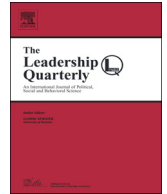




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How leader humility helps teams to be humbler, psychologically stronger, and more effective: A moderated mediation model☆

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ABSTRACT

We hypothesize that (a) the *level* of humility expressed by leaders predicts team performance through, serially, team humility and team PsyCap, and (b) the *strength* (i.e., consensus within the team) of the leader humility, team humility and team PsyCap moderates the paths of that hypothesized model. A sample comprising 82 teams (82 leaders; 332 team members) was collected. Team members reported leader humility, team humility and team PsyCap. Leaders reported team performance. To handle the risks of common method bias, each mediating path of the hypothesized model is based on data from two different subsamples within each team. Our model's most novel theoretical contribution is the (moderated mediated) connection between leader humility, collective humility, and team PsyCap, and this was consistently supported in our data. Our inconsistent findings dealing with the relationship between team PsyCap and performance is well established in the literature and our results in both sub-samples were in the theorized direction. The study contributes to understand *why, how and when* humble leaders are more effective.

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Introduction

Since the inception of the Positive Organizational Behavior (POB) concept (Luthans, 2002a, 2002b), several positive psychological capacities have been proposed, both theoretically and empirically, for inclusion in the POB framework (Luthans, Youssef-Morgan, & Avolio, 2015). To date, the psychological capacities deemed to best fit the POB inclusion criteria (i.e., capacities that “can be measured, developed and effectively managed for performance improvement in today’s workplace,” Luthans, 2002a, p. 59) are those included in Psychological Capital (PsyCap), a “core confidence” (Stajkovic, 2006) construct comprising four dimensions: self-efficacy, hope, resilience, and optimism. PsyCap predicts important attitudes and behaviors of employees, including performance (reviews and syntheses in Dawkins, Martin, Scott, & Sanderson, 2013; Newman, Ucbasaran, Zhu, & Hirst, 2014; Youssef & Luthans, 2012). PsyCap also

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neutralizes undesirable attitudes and behaviors (Heled, Somech, & Waters, 2016). For these reasons, it has been argued that PsyCap “goes beyond” (Luthans et al., 2015) other forms of capital (i.e., economic, human, and social) and thus constitutes a source of sustainable competitive advantage in today’s highly competitive environments (Luthans & Youssef, 2004).

PsyCap has been studied mainly at the individual level, although a few empirical studies have suggested that PsyCap may develop at the team level (Dawkins, Martin, Scott, & Sanderson, 2015) and have positive consequences for team outcomes, including cohesion, cooperation, coordination, and team/organizational in-role and extra-role performance (e.g., Clapp-Smith, Vogelgesang, & Avey, 2009; Heled et al., 2016; Mathe-Soulek, Scott-Halsell, Kim, & Krawczyk, 2014; McKenny, Short, & Payne, 2013; Peterson & Zhang, 2011; West, Patera, & Carsten, 2009). It is therefore important to investigate the antecedents of PsyCap at the team level because work teams are increasingly important to individual and team functioning, performance, and success (Gully, Incalcaterra, Joshi, & Beaubien, 2002; West et al., 2009). Unfortunately, the empirical evidence about the antecedents of PsyCap is relatively modest, as discussed by several authors (Avey, 2014; Avey, Reichard, Luthans, & Mhatre, 2011). Even more modest are studies focusing on the antecedents of team PsyCap, as argued by Newman et al. (2014) and Heled et al. (2016).

In this study we contribute to the filling of this gap by investigating how humble leaders develop team PsyCap through fostering team humility, and, as a consequence, contribute to team performance, as rated by team supervisors (henceforth we will refer to this as “team performance”). Based on grounded theory (Owens & Hekman, 2012), leader-expressed humility refers to the three behavioral dimensions of (1) admitting mistakes and limitations, (2) spotlighting team members’ strengths and deflecting praise to others, and (3) being teachable (Owens, Johnson, & Mitchell, 2013). By team humility, we mean an interpersonal team process involving the three underlying dimensions of humility mentioned above (Owens & Hekman, 2016). It has been argued that humility in leaders is relevant for team and organizational performance, but empirical studies supporting this view are scarce. We propose that leader-expressed humility influences team performance through the process of team humility, which in turn fosters team PsyCap. In line with Owens and Hekman (2016), one core premise of our hypothesized model is that leaders’ modeling of humility is an influential team input that will lead to positive team interpersonal processes (i.e., team humility) and emergent states (i.e., team PsyCap), leading to higher team performance.

While leadership has been considered one of the most important contextual factors influencing team performance (Williams, Parker, & Turner, 2010), more research is necessary to understand the mechanisms linking leader behaviors to team performance (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009; Burke et al., 2006; Owens & Hekman, 2016). We suggest that through the processes of social learning (Bandura, 1977), the positive benefits of team leaders modeling humble behaviors will shape team interpersonal processes that reflects the leader’s humble behaviors, which will in turn foster team PsyCap. Our study also answers the call for more research to understand the mediating and moderating mechanisms that link leader behaviors to follower outcomes (Avolio et al., 2009; Yukl, 1999). Specifically, in our hypothesized model, the three indirect paths linking leader humility with team performance are moderated by the consistency with which the team members perceive the respective leader and the team.

Research on organizational/team climate (Schneider, Ehrhart, & Macey, 2013) suggests that although team members share the perceptions about the climate (including the team leader and the team) in which they operate, some degree of variability may be found within teams. Based on conceptual and measurement explanations (discussion below), research also suggests that the relationship between the climate level and its outcomes is stronger when the climate strength (i.e., the consistency of perceptions within the team) is high versus low (González-Romá, Fortes-Ferreira, & Peiró, 2009; González-Romá, Peiró, & Tordera, 2002; Schneider, Salvaggio, & Subirats, 2002). Therefore, we consider that the relationships between the variables of our hypothesized model (Fig. 1) are stronger when the climate strength is higher versus lower, that is, when all team members within the team perceive the leader and the team in a more versus less consistent way.

With this in mind, we structure the paper as follows: We start by clarifying both the conceptualization of humility and the dimensional model of “expressed humility” adopted herein. We then discuss how humility and PsyCap may emerge as team phenomena and why expressed humility in leaders predicts team performance through, serially, team humility and team PsyCap. Finally, we discuss why the strength of (a) leader-expressed humility, (b) team humility, and (c) team PsyCap moderate the relationship between, respectively, (a) leader-expressed humility and team humility, (b) team humility and team PsyCap, and (c) team PsyCap and team performance. Then, after presenting the method and the results, we discuss the main findings, the limitations of the study, and possible avenues for future research. We conclude with some implications for action.

The study makes five important contributions. First, it further elucidates the interpersonal implications of both humility (Owens et al., 2013) and PsyCap (Dawkins et al., 2015) by examining these constructs at the team level. This furthers theoretical understanding

Hypothesized model

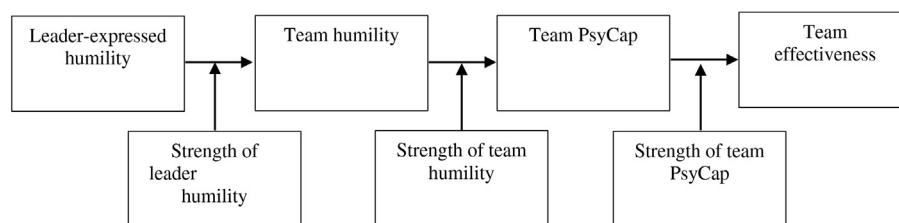


Fig. 1. Hypothesized model.

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