership on employee performance via employees' learning goal orientation will be moderated by task challenge.



Figure 1 shows the theoretical model of this study.

2. Methods

2.1 Sample and Procedures

The data collection is conducted through questionnaires in two stages, with a two-week interval. In the first stage, the questionnaire collects interviewees' personal background information, humble leadership, and task challenge. The second one focuses on employees' learning goal orientation and three types of performance. We have coded the questionnaire for matching purposes. In the questionnaire description, we have informed the interviewees that the research data will only be used for scientific research and that their personal information will be kept confidential. Then, the questionnaires of the two stages are matched, after which we have obtained a total of 203 samples for the test analysis of subsequent research hypotheses.

Among the 203 samples, 107 are women, accounting for 52.7%; the average age of employees is 31.3 (SD=5.8), and the average years of working is 4.1 years (SD=4.9); in terms of the educational level, 15 people (7.4%) have not even got a bachelor's degree, 165 people (81.3%) are with a bachelor's degree, 22 (10.8%) are with a master's degree, and 1 (0.5%) has a doctor's degree.

2.2 Measures

All variables in this study used a likert5-point scale to measure the respondents' agreement to the items, where 1 means "strongly disagree" and 5 means "strongly agree".

(1) Humble leadership: The measurement of humble leadership adopts the scale of Owens, Johnson & Mitchell (2013)^[5], which contains 9 questions in total. Representative measurement titles such as "My leader serves as a reference to feedback, even if it is critical" and "My leader shows he or she is open to the advice of others". In this study, Cronbach's value on this scale was 0.85.

(2) task challenge: As for the measures of task challenge, this study integrates 6 questions in Morgeson & Humphrey (2006)^[12]. Measurement subject is respectively "The job involves doing a number of the company things", "The job comprises relatively complicated tasks", "The job requires that I engage in a large amount of thinking", "The job requires me to analyze a lot of information", "The job involves solving problems that have no obviously correct answer", "The job often involves dealing with problems that I have not met before". In this study, The Cronbach's value of this scale was 0.77.

(3) learning goal orientation: the learning goal orientation was measured using VandeWalle's scale (1997)^[13], which contains 5 questions in total. For example, "I am willing to select a challenging work assignment that I can learn a lot from", "I enjoy challenging and difficult tasks at work where I'll learn new skills". In this study, Cronbach's a value of this scale was 0.83.

(4) Employee performance: Employee performance was measured by Griffin, Neal, & Parker (2007)^[1]. The scale is divided into three dimensions, with three items of measurement in each dimension, respectively measuring employees' performance in three aspects: task proficiency (e.g., analyses my tasks were completed), task adaptivity (e.g., coped with changes to the way I have to do my core tasks), task proactivity (e.g., Initiated better ways of doing my core tasks). The Cronbach's a value of the three subscales were 0.75, 0.78, and 0.76, respectively.

3. Results

3.1 Confirmatory Factor Analyses

We first conducted a series of confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) to ensure that our measures had satisfactory discriminant validity. A good model fit requires the values of both CFI and TLI to be greater than 0.90, and the value of RMSEA has to be lower than 0.08 (Hu & Bentler, 1999)^[14]. The CFA results indicated that the hypothesized 6-factor measurement model fit the data well, and displayed superior fit to any of the alternative models, supporting the discriminant validity for the measured variables. The details of the confirmatory factor analyses can be found in Table 1.

Table1. Results of Confirmatory Factor Analyses

Model	χ^2	df	RMSEA	CFI	TLI
6-factor model	505.69	362	.04	.93	.92
4-factor model	660.72	371	.06	.85	.84
3-factor model	756.19	374	.07	.81	.79
one-factor model	1255.32	377	.11	.56	.52

Note. N = 203. 4-factor model: Three dependent variables were combined to one factor. 3-factor model: Mediator and dependent variables were combined to one factor.

3.2 Descriptive Analyses

Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations for all variables in this study are presented in Table 2. As expected, humble leadership was significantly correlated with employee performance and employees' learning goal orientation.

Table2. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations of the Focal Variables

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Gender ^a	.53	.50									
2. Age	31.32	5.83	.04								
3. Tenure	4.11	4.88	-.13	.55**							
4. Education ^b	2.04	.45	-.02	-.14*	-.14*						
5. Humble leadership	3.69	.62	-.04	.11	.04	-.04					
6. Task challenge	3.77	.69	-.04	.03	.05	.03	.24**				
7. Learning goal orientation	4.03	.54	.03	-.04	-.03	.06	.32**	.38**			
8. Task proficiency	4.16	.45	.02	.14*	.21**	-.09	.21**	.17*	.27**		
9. Task adaptivity	4.09	.52	.00	.11	-.02	-.10	.29**	.31**	.50**	.38**	
10. Task proactivity	4.06	.55	.09	.02	-.02	-.01	.31**	.36**	.55**	.34**	.52**

Note. N = 203. ^a Dummy variable (0 = male, 1 = female). ^b Education was coded as 1 = high school education or below, 2 = bachelor's degree, 3 = master's degree, 4=PhD.

*p < 0.05; **p < 0.01 (two-tailed).

3.3 Hypotheses Tests

We tested our hypotheses using the PROCESS tool, a statistical software package developed by Hayes (2013)^[15]. The results of these analyses are shown in Tables 3 and 4.

As shown in Table3, we found that humble leadership has a positive effect on employees' task proficiency ($\beta = .14, p < .01$, see model 3), task proactivity ($\beta = .24, p < .01$, see model 5), and task adaptivity ($\beta = .28, p < .01$, see model 7). Therefore, hypothesis 1 was supported.

To test hypothesis 2, which predicted the mediating role of learning goal orientation in the relationships between humble leadership and employee performance, we used the PROCESS tool by a bias-corrected bootstrapping procedure (5000 resamples). As shown in Table3, humble leadership was positively related to learning goal orientation ($\beta = .29, p < .01$, see model 1). In addition, when humble leadership and learning goal orientation were simultaneously entered into model to predict employee performance, learning goal orientation were significantly related to task proficiency ($\beta = .20, p < .01$, see model 4), task adaptivity ($\beta = .46, p < .01$, see model 6), and task proactivity ($\beta = .51, p < .01$, see model 8).

The bootstrapping analyses (5000 resamples) revealed a significant mediated effect of humble leadership on employee performance through learning goal orientation. The bias-corrected 95% confidence interval (CI) of the mediated effects did not include zero, indicating support of hypothesis 2.

In hypothesis 3, we predicted task challenge to attenuates the positive relationship between humble leadership and employee performance. In our analyses (Table 3, model 2), the interaction

between humble leadership and task challenge was significantly related to employees' learning goal orientation ($\beta = -.22, p < .01$, see model 2). Therefore, hypothesis 3 was supported.

Table3. Results of Hypothesis Tests

	Learning goal orientation		Task proficiency		Task adaptivity		Task proactivity	
Variable	Model1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8
Gender	.05	.04	.05	.04	-.01	-.04	.11	.09
Age	-.01	-.01	.00	.00	.01	.02	.00	.00
Tenure	.00	.00	.02*	.02*	-.01	-.01	.00	.00
Education	.09	.05	-.05	-.07	-.10	-.14	.00	-.04
Humble leadership (HL)	.29**	.22**	.14**	.08	.24**	.10*	.28**	.13*
Learning goal orientation (LGO)				.20**		.46**		.51**
Task challenge (TS)		.22**						
HL \times TS		-.22**						
F	5.05	8.85	3.82	5.35	4.77	14.22	4.58	15.71
R ²	.11**	.24**	.09**	.14**	.11**	.30**	.10**	.32**
Bootstrap results for mediated effect								
	Effect		Boot SE		LL 95% CI		UL 95% CI	
Task proficiency	.06		.03		.02		.12	
Task adaptivity	.13		.04		.07		.21	
Task proactivity	.15		.04		.08		.24	

Note. N = 203. Unstandardized regression coefficients are reported. Bootstrap sample size = 5,000. LL = lower limit; CI = confidence interval; UL = upper limit.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

In sum, we predicted a first-stage moderated mediation effect of humble leadership on employee performance via learning goal orientation and moderated by task challenge. To test hypothesis 4, we inspected the index of moderated mediation following Hayes (2015)^[16]. As can be seen from Tables 4, the index of moderated mediation as a direct significance test was all significant. The results suggest that employees with a low level of task challenge are more employee performance, supporting hypothesis 4.

Table4. Index of moderated mediation

	Effect	Boot SE	LL 95% CI	UL 95% CI
Index of moderated mediation	Task proficiency			
	-.04	.03	-.12	-.01
	Task adaptivity			
	-.10	.05	-.23	-.02
	Task proactivity			
	-.11	.06	-.25	-.03

Note. N = 203. Bootstrap sample size = 5,000. LL = lower limit; CI = confidence interval; UL = upper limit.

4. Discussion and conclusion

This study indicates that humble leadership can significantly improve employees' job performance, including proficiency, adaptability, and proactivity, which expands previous research

results to some extent, because previous studies mainly verified the influence of humble leadership on proficiency, this study supports the positive impact of humble leadership on job performance in a broader sense.

This study also found that humble leadership can further improve employee performance by influencing employees' learning goal orientation. Previous studies have found that good interpersonal relationship between employees and their superiors mediates the relationship between humble leadership and employee performance. This study expands a new mediating variable from the perspective of employee motivation. Humble leadership can significantly improve employees' learning motivation and willingness to learn. When employees have higher learning goals, they can easily keep their commitment and focus to work and have more cognitive flexibility and richness of knowledge and skills. Therefore, no matter for proficiency, adaptability, and proactivity, it can promote them positively.

Secondly, this study further examined the moderating effect of job challenge between humble leadership and employee learning goal orientation. The results showed that job challenge weakened the effect of humble leadership on employees' learning goal orientation. With the increasingly challenging work, employees will expect more immediate guidance and help from the leader to solve the huge dilemma in a faster manner, so the humble leader will become less popular. Furthermore, job challenge moderates the first half of the mediating path of humble leadership -- employee learning goal orientation -- employee job performance. This tells us that the effectiveness of humble leadership is bounded and may be more suitable for relatively uncomplicated work situations. When the complexity and difficulty of tasks go through a high level, humble leadership may become less effective.

In conclusion, this study deeply reveals the internal mechanism of humble leadership influencing employees' work performance: employees' learning goal orientation plays an intermediary role, and this intermediary path is also negatively regulated by the challenges of employees' work tasks. This suggests that we should not only consider the influence of leadership factors on employees' motivation and work performance but also consider the interference effect of job challenge on the process.

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