

# Why and When Do Leaders Express Humility? Leader Expressed Humility as Psycho-Social Signaling

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## ABSTRACT

Humble leadership has generated immense research interest. Yet, little is understood regarding why or when leaders may choose to express humility to their followers. Drawing upon self-determination and signaling theories, this conceptual research seeks to explain why some leaders display humble behaviors toward their followers more than other leaders. Needs for relatedness and competence are proposed as antecedents of humble expressions. Leader optimism is proposed as a moderator of this relationship. I contend leaders sustain expressions of humility to signal their values of relatedness and growth to followers and to encourage humble behaviors among them for mutually beneficial outcomes. Optimism is presented as a contingency variable that may explain additional variance in leader expressions of humility. Theoretical and managerial implications are presented as well as directions for future research.

## KEYWORDS

Leader Expressed Humility, Self-Determination, Signaling Theory, Humility, Leader Optimism

## INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, great attention has been paid to leader humility and its effects on followers, teams, and organizational outcomes (Argandona, 2015; Mallén et al., 2019; Nielsen & Marrone, 2018; Ou et al., 2014; Owens & Hekman, 2012). Specifically, follower outcomes are overwhelmingly positive and include increased relational energy, psychological safety, self-efficacy, and self-expansion, as well as increased job engagement and job satisfaction (Hu et al., 2018; Mao et al., 2019; Owens et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2018). Yet despite our current knowledge of leader humility's positive effects, there are still unanswered questions.

First, additional exploration of potential antecedents of leader humility is needed (Nielsen & Marrone, 2018; Wang et al., 2018). While previous research does point to a handful of individual differences that are related to expressions of humility, namely narcissism, honesty-humility, trait humility, learning goal orientation, relational identity, and leader incremental theory of the self (Owens et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2018), very little is known about why and when leaders are motivated to express humility to their subordinates. Broadly, leadership scholars have argued for more frequent usage of motivational constructs to explain leadership processes across the field (Hiller et al., 2011). This is also the case within humility research. Beyond stable traits, theoretical linkages still need to be made between a leader's psychological needs/motives and subsequent expressions of humility toward

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others and their own within-person motivational changes (Hiller et al., 2011; Mischel & Shoda, 1995; Nielsen & Marrone, 2018).

Additionally, more research is needed to identify potential contingency effects that may weaken or strengthen leader expressions of humility (Nielsen & Marrone, 2018; Wang et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2019). For example, it is somewhat unclear whether leaders engage in differentiated leader humility, that is leaders may alter their expressions of humility based on follower characteristics (Qin et al., 2020; Qin et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2019). A leader's perception of follower needs is one such situational element that may alter the frequency or intensity of humble displays. This highlights the interdependence of expressed humility and the leader/follower relationship (Frostenson, 2016). One must express humility while another must be present to experience its effects. A better understanding of how humility affects processes of relating and sensemaking between individuals, especially between individuals at different hierarchical levels, is warranted (Nielsen & Marrone, 2018).

Finally, the conceptualization and measurement of humility has long been an issue within the literature (Davis et al., 2010; Nielsen & Marrone, 2018; Tangney, 2000). Humility has been defined and measured as a personality trait, a disposition, a relationally-based personality judgment, a cognitive process of self-appraisal, and as a pattern of interpersonal behaviors (Davis et al., 2011; Landrum, 2011; Lee & Ashton, 2004; Owens et al., 2013; Rowatt et al., 2002). There is a need for a clearer, detailed untangling of humility as a multistage relational process that links motives, states, and behaviors (Davis et al., 2010; Nielsen & Marrone, 2018). In the present research, I present motivational needs of competence and relatedness as potential antecedents of humility emergence and expression as moderated by leader optimism.

Finally, I draw upon signaling theory (Spence, 1973) to explain why/when leaders sustain displays of humility toward followers. While needs for relatedness and competence may enhance individual expressions of humility, within a leadership context I contend leaders engage in expressions of humility to signal and cultivate values of relatedness and growth among followers toward mutually beneficial outcomes. Finally, I propose that leader optimism will moderate the relationship between leader needs and expressions of humility toward followers.

The research contributes to the study of humility in leadership in three ways. First it presents a potential link between specific leader motivations and expressed humility providing one explanation as to why some individuals express humility more than others: a greater need for competence and relatedness. Second, the research adds leader optimism as a possible contingency variable that may explain variance in leader expressions of humility. Third, using signaling theory, it provides a jumping-off point for future research to explore why/when leaders continue to express humility toward their followers: to signal their inherent values of growth and relatedness and to cultivate these values in their followers. Taken as a whole, the research presents humility as not only a disposition or pattern of behaviors but as an entire interpersonal process of psycho-social signaling for the mutual benefit of both the leader and followers.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### **THE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF HUMILITY AND HUMBLE BEHAVIORS**

Humility research has increased exponentially across several disciplines over the past decade including organizational behavior, leadership, and positive psychology (Nielsen & Marrone, 2018). Trait or dispositional humility has been defined and measured differently across these disciplines, but common conceptual components have emerged. First, humble individuals have the ability and willingness to assess their strengths and weaknesses accurately and accept their own personal limitations (Davis et al., 2011; Nielsen & Marrone, 2018; Owens & Hekman, 2012). Second, research suggests that humble

individuals are more open to feedback and are unthreatened by the strengths of others (Nielsen & Marrone, 2018; Owens & Hekman, 2012; Owens et al., 2013). Finally, a smaller subset of research suggests that humble individuals are capable of self-transcendence, or the ability to accept one's place within the broader world (Morris et al., 2005; Nielsen & Marrone, 2018; Ou et al., 2014).

Beyond the conceptual core of trait humility, it is important to identify how humility emerges in the form of observable interpersonal behaviors especially in the context of leadership. Owens et al.'s (2013) conceptualization of *leader expressed humility* includes three ways in which humility is expressed: 1) evaluating oneself openly and honestly, 2) valuing and praising the strengths and contributions of others, and 3) remaining open to feedback and input from others. Regarding the first facet, humble individuals are more willing to take responsibility for their mistakes and weaknesses and publicly acknowledge them (Morris et al., 2005; Owens & Hekman, 2012; Owens et al., 2013; Tangney, 2000). This willingness to confess their shortcomings likely stems from their focus on learning and self-improvement (Owens et al., 2013). They appear to place more value on growth and learning than being perceived as always right. While humble individuals are more likely to share their mistakes and weaknesses, they simultaneously maintain a healthy appreciation of their strengths (Davis et al., 2016). Davis et al. (2016: 192) have referred to this as "a 'just right' view of the self". Distinct from modesty, humble individuals are not self-deprecating but rather self-aware which results in a more accurate assessment of their weaknesses and abilities (Nielsen et al., 2010). Thus, humble individuals display neither self-aggrandizing nor self-effacing behaviors, but tend to maintain a confident, yet accurate, view of the self (Davis et al., 2011; Exline & Hill, 2012).

As these individuals tend to be more comfortable with themselves, humble individuals are also less threatened by the strengths and accomplishments of others (Exline et al., 2004; Owens & Hekman, 2012). Humble individuals will more readily recognize the contributions and achievements of their peers and subordinates (Owens & Hekman, 2012; Owens et al., 2013). Additionally, because they value the strengths and contributions of others, they are willing to ask for advice, encourage opposing viewpoints, and share in decision-making (Morris et al., 2005; Owens & Hekman, 2016; Tangney, 2009). These behaviors or expressions of humility are informed by a self-transcendent view of the world. In general, humble individuals tend to display more others-oriented and prosocial tendencies (Jankowski et al., 2013; Owens et al., 2013; Tangney, 2009). They understand that they are just a small part of the broader organization, community, and world at large and this transcendent view influences their interpersonal interactions and relationships.

When discussing leader humility, it is important to acknowledge the situational variables that can impact leader humility emergence and expression. That is to say that humble individuals may not express humility in every situation, nor will it have the same saliency in every context (Owens, 2009; Yang et al., 2019). For example, an individual's sensitivity to the social risk of showing weakness in certain environments can constrain expressions of humility (Owens, 2009). Follower and team characteristics such as team voice and follower capability can either enable or restrict leader expressions of humility (Wang et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2019). Additionally, how leader humble expressions are perceived by followers can impact leadership outcomes (Dasborough & Ashkanasy, 2002). If followers believe their leader is behaving humbly for selfish gain or engaging in impression management, it can engender perceptions of leader inauthenticity and hypocrisy (Bharanitharan et al., 2021; Owens, 2009; Owens et al., 2013). This is because follower attributions of impression management can generate uncertainty regarding a leader's true motivations (Li et al., 2017) and thereby reduce follower trust in leadership (Elangovan et al., 2007; Yang et al., 2019). As Owens and Hekman (2012) have argued, authentic expressions of humility that are perceived by followers as "sincere" will cultivate more positive outcomes than humble expressions that are deemed "instrumental" or manipulative.

## HUMILITY AND MOTIVATION

Theories of human motivation have long postulated why individuals display certain behaviors in the pursuit of valued outcomes. Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2002) is one macrotheory of human motivation that focuses on the fulfillment of intrinsic psychological needs as a source of motivation. The theory explicates a broad array of processes such as personality development, psychological well-being, affect, behavior, self-regulation, and subconscious cognitive processes (Deci & Ryan, 2008). SDT suggests that behaviors are a result of intrinsic motivations driven by three main psychological needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Specifically, needs for relatedness, autonomy, and competence are identified as the prerequisite states in which behavior initiates and human development, performance, and well-being are realized (Deci & Ryan, 2000). *Relatedness* refers to achieving satisfactory relationships with others. *Competence* refers to the ability to master one's work and *autonomy* refers to one's sense of independence or that one has control over their environment. When these needs are met, it is thought that humans will experience optimal functioning, personal growth, and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

The behaviors or actions that individuals consciously select in the support of their intrinsic or extrinsic motivations are referred to as *self-determined behaviors* (Deci & Ryan, 1980). Behaviors that are enacted of one's own volition for the sake of intrinsic rewards are said to be the result of *autonomous motivation*, and behaviors in the pursuit of extrinsic rewards are driven by *controlled motivation* (Gagné & Deci, 2005). In previous research, humility has been linked to disinterest in social status (Ashton & Lee, 2008), greed avoidance (Hilbig & Zettler, 2009) and higher levels of intrinsic motivation (Cropsey, 2018) suggesting humble individuals are more autonomously motivated in their pursuit of goals.

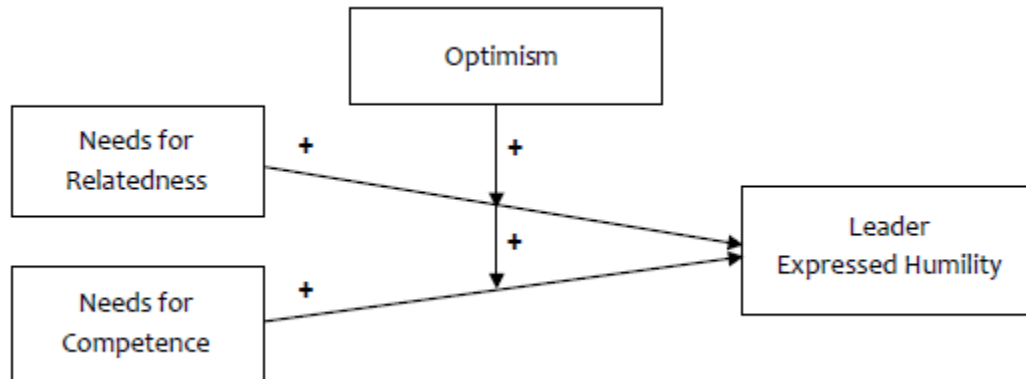
In the pursuit of relatedness, behaviors would be directed toward maintaining satisfactory relationships with others. As a psychological need, relatedness describes the desire to be connected to others and experience a sense of belonging (Deci & Ryan, 2000). At its core, it reflects a basic need to love and care for others and to be loved and cared for by others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Ryan, 1993). Sometimes referred to as the *belonging hypothesis*, it is thought that a large portion of human behavior and interactions are motivated by the drive to build and maintain strong social bonds (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Freud, 1930; Maslow, 1968). These bonds include familial bonds as described by attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969; 1973) and by Freud (1930), but also include the potential bonds that can form from consistent interactions with any nearby human being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Interpersonally, humble individuals display many prosocial behaviors that would suggest a salient need for relatedness and satisfactory relationships. *Prosocial* or *helping behaviors* are actions performed to benefit another individual (George, 1991; Krebs, 1982). Humility has often been found to either predict or be associated with many prosocial behaviors including helpfulness (LaBouff et al., 2012), cooperation (Hilbig & Zettler, 2009), generosity (Exline & Hill, 2012), and forgiveness (Exline et al., 2008; Powers et al., 2007; Shepherd & Belicki, 2008). Additionally, humility is associated with less interpersonal deception (Ashton & Lee, 2005; 2008) and a commitment to social justice (Jankowski et al., 2013), indicating that humble individuals seek to maintain satisfactory relationships based on prosocial values of honesty and fairness.

Humble individuals not only attempt to build satisfactory relationships, they appear to have a strong motivation to maintain them as well. Overall, humility is associated with stronger relationship quality as well as better relationship outcomes (Farrell et al., 2015; Peters et al., 2011). Additionally, when relationships are strained or ruptured, humility has been shown to serve as a buffer in the repair of social bonds (Davis et al., 2013; Van Tongeren et al., 2014). Self-determination theory suggests that humble individuals are autonomously motivated to display prosocial behaviors to build and maintain

satisfactory social bonds due to their need for relatedness. Thus, I expect to find a positive association between needs for relatedness and expressed humility (see Figure 1).

**Proposition 1:** *Leader relatedness needs are positively related to leader expressed humility.*



**Figure 1.** Conceptual Model

Competence is described as a need to develop new skills and to master one's environment (White, 1959). SDT suggests the need extends from the human desire to explore and manipulate their environment as well as seek challenges of optimal difficulty (Van den Broeck et al., 2016). White (1959) argues this is biologically driven as humans must learn about their environment for the sake of survival. Since research suggests that humble individuals are more autonomously motivated (Ashton & Lee, 2008; Cropsey, 2018; Hilbig & Zettler, 2009), it can be assumed that their pursuits of competence are mostly intrinsically motivated by the potential rewards of mastery, cognizance, and personal achievement (Deci & Ryan, 1980). Competence also plays into other prominent theories of motivation like social cognitive theory which states individual knowledge acquisition stems from observing behaviors in the social environment. The enactment of new learned behaviors is based on an individual's perceived self-efficacy or the belief they can master a skill or accomplish a chosen task (Bandura, 1977). Higher levels of self-efficacy led to more confidence, motivation, and better performance (Bandura, 1993). Self-determination theory echoes this as Deci and Ryan (1980) argue when information is received that individuals have achieved competence, their motivation will be enhanced further toward it.

Behaviors oriented toward the pursuit of competence include practicing, learning, and seeking out challenges or growth opportunities (Deci & Ryan, 1980). Humble individuals have a strong orientation toward learning and self-improvement (Li et al., 2019; Owens & Hekman, 2012; Wang et al., 2018). First, humble individuals are more likely to engage in processes of self-reflection and self-critique that would identify areas for personal improvement (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998). They tend to set higher standards of achievement for themselves and display greater productivity (Chirumbolo, 2015; Dinger et al., 2015; Rowatt et al., 2006). They are more open to receiving help (Exline, 2012) and have greater ego resilience (Dwiwardani et al., 2014) which helps explain their openness to feedback from others and willingness to adjust their behaviors based on that feedback (Ashton & Lee, 2007; Tangney 2000, 2009). This still holds true even when the feedback is from a subordinate (Watkins et al., 2016).

Humble leaders also facilitate and encourage growth among their followers. In their research on humble leadership behaviors, Owens and Hekman (2012) found that followers described humble leaders as "models of learning" (p.798). They were said to consistently model teachability and growth for their followers by (1) validating follower development over time, (2) enhancing psychological

freedom, and (3) increasing follower engagement (Owens & Hekman, 2012). These behaviors helped followers to gain a deeper understanding of their environment and overcome challenges within it. Additionally, Li et al. (2019) found a positive relationship between leader humility and team learning through the cultivation of a shared mental model. It is theorized that humble leader behaviors stimulate collective humility in teams by influencing the development of a shared cognition (Li et al., 2019; Owens & Hekman, 2016). Taking this a step further, Mao et al. (2019) found that leader humility, moderated by follower age and gender similarity, led to increased self-expansion: the psychological process of expanding one's identity to include a target (e.g., the leader) into the view of self (Aron et al., 1991). Subsequently, increased self-expansion led to increased self-efficacy and greater task performance (Mao et al., 2019).

Self-determination theory suggests that behaviors oriented toward learning and improvement are driven by a frustration or desire for greater competence and skill mastery. Based on the behaviors humble leaders engage in and model for their followers, I contend that competence needs will be positively associated with expressed humility.

**Proposition 2:** *Leader competence needs are positively related to leader expressed humility.*

### **LEADER EXPRESSIONS OF HUMILITY AS PSYCHO-SOCIAL SIGNALING**

Signaling theory is concerned with the exchange of information between two parties that have access to different sources of information (Spence, 2002). The signaling process encompasses the sending of signals, the receiving of signals, and the adaptation of both the sender and receiver to signaled information (Antonakis et al., 2016; Spence, 2002). According to evolutionary signaling theory (Smith & Harper, 2003), when an observed behavior reliably correlates with an attribute (e.g., charisma or humility) it can be considered a reliable *cue*. When cues influence behaviors that produce mutually beneficial outcomes to both the sender and receiver, it may be considered a *signal*. These behaviors not only signal leader values to followers but also give followers a sense of what is expected for future interactions (Stiglitz, 2000). Referred to as *intent signaling*, one party will signal or communicate information regarding social expectations through a variety of actions or behaviors (Connelly et al., 2011).

In the context of leadership, leaders will have access to certain types of knowledge that followers will not, which may cause an imbalance in informational power. The absence of information sharing that stems from power differentials can lead to misunderstandings and impede sensemaking in organizations (Schildt et al., 2020; Weick, 1995). Information gaps can include role-specific information known only to those that occupy a position, as well as social expectations for leader-follower and follower-follower interactions. To reduce uncertainty regarding intentions and build trust, leaders will engage in specific behaviors to signal their values and expectations to followers (Antonakis et al., 2016; Grabo et al., 2017; Maran et al., 2019). In their study on charismatic leadership as psycho-evolutionary signaling, Grabo et al. (2017) suggest that leader charisma has emerged as a reliable signal that a leader can successfully coordinate group members when urgent collective action is necessary. In the same fashion, I contend leaders express humility to signal the importance of relatedness and competence for team social functioning and performance.

Humble individuals are known to consistently engage in three common expressions of humility: 1) acknowledging weakness and mistakes, 2) appreciating the strengths and contributions of others, and 3) accepting and adapting to feedback (Davis et al., 2011; Nielsen & Marrone, 2018; Owens & Hekman, 2012; Owens et al., 2013). As humble leaders express appreciation for the strengths of followers, defer to followers' expertise, and let followers share in decision making, they are signaling that each member of the team has value and makes important contributions. When humble individuals accept

and implement feedback from subordinates without feeling threatened (Ashton & Lee, 2007; Tangney 2000, 2009; Watkins et al., 2016), they are signaling to followers that their ideas have value and the potential to shape important group outcomes. Finally, humble leaders are also more likely to verbally praise and deflect praise toward followers (Davis et al., 2010; Owens & Hekman, 2016). With these adaptive, others-oriented behaviors, humble supervisors are signaling that they value the wellbeing of others and team improvement over their own self-image (Davis et al, 2013).

These intent signaling behaviors from leaders will cause behavioral adaptations within followers and influence how they interact with each other as well (Antonakis et al., 2016; Grabo et al., 2017). One study found that top management teams with humble CEOs are more likely to collaborate well and share information and decision making (Ou et al., 2014). Another study found that leader humility led to group collective humility via social contagion which resulted in more follower admission of mistakes and limitations, recognition of others, and openness to new ideas and feedback (Owens & Hekman, 2016). Collective humility subsequently led to collective promotion focus and greater team performance.

### **LEADER OPTIMISM AS MODERATOR**

Signaling theory proposes that as behavioral signals are sent and received it will cause mutual adaptation between parties (Antonakis et al., 2016; Spence, 2002). Thus, leaders continually assess follower needs, assess their acceptance of intent signals, and engage in self-regulation to adjust behaviors accordingly. A leader's level of optimism is one variable that may moderate signal levels in the form of expressions of humility. Defined as the expectation that good things will happen, optimism has been found to have a strong impact on how individuals interact with the world and those around them (Carver et al., 2010). Individuals with high levels of optimism approach problems differently and have more positive feelings about the future (Scheier et al. 1999; Segerstrom, 2011). The expectation of positive future outcomes is likely due to the specific forms of coping skills associated with optimism (Carver et al, 2010). Specifically, optimism is associated with problem-focused coping and engagement coping, both of which are proactive instead of reactive or avoidant of stressors (Solberg & Segerstrom, 2006). That is, optimistic individuals actively consider and engage with problems to find solutions because they believe positive outcomes are possible.

I contend leaders with higher levels of optimism will be more likely to consider that positive change and an improved future for themselves and their followers is possible. They will cope with problems and adversity by taking action and thus increase humility expressions as they want to signal pro-social and growth-oriented values to improve team social functioning and performance.

**Proposition 3a:** *Leader optimism moderates the positive relationship between competence needs and leader expressed humility, such that the relationship is stronger when leader optimism is high.*

**Proposition 3b:** *Leader optimism moderates the positive relationship between relatedness needs and leader expressed humility, such that the relationship is stronger when leader optimism is high.*

### **THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS**

This paper has conceptualized leader expressed humility as a multi-stage interpersonal process by connecting individual motivations (relatedness and competence needs), states (optimism), and behaviors (expressions of humility) in the context of a leader-follower relationship. Possible links between leader competence and relatedness needs to increased expressions of humility would

provide one explanation as to why some individuals express humility more than others: stronger needs for expertise and satisfactory social interactions than the average individual.

Additionally, leader optimism is presented as a potential contingency variable that may explain variance in leader expressions of humility. This also suggests that leaders may engage in differentiated humility across different situations eliciting several follow up research questions. Finally, through the lens of signaling theory, the paper proposes leaders express humility toward followers to inform them of their inherent values and expectations for growth and relatedness and to encourage humble behaviors among them. Overall, humble leadership is considered as a process of psycho-social signaling for the mutual benefit of leaders and followers.

### **MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS**

Empirical results spawned by the current discussion would be of interest to managers who hope to identify and cultivate humble leaders in their own organizations. Individuals with high relatedness and competence needs may be more likely to engage in humble expressions toward others. Hiring managers may want to test potential leaders for both humility and optimism traits to reap the benefits of humble leadership in organizations. This could have ramifications for job assessment and interviewing, training and development, as well as for succession planning. Additionally, it is proposed that humble leaders may engage in intent signaling to influence follower values and behaviors. If managers have individuals or teams that could benefit from an increase in prosocial and growth-oriented values and behaviors, a dispositionally humble leader may be a good fit.

### **FUTURE RESEARCH**

In addition to individual differences, contextual variables may also influence leader expressions of humility. Thus, future research may want to investigate the effects of more global variables on humble leadership (Dihn et al., 2014). Specific examples would include the types of variables that are commonly considered as substitutes for leadership: the task/work type being engaged in, organizational structure, organizational culture, and industry (Kerr & Jermier, 1978). An interesting opportunity for future research would be exploring how these variables affect or even cancel-out the effects of humble leadership. Follower perceptions of leader humble expressions should also be examined such as perceptions of sincerity (Owens & Hekman, 2012), follower implicit leadership bias (Epitropaki & Martin, 2005; Keller, 1999) and the effects of both leader and follower gender on perceptions of humility in leadership (Exline & Geyer, 2004). Additionally, the conceptual model can be taken a step further to measure changes in follower behaviors to document the effects of humble leadership at multiple points over time. Lastly, as of this writing, the relationship between leader humility and optimism has received little attention. The interaction of these two virtues as well as other facets of psychological capital in a leadership context is an area for interesting future research.

### **CONCLUSION**

In today's hyperconnected and increasingly dependent global environment, it seems more important than ever to develop and install humble leaders who can see the world from a self-transcendent point of view. I contend leaders who can admit mistakes and learn from them, who can cultivate prosocial and growth-minded values in their followers, and who are optimistic about the future will be fundamental to organizational performance and survival. Beyond organizational health, I contend humble leaders will be necessary for the survival of our most sacred support systems including



democracy and the health of our planet. It is my hope that this paper contributes to the understanding of humble leadership and generates exciting research on why and when leader humility is expressed.

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