2021 International Conference on Educational Innovation and Philosophical Inquiries (ICEIPI 2021)
Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Educational Innovation and Philosophical Inquiries (ICEIPI 2021), Part 1
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/1/ICEIPI_203

How and When Humble Leadership Impact Employee's Well-Being: A Moderated Mediation Model

Jiacheng Li

University Of California, Social Ecology, Irvine, Ca, 92697, U.S.
lijiachenglunwen@163.com

Keywords: humble leadership, workplace well-being, autonomy need satisfaction, prevention regulatory focus

Abstract: This study aimed to explore how humble leadership affects employees' autonomy need satisfaction and workplace well-being, and whether employees' prevention regulation focus can moderate the association between humble leadership and autonomy need satisfaction. A questionnaire survey finally produced 222 valid cases. According to the results, humble leadership significantly impacts employees' workplace well-being through autonomy need satisfaction, and employees' prevention regulatory focus amplify the positive relationship between humble leadership and autonomy need satisfaction. The current research is extended in terms of humble leadership and workplace well-being.

1. Introduction

With the advent of the Internet economy era, the organizational structure tends to be flat day by day, and organizations and individuals are no longer subordinate to each other, but symbiotic. The development of an organization is increasingly dependent on the joint promotion of leaders and employees. Employees, as the most direct practitioners of enterprises, are the most important stakeholders in an organization, and their well-being is critical to the sustainability of the organization (Celma, Martinez-Garcia & Raya, 2018). Leadership style and behaviors in organizational environment are important factors that influence employees' wellbeing (Rivers, Thompson & Jeske, 2018). Recently, the concept of humble leadership has been widely concerned by scholars since it was put forward (Zhou & Wu, 2018). Humble leadership is a new, open and supportive leadership style, which not only pays attention to the growth and development of employees, but also can be frank about its own shortcomings and shortcomings, and always has a positive and open mind to new things (Owens, Johnson & Mitchell, 2013). These characteristics can encourage employees to work harder, realize and feel the value of their work, and help to establish a common work vision with the company. According to a large number of researches, humble leadership is correlated with positive results such as job engagement, job satisfaction and creativity positively (Broeck, Vansteenkiste, Witte, Soenens & Lens, 2010; Walters & Diab, 2016; Wang, Liu & Zhu, 2018). This study aims to examine the association between humble leadership and staffs' well-being through mediating the role of autonomy need satisfaction.

Employees' workplace wellbeing was defined as employees experience more positive emotions but less negative emotions in the workplace and are satisfied with their own work (Ernst, Kalliath & Kalliath, 2012). Most scholars believe that employees' well-being is the reflection of happiness in the

© 2025 The Authors. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/1/ICEIPI_203

workplace, and it is the subjective perception and emotional experience of personal work (Guest, 2017; Mäkikangas, Kinnunen, Feldt, & Schaufeli, 2016). Organizational leaders should attach importance to the role of humble leadership. Leaders need to dig deep into their own excellent qualities in their daily work practice, from self-awareness of their own defects and deficiencies, appreciation of others' advantages, opening to the outside world, cultivate humble leadership behaviors, and organize leaders to constantly improve these excellent qualities related to work, which will help improve employees' workplace well-being.

This research attempts to examine the association between humble leadership and employees' workplace well-being. Based on the above analysis, the possible contributions of this study include that the impact of humble leadership on employee well-being from the perspective of autonomy need satisfaction in self-determination theory and provides a new theoretical perspective for the study of leadership-employee relationship; Secondly, the role of prevention regulatory focus is introduced, and its moderating effect on humble leadership and employee well-being is explored.

2. Hypothesis development

2.1. Humble Leadership

The concept of humble leadership was first put forward by Owens & Hekman (2012) and established as an independent leadership style. Humble leadership can not only be loved by subordinates, but also affect the development and performance of enterprises. Ancona et al. said that humble leaders can provide strategic value and produce long-term performance for the company by providing realistic perspectives on themselves, the company and the environment and making full use of the advantages of themselves and others (Ancona, Malone, Orlikowski et al, 2007). Owens & Hekman (2012) argued that humble leadership is one or all the three characteristics of admitting restrictions and errors, highlighting followers' advantages and efforts, and imitating others' teachability. They said that humble leadership is a behavior pattern, which occurs in the process of interpersonal communication and can be observed by others, and developed a three-dimensional scale as strong willing to assure self-accuracy, appreciation of other's merits and efforts, and teachability.

2.2. Self-determination theory

American psychologist Deci and Ryan put forward the theory of self-determination of motivation in 1980s (Deci, Vallerand, R. J., Pelletier, L. G., & Ryan, R. M, 1991). They believe when people fully realize their inner needs and social situations, they can freely choose their behaviors and guide themselves to engage in behaviors that are interesting and promote their ability development, so as to better adapt to society. Self-determination theory divides motivation into external ones Part motivation and internal motivation, the external motivation of learning refers to the separation from learning itself to achieve external results; Internal motivation is caused by the individual's needs and comes from the interest in learning. Internal and external motivation can be transformed into each other, and the motivation of learning lies in the internalization of external motivation. Internal motivation depends on three basic needs of individuals: competency, relationship demand and autonomy. Our study mainly focuses on the effect of autonomy need since it has most strong connection with leadership and employees' feeling. The need of autonomy mainly refers to the individual's demand for environmental control and the choice of freedom of behavior that "the feeling that one is effective with the chance to practice and show one's talents in the interaction between one and the social context" (Deci, 2017). Leader plays an important role in providing autonomous support for the subordinate and provide free environment for them. Humble leaders have ability to

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/1/ICEIPI_203

appreciate the strength of employees and place them to appropriate work and position, in which they have autonomy to make suggestions and work in line that they really want to do.

2.3. Humble leadership and employee well-being

Humble leadership means that leaders attach importance to the development of employees, treat new things with an open mind, recognize the contributions made by subordinates, appreciate their advantages, and be frank about their own shortcomings (Chen, Liu, Zhang, & Qian, 2018). This will help employees communicate equally, reduce their fear of making mistakes and failures, and make employees feel fewer negative emotions and more positive emotions, thus improving their wellbeing. Therefore, hypothesis 1 is about the direct influences of humble leadership on staff well-being.

Hypothesis 1. Humble leadership is associated with employee well-being positively.

2.4. The mediating role of autonomy need satisfaction

Humble leadership recognizes the strengths of employees and believes that they can overcome their weaknesses. Therefore, they provide employees with a free environment to do work that suits them, in which they feel they have high subjectivity and importance to do things they enjoy and find valuable (Jeung & Yoon, 2016). The employee's free work environment and his control of work are reflected in his autonomy need satisfaction. Well-being in workplace is strongly related to psychological need and increase after autonomy need satisfaction is high.

Hypothesis 2. The positive association between humble leadership and staff well-being is mediated by employees' autonomy need satisfaction.

2.4.1. The moderating effect of prevention regulatory focus

Regulatory focus theory was put forward by Higgins in 1998. It analyzed people's cognition pattern during decision making process. He divided self-regulation into prevention focus and promotion focus. The main difference between them was reflected by ideal or ought self-regulation. Individual with high prevention regulatory focus tends to more care about negative responses and emotions. In order to avoid the appearance of negative emotions, people with high ought self-regulation need to have high control of their job and finish their responsibilities timely and accurately to prevent bad outcomes (Gorman et al., 2012; Higgins & Pinelli, 2020). Self-regulation with a prevention focus demonstrates that employees is motivated to bring himself into alignment with one's own thought, so we indicate that employees with high prevention focus will have higher sense of work control, and higher autonomy need satisfaction.

Hypothesis 3. The positive association between humble leadership and employees' autonomy need satisfaction is weakened by employees' prevention regulation focus such that the association will be stronger if prevention regulation focus of employees are high.

Summary: a comprehensive model

This manuscript has assumed that employees' prevention regulation focus moderates the humble leadership–employees' autonomy need satisfaction association. Moderated mediation will happen "if the strength of an indirect role relies on the level of some variables, or, in case of contingent mediation relations on the level of a moderator" (Preacher, Rucker & Hayes, 2007). Therefore, we put forward the hypotheses above:

Hypothesis 4. The indirect role of humble leadership in employee well-being via employees' autonomy need satisfaction will be moderated by employees' prevention regulation focus.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/1/ICEIPI_203

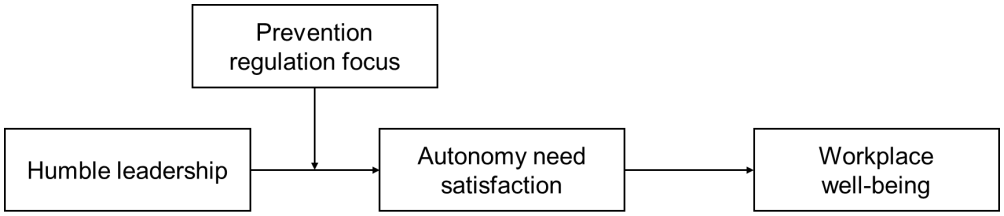

Figure 1 theoretical model of this research

3. Approaches

3.1. Sample and Procedures

The study takes employees as samples to conduct a questionnaire survey, and emphasizes the anonymity and academic nature of the survey on the front page of the questionnaire. This survey is mainly conducted by questionnaire star, a platform offering Amazon Mechanical Turk functions equivalent.

The questionnaire is divided into five parts, including personal information, humble leadership, autonomy need satisfaction, workplace well-being, and prevention regulation focus. In the description of the questionnaire, we have informed the respondents that the data will be only for scientific researches, and their personal data will be kept confidential. Finally, we got 292 responses. Then, after removing the invalid questionnaire, we obtained a total of 222 cases for testing and analysis of hypotheses for subsequent research. Among the 222 cases, 117 are male, accounting for 52.7%; employees were 31.0 years old on average; the average tenure of employees was 6.27 years; in terms of education, 1 people are with a high school education or less degree (0.5%), 25 are with a college degree (11.3%), 171 are with a bachelor degree (77.0%), and 25 are with a master or higher degree (11.3%).

3.2. Measures

Based on combing the literature, the measurement items are determined. The questionnaires all apply a 5-point scale, in which 1 stands for “strongly disagree” and 5 refers to “strongly agree”.

Humble leadership: using Owens et al.’ s (2013) scale, there are 9 items in total, and the example items are as follows “This leader recognizes that others possess more knowledge and skills than himself or herself.” In this study, Cronbach's coefficient on this scale was 0.78.

Prevention regulatory focus: we adopted the scale of Neubert et al.’ (2008), and one example item is “I focus on finishing my missions correctly, so as to improve my job security.” In this research, Cronbach's coefficient on this scale was 0.72.

Autonomy need satisfaction: The measurement of autonomy need satisfaction is on basis of Broeck et al.’ s (2010) scale. The example item is “ I feel like I can be myself at work.” In this study, Cronbach's coefficient on this scale was 0.79.

Workplace well-being: we adopted the scale of Zheng et al.’ (2015), and one example item is “I am satisfied with my achievements at my current work basically.” In this study, Cronbach's coefficient on this scale was 0.84.

Control variables: Referring to the literature of employee well-being, this study evaluates five control variables including age, gender, tenure, and education level.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/1/ICEIPI_203

4. Outcomes

4.1. Analyses of Confirmatory Factors

Through conducting confirmatory factor analyses (CFA), it is ensured that our methods showed satisfactory discriminant validity. According to the CFA outcomes, the hypothesized 4-factor measurement model meet the data well, which supports the discriminant validity for the measured variables. Table 1 shows the confirmatory factor analyses in detail.

Table1. Outcomes of Confirmatory Factor Analyses

Model	$\chi 2$	df	RMSEA	CFI	TLI
4-factor model	725.80	399	.06	.84	.83
one-factor model	1004.65	405	.08	.71	.68

Note. N = 222.

4.2. Descriptive Analyses

Table 2 presents means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients for all variables in this research. According to the expectation, humble leadership was greatly associated with autonomy need satisfaction (r= .52, p < .01) and well-being (r= .62, p < .01).

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

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1.Gender[a]	.47	.50							
2.Age	31.00	6.52	-.23**						
3.Education	3.00	.51	-.05	-.11					
4.Tenure	6.27	5.68	-.24**	.85**	-.07				
5.Humble leadership	3.66	.53	-.03	.10	.02	.11			
6.Prevention regulation focus	4.25	.37	-.13	.12	-.13	.13*	.50**		
7.Autonomy need satisfaction	3.58	.68	-.01	.11	-.03	.11	.52**	.27**	
8.Well-being	4.01	.62	-.04	.17*	.06	.16*	.62**	.49**	.62**

Note. N = 222. a Dummy variable (0 = male, 1 = female).
*p < 0.05; **p < 0.01 (two-tailed).

4.2.1. Hypotheses Tests

We tested our assumptions by applying the PROCESS tool, a statistical software package launched by Hayes (2013). Tables 3 presented the results of these analyses.

As shown in table3, humble leadership positively influences staffs' workplace well-being (β = .71, p < .01, see model 3). Hence, assumption 1 was supported.

For testing assumption 2 which predicted the mediating effect of autonomy need satisfaction on the associations between humble leadership and well-being, the PROCESS tool was used by a bias-

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/1/ICEIPI_203

corrected bootstrapping procedure (5000 resamples). As shown in table3, humble leadership is positively associated with employees' autonomy need satisfaction (β = .67, p < .01, see model 1). Besides, while humble leadership and autonomy need satisfaction simultaneously entering into model to predict employees' well-being, autonomy need satisfaction were greatly associated with well-being (β = .37, p < .01, see model 4). Based on the bootstrapping analyses (5000 resamples), a great mediated role of humble leadership in well-being through autonomy need satisfaction was showed. Zero (95% CI [.16, .35]) was not included in the bias-corrected 95% confidence interval (CI) of the mediated effect, showing the support of assumption 2.

Hypothesis 3 predicted prevention regulatory focus to amplify the positive association between humble leadership and autonomy need satisfaction. In the analyses (Table 3, model 2), the interaction between humble leadership and prevention regulatory focus was greatly associated with autonomy need satisfaction (β = .42, p < .05, see model 2). Thence, assumption 3 was supported.

Table3. Results of Hypothesis Tests

	Autonomy need satisfaction		Well-being	
Variable	Model1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Gender	.03	.03	.02	.01
Age	.00	.00	.01	.01
Education	-.04	-.03	.07	.08
Tenure	.00	.00	.00	.00
Humble leadership	.67**	.68**	.71**	.47**
Autonomy need satisfaction				.37**
Prevention regulation focus		.05		
Humble leadership ×Prevention regulation focus		42*		
F	16.29	12.62	27.96	37.90
R^2	.27**	.29**	.39**	.51**

Bootstrap outcomes for mediated role				
	Effect	Boot SE	LL 95% CI	UL 95% CI
Autonomy need satisfaction	.25	.05	.16	.35

Note. N = 222. Unstandardized regression parameters are showed. Bootstrap sample size = 5,000. LL = lower limit; CI = confidence interval; UL = upper limit.
*p < 0.05; **p < 0.01.

In addition, a first-stage moderated mediation role of humble leadership in employee's workplace well-being via autonomy need satisfaction and moderated by employees' prevention regulatory focus is predicted in the research. For testing assumption 4, the index of moderated mediation following Hayes (2015) is inspected in the research. According to Table 4, the index of moderated mediation was significant as a direct significant test. According to the outcomes, employees with high-level prevention regulatory focus are influenced by humble leadership easily and that this is positively related to employee's workplace well-being, supporting hypothesis 4 in turn.

Table 4. Index of moderated mediation

	Effect	Boot SE	LL 95% CI	UL 95% CI
Index of moderated mediation	.16	.06	.05	.30

Note. N = 222. Bootstrap sample size = 5,000. LL = lower limit; CI = confidence interval; UL = upper limit

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/1/ICEIPI_203

5. Discussion

Paying attention to the significant effect of employees' needs in realizing the effectiveness of leadership behavior requires not only satisfying employees' basic material needs, but also paying attention to employees' basic psychological needs and realizing internal incentives. According to the humble leadership literature, the leadership qualities of admitting one's own shortcomings, encouraging two-way equal interaction and willing to learn modestly from staff have changed the idea of "leader-centered" in previous studies to a certain extent, making employees more accessible to leaders and promoting the satisfaction of employees' psychological needs (Chen, Liu, Zhang, & Qian, 2018; Wang, Liu & Zhu, 2018). Therefore, the organization should re-evaluate the human resource management measures, and make the organizational system and leaders' actions the basic psychological needs of the employees. The relationship between the need to satisfy the different notes and the corresponding result variables. When the related need, ability needs and autonomy need cannot be met at the same time, leaders must rank the best first among the three types of needs, and pay more attention to the needs that have the greatest impact on the corresponding results. According to the research results of this paper, when organizations pay attention to employees' task performance, it is suggested to give priority to meeting employees' ability needs, while when organizations encourage employees to innovate, the needs of related, ability and autonomy are indispensable.

Future research can further verify the conclusion by means of long-term data. At the same time, future research can consider collecting samples in different cultural situations for comparative analysis. Secondly, the paper builds a theoretical framework based on self-determination theory, which proves the effect of humble leadership behavior, but does not consider the role of self-verification and social cognition, which leads to the influence of the validity of research conclusions.

6. Conclusion

We believe that humble leadership act as a positive role and make contributions on the satisfaction of employees' psychological needs. Self-determination theory holds that the satisfaction of employees' self-determination mainly comes from the psychological freedom and self-determination satisfaction they feel in the process of task completion. Specifically, humble leaders encourage subordinates to explore ways and methods to complete their work independently by appreciating their advantages and contributions and taking responsibility for failure, thus providing them with a certain degree of autonomy.

References

[1] *Ancona, D., Malone, T. W., Orlikowski, W. J et al. In Praise of the Incomplete Leader[J]. Harvard Business Review, 2007, 85(2): 108-118.*

[2] *Broeck, A., Vansteenkiste, M., Witte, H., Soenens, B., & Lens, W. Capturing Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness at Work: Construction and Initial Validation of the Work Related Basic Need Satisfaction scale. Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology, 2010, 83(4): 981-1002.*

[3] *Celma, D., Martinez-Garcia, E., & Raya, J. M. 2018. Socially responsible HR practices and their effects on employees' wellbeing: Empirical evidence from Catalonia, Spain. European Research on Management and Business Economics, 24(2): 82-89.*

[4] *Chen, Y., Liu, B., Zhang, L., & Qian, S. 2018. Can leader "humility" spark employee "proactivity"? The mediating role of psychological empowerment. Leadership & Organization Development Journal, 39(3): 326-339.*

[5] *Deci, E. L., Vallerand, R. J., Pelletier, L. G., & Ryan, R. M. . (1991). Motivation and education: the self-determination perspective. Educational Psychologist, 26(3-4), 325-346.*

[6] *Ernst, K. E., Kalliath, T., & Kalliath, P. 2012. Achieving employee wellbeing in a changing work environment: An expert commentary on current scholarship. International Journal of Manpower, 33(7): 738-753.*

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/1/ICEIPI_203

[7] Gorman, C. A., Meriac, J. P., Overstreet, B. L., Apodaca, S., McIntyre, A. L., Park, P., & Godbey, J. N. 2012. A meta-analysis of the regulatory focus nomological network: Work-related antecedents and consequences. Journal of Vocational Behavior, 80(1): 160-172.

[8] Guest, D. E. 2017. Human resource management and employee well-being: Towards a new analytic framework. Human resource management journal, 27(1): 22-38.

[9] Hayes, A. F. 2013. Introduction to mediation, moderation, and conditional process analysis: A regression-based approach. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

[10] Hayes, A. F. (2015). An index and test of linear moderated mediation. Multivariate behavioral research, 50(1), 1-22.

[11] Higgins, E. T. 1998. Promotion and Prevention: Regulatory Focus as A Motivational Principle. Advances in experimental social psychology, 30: 1-46.

[12] Higgins, E. T., & Pinelli, F. 2020. Regulatory focus and fit effects in organizations. Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior, 7: 25-48.

[13] Jeung, C., & Yoon, H. J. 2016. Leader humility and psychological empowerment: investigating contingencies. Journal of Managerial Psychology, 31(7): 1122-1136.

[14] Mäkikangas, A., Kinnunen, U., Feldt, T., & Schaufeli, W. 2016. The longitudinal development of employee well-being: A systematic review. Work & Stress, 30(1): 46-70.

[15] Neubert, M. J., Kacmar, K. M., Carlson, D. S., Chonko, L. B., & Roberts, J. A. (2008). Regulatory focus as a mediator of the influence of initiating structure and servant leadership on employee behavior. Journal of Applied Psychology, 93(6), 1220–1233.

[16] Owens, B. P., & Hekman, D. R. 2012. Modeling how to grow: An inductive examination of humble leader behaviors, contingencies, and outcomes. Academy of Management Journal, 55(4): 787-818.

[17] Owens B P, Johnson M D, Mitchell T R. Expressed Humility in Organizations: Implications for Performance, Teams, and Leadership. Organization Science, 2013, 24(5): 1517-1538.

[18] Preacher, K. J., Rucker, D. D., & Hayes, A. F. (2007). Addressing moderated mediation hypotheses: Theory, methods, and prescriptions. Multivariate behavioral research, 42(1), 185-227.

[19] Rivers, J., Thompson, N., & Jeske, D. 2018. Dedicated but exhausted? The role of ethical leadership for employee wellbeing in UK student unions. Journal of Human Resource Management, 21(2): 16-27.

[20] Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2017). Self-determination theory: Basic psychological needs in motivation, development, and wellness. Guilford Press.

[21] Walters, K. N., & Diab, D. L. 2016. Humble leadership: Implications for psychological safety and follower engagement. Journal of leadership studies, 10(2): 7-18.

[22] Wang, Y., Liu, J., & Zhu, Y. 2018. How does humble leadership promote follower creativity? The roles of psychological capital and growth need strength. Leadership & Organization Development Journal, 39(4): 507-521.

[23] Zheng, X., Zhu, W., Zhao, H., & Zhang, C. (2015). Employee well-being in organizations: Theoretical model, scale development, and cross-cultural validation. Journal of Organizational Behavior, 36(5), 621-644.

[24] Zhou, F., & Wu, Y. J. 2018. How humble leadership fosters employee innovation behavior: A two-way perspective on the leader-employee interaction. Leadership & Organization Development Journal, 39(3): 375-387.