



Trick or trait? The combined effects of employee impression management modesty and trait modesty on supervisor evaluations☆



Corinna Diekmann*, Gerhard Blickle, Katharina Hafner, Lioba Peters

University of Bonn, Germany

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ABSTRACT

Prior research on the benefits of modest self-presentation in organizational contexts has shown positive effects on several career-related outcomes, including employees' reputation, organizational support, and mentoring. However, little is known about the nature, mechanisms, and boundary conditions of this promising impression management tactic. Our study addresses this research gap by integrating two theoretical conceptions of modesty, i.e., impression management modesty (IM modesty) and trait modesty. We developed and tested an overarching theoretical model that postulates positive interactive effects of employees' IM modesty and trait modesty on supervisor ratings of employees' likeability, competence, and job performance. Data on 233 employee-supervisor dyads were analyzed using hierarchical regression and conditional process analyses. As expected, the effects of IM modesty were systematically moderated by employees' trait modesty: For employees with high trait modesty, IM modesty demonstrated significant positive effects on supervisor ratings of employee likeability and competence, which in turn were associated with higher job performance ratings. For employees with low trait modesty, however, using IM modesty was neither beneficial nor detrimental to supervisor evaluations. Implications for theory, practice, and avenues for future research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

If you were a manager at a major company, and you were to decide who of several rising talents was in line for a promotion or a pay raise, how would you make your choice? Would your decision be purely based on the candidates' performance, their professional skills, and their potential? Or, would you also consider their interpersonal style, their attitude toward other people, and their personality? Would it matter if you liked or disliked a candidate?

Prior research on organizational behavior has shown that diverse personal evaluations may influence our decisions about whom to promote, mentor, or generally support in the workplace (e.g., Ferris, Munyon, Basik, & Buckley, 2008; Ferris et al., 2009), and as a consequence, employees do well to actively shape their professional and interpersonal reputation. *Impression management* (IM) research has identified several self-presentation tactics that employees use in order to create favorable impressions and to advance their careers. Whereas the benefits and drawbacks of some of these tactics (e.g., ingratiation, self-promotion) have been widely studied

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* Corresponding author at: Arbeits-, Organisations- und Wirtschaftspsychologie, Institut fuer Psychologie, Universitaet Bonn, Kaiser-Karl-Ring 9, 53111 Bonn, Germany. Fax: +49 228 734670.

E-mail address: corinna.diekmann@uni-bonn.de (C. Diekmann).

(e.g., Barrick, Shaffer, & DeGrassi, 2009; Higgins, Judge, & Ferris, 2003), one tactic that might prove to be highly efficient has not yet received much research attention: modesty.

Impression management modesty (IM modesty) is understood as the intentional moderate underrepresentation of one's own obvious strengths, accomplishments, and expectations in order to appear likeable and maintain a reputation of competence at the same time (Cialdini & De Nicholas, 1989). As Cialdini and De Nicholas (1989) pointed out, "favorable self-presentation is a tricky business" (p. 626) because the self-presenter is evaluated on several dimensions at once: For example, certain IM behaviors may make a person appear not only nice, but also naïve; or not only competent, but also arrogant. Whereas some well-known IM tactics, such as ingratiation or self-promotion, focus on just one evaluative dimension (likeability or competence), the use of IM modesty can benefit employees in both respects (likeability and competence). Perceived likeability and competence mirror two universal dimensions in social cognition (i.e., warmth and competence; Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007), and forms of both have been shown to affect supervisor evaluations (e.g., Bates, 2002; Borman, White, & Dorsey, 1995; Lefkowitz, 2000; Schmidt, Hunter, & Outerbridge, 1986). Therefore, using an IM tactic that fosters attributions of both likeability and competence may be of great advantage. Indeed, previous research has demonstrated positive effects of a modest demeanor on actors' reputation as being likeable and competent (Tetlock, 1980), on organizational support (Wosinska, Dabul, Whetstone-Dion, & Cialdini, 1996) and mentoring (Blickle, Schneider, Perrewé, Blass, & Ferris, 2008), and even on objective career success in terms of hierarchical position and income (Blickle, Diekmann, Schneider, Kalthöfer, & Summers, 2012).

Although these findings on the benefits of a modest impression are very promising, past studies have not explicitly distinguished between IM modesty and *trait modesty*, a stable personality disposition that involves people's thoughts and feelings about themselves in comparison to other people (Chen, Bond, Chan, Tang, & Buchtel, 2009). Even though IM modesty and trait modesty may appear similar at first glance, both forms of modesty are conceptually and empirically distinct (Blickle et al., 2012; Chen et al., 2009). Whereas IM modesty involves the intentional, situational, and public self-presentation toward target persons in regard to one's own achievements or strengths, trait modesty describes an enduring personal characteristic that reflects private attitudes, and is consistent across time and different situations. In spite of their considerable conceptual differences, the two forms of modesty have not been clearly delineated in prior research and have never been examined simultaneously.

This raises the question whether the positive effects of a modest demeanor found in past studies are due to employees' IM modesty, trait modesty, or both. In other words, can employees reap the benefits of a modest reputation by just acting the part, is the virtue of genuine modesty actually more profitable than previously recognized, or does it take both to make a positive impression? In order to close this research gap and to extend our understanding of the potential and limitations of modesty in organizations, the present study aimed at two purposes. The first goal of our study was to clearly distinguish between employee IM modesty and trait modesty, and identify both their separate and their interactive effects on supervisor ratings of employees' perceived likeability, competence, and job performance. The second objective was to analyze how these supervisor ratings interrelate, and specifically, if the effects of modesty on likeability and competence ratings carry over into job performance evaluations. The complete model of hypothesized relations between employee IM modesty, trait modesty, and supervisor evaluations is illustrated in Fig. 1.

2. Theoretical background and hypothesis development

Impression management has been firmly established as a field of research for several decades, and scholars' interest in the forms and consequences of people's self-presentation continues. Although there are numerous and divergent conceptions of the construct, impression management essentially comprises actors' behaviors aimed at creating, protecting, maintaining, or modifying certain images held by a target audience (Bolino, Kacmar, Turnley, & Gilstrap, 2008). These behaviors have been categorized into specific tactics, strategies, and styles (e.g., Jones & Pittman, 1982; Tedeschi & Melburg, 1984; Wayne & Ferris, 1990), and have been examined with regard to diverse organizational outcomes such as job offers, performance evaluations, and career success (for a review, see Bolino et al., 2008). Despite this extensive research activity, the promising tactic of IM modesty is still largely underexplored.

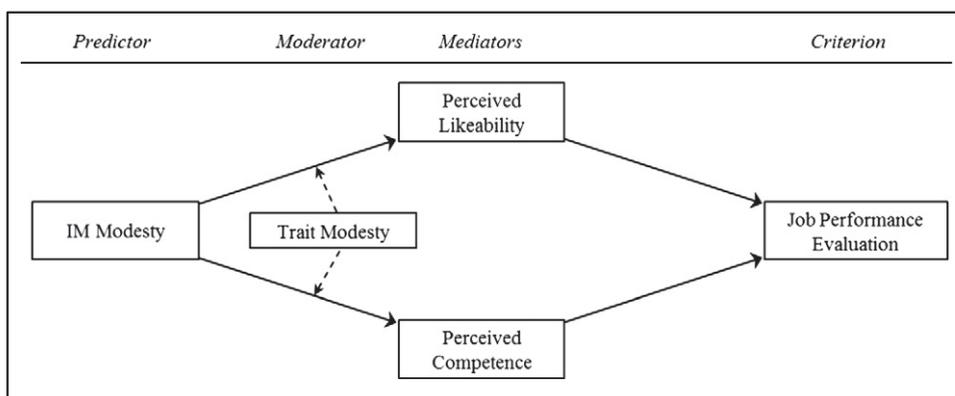


Fig. 1. Theoretical model linking employee impression management (IM) modesty, trait modesty, and supervisor evaluations.

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