

# The Influence of Humility on Leadership: A Chinese and Western Review

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**Abstract.** In recent years, there has been a growing interest in humility in leadership amongst western management scholars. This research first provides a definition of humility to allow an exploration of the differences between the Western and Chinese views of humility. We propose that the leadership process can be affected by the hard and soft use of power. We consider the place of humility in models of leadership theory and possibilities for future research.

**Keywords:** Leadership, Humility, Power, Integrity

## 1. Introduction

Synonyms of humility include modesty, humble, self-effacing; this research uses ‘self effacing.’ Words those if taken too literally are unlikely to be accepted by aggressive entrepreneurs. Humility as a virtue became well received, but it has not been followed up in society’s attention because in a society that likes to win it is considered to be out of the times. However, in the field of western management leadership there is a growing tendency to examine the topic of humility. This research attempts to analyze this trend and examine the concept of humility.

It is clear that the developing trend in leadership theory and research at the intersection of society and ethics has begun a rethink and a return to an investigation of the nature of leadership. Following the collapse of the economic system and the restructuring of the relationship between organization and management there is a crisis of confidence due to corporate scandals, the formation of leadership crises, and leaders have been endlessly subjected to pressures and challenges to their ability, authority, integrity and trust. There is an urgent need to build a viable model of real leadership. However it is understood that the urgent need is not for a new leadership theory to catch up with the pace of social change in the world, but we need a new view of the nature of leadership, to assist leaders improve leadership and further the organizations’ mission.

Research in leadership and research on how effectively lead subordinates to reach the organization’s goal are central topics of interest to management and business scholars. Leadership theories from trait theory, behavioral theory, contingency theory to transactional leadership, transformational leadership, and charismatic leadership have been examined by scholars from various perspectives. Each development has the hope to lead to an effective guide for leadership, but amongst these theories, humility is not an obvious component. However, in recent years, servant leadership with its emphasis on service to others as a natural motivator and authentic leadership with its emphasis on self-awareness and restraint [1], and spiritual leadership’s concern with loyalty, faith and caring clearly show the inclusion of humility [2].

Notable research from a team led by Jim Collins made a contribution to the research that he termed level five leadership. A level 5 leader has the seemingly contradictory traits of personal humility and professional will [3]. The study used stringent criteria to identify eleven outstanding so called level 5 leaders, and found rather than focusing on their own interests in the future of the company they emphasized sacrifice, dedication and determination, and that this was sufficient to lead subordinates in the right direction. Even

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mediocre or at risk business were gradually transformed by an emphasis of sustainable management of the organization. Executives with superior accomplishments over the long term had similar characteristics of humility, acting with a low profile and not wanting to be the centre of media attention. Although humility has been overlooked as a virtue in modern management science, the fact of these outstanding leaders has refocused attention and interest on humility in leadership.

## **2. Meaning of Humility**

### **2.1. Humility in Chinese Culture**

Traditional Chinese culture places great importance on humility and arguably amongst the world civilizations the Chinese were the first to promote humility. In one of the most ancient Chinese texts Classic of History, the Book of History reports [4], put complacency and humility at the level of heaven. In the book of changes (I-Ching) [5], respects individuals who know how to exercise self-discipline and humility. In Confucius' "The Analects," humility was considered in various aspects: the desire not to boast, not to publicize one's merit; every person has the ability through diligent practice to learn humility, no matter his position or learning he can ask for advice without shame. Humility for Chinese Confucian [6] restrains introspection to reflect self-knowledge. In Taoism, the Master Lao Tze was praised for his humility and in Tao Te Ching, chapter 66 [7], "Why is the sea king of a hundred streams? The reason is that it lies below them. Therefore it is the king of a hundred streams." "If the sage would guide the people, he must serve with humility." Also in chapter 68 [8], "A good employer is humble. This is known as the Virtue of not striving. This is known as ability to deal with others."

Lao Tze points out that employing others needs an attitude of humility, that mere title is not sufficient, but to use others capabilities needs to meet the rules of heaven. Lao Tze frequently uses water as a metaphor and at the same time brings up water and the seven virtues. The water always takes the lowest level, so as not to attract responsibility and at the same time take on others strength, in principle conforming with nature and human nature.

In addition, Hsu [9] found that Lao Tze attached great importance to virtue and the cultivation of peace and harmony as a core concept, emphasizing 'inaction' following nature and being attentive to the employees with democratic leadership then leaders will value the self-improvement and promote moral values. In this way they can subtly influence the attitudes of subordinates and in a timely manner respond to change in the environment with the principle of caring for employees as is appropriate in transformational leadership. Organizations can nurture courtesy, understanding and forgiveness harmony and a harmonious culture and way of dealing with people so in combination allowing all to flourish.

### **2.2. Humility in Western thoughts**

Western culture strongly emphasizes humility as a norm for dealing with people, and an individual's stature and success is related to his qualities and humility. For example Rousseau said, 'Great men never make bad use of their superiority; they see it, and feel it, and are not less modest. The more they have, the more they know their own deficiencies.' Tagore said, 'We come nearest to the great when we are great in humility.' In the New Testament, the Gospel of Luke, Jesus says, 'But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, 'Friend, move up to a better place.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all your fellow guests.'

Some scholars have given humility a more concrete definition, for example Morris et al [10] proposed three dimensions to define humility, that of self-awareness, openness and transcendence. Rowatt et al [11] considers humility should contain five dimensions: sincerity, fairness, open-mindedness, respectfulness of others and an absence of arrogance, egotism or conceit. Several scholars have further developed the definition of humility. Solomon [12] argues that humility comes from egoism and altruism. Egoism is the realistic expectations of the self and a rewarding sense of gratitude without the fear of shortcomings. Altruism includes sharing, reducing threats and giving credit.

Vera & Rodriguez-Lopez [13] argue that genuine humility is irreplaceable and represents a life attitude, but humility is not an inherent characteristic, it can be learnt like other virtues, but it is a long process

needing self-control, and this process is difficult because it involves a change in commitment, which could lead to a fundamental change in the individual.

### **3. Research Thesis**

From the above review of Chinese and Western perspectives of humility, we suggest that humility has six dimensions, including open-mindedness, self-awareness, self-reflection, courtesy, transcendence, and attitude of gratitude. We will summarize these dimensions as follows:

1. Open-mindedness. Individuals with humility understand that some matters are beyond them and beyond their control, being capable of understanding oneself and knowing one's limits and to understand one is faulty and weak [14]. Therefore being open-minded is humility's most important characteristic. A person with humility will maintain his curiosity toward other's ideas and practices and be interested to understand others.

2. Self-awareness. Humility implies correctly understanding the individual's own limits and condition [14]. Humility is not self-deprecating, nor is it too much attention to your own interests, but a desire to take an objective view of yourself and an inclination to see yourself clearly, a willingness to see yourself accurately, so as not to be subject to false perspectives and deviate from effective decision making an individual with humility is capable of understanding his strengths and weaknesses so as to objectively appraise his abilities and limitations [15]. The Tao Te Ching [7] emphasizes the importance of self-awareness and the cumulative power of small steps to affect a significant breakthrough. Then a small selection in the process can be leveraged to break through and affect the final result.

3. Self-reflection. People with humility know that they are imperfect, and by not limiting themselves and through self-reflection and learning can continue to make progress [3]. Mencius [17] said, "Retrospect yourself three times a day," and Confucius [6], "there must be one that be your teacher in every three." Both stress the importance of self-reflection. Understanding your starting point and being honest to correct yourself through introspection is a way to develop virtue and character.

4. Showing courtesy. People with humility understand the need to respect others, and not appear arrogant or self-centred [18], [19]. In fact, humility is a way of getting along with people. Confucians in particular place importance on interpersonal relationships we can see the importance of courtesy to the ethics and morality of Chinese.

5. Sense of transcendence. In defining humility, scholars in the west often introduce a sense of transcendence [20]. Transcendence implies an ability to understand and accept one's insignificant role and place in the universe, to understand and be grateful for others, and realize our value to others, allows us to face other's points of view.

6. An attitude of gratitude. People with authentic humility are not only capable of honest self assessment, but also can set themselves aside sufficiently to be able to recognize the positive value of the contribution from others[21]. As the emperor of Gin promoted the reflected glory of himself as a person of character and humility to understand their abilities have limits and know that success does not depend only on themselves and can perceive the contribution of others and know how to appreciate others [22]. Collins [3] argues that leaders with the characteristic of humility credit their success and achievements to others, external factors and luck. People of humility overcome their own interests to consider all matters to be subject to fortune and are grateful for them. However, in business, the focus on competition has shaped the heroic stories and gratitude is something often overlooked [11].

### **4. Humility and Leadership**

Research into models of leadership, have progressed from trait theory which focused on leadership qualities and characteristics of leaders; attribution theory of leadership emphasizing leadership style and behavior on the impact of leadership performance. Contingency theory of leadership takes into account different factors and conditions to select the corresponding leadership behavior and so achieve the desired leadership performance. Transactional leadership uses the followers to achieve goals through the use of incentives. Transformational leaders communicate a strong vision and mission in order to change the

subordinate's values and beliefs and attract the subordinate's attention to pursue a higher level. Charismatic leadership theory guides leaders and the followers through charisma and is capable of attracting and influencing subordinates to change the subordinate's work values and increase their confidence to raise the performance level.

Therefore from trait theory, behavioral theory, contingency theory to transactional, transformational and charismatic leadership theory scholars continue to analyze and discuss with a goal to construct criteria and guidelines for effective leadership. However, many scholars argue that among these leadership models none are universal in application and all have limitations. Humility is not an evident component. However in more recent leadership theory, such as servant leadership in which service to others is a motivation and authentic leadership which stresses self awareness and self discipline, and spiritual leadership which emphasizes loyalty, faith and care [2], we are clearly aware of humility as a component.

Leadership humility as a characteristic displayed by leaders has several dimensions. By definition the main task of leadership is the creation of strategy and we can make a simpler definition of leadership humility as a leader's willingness to accept that situations may be different to their expectations.

Morris [9] explored the relationship between humility and leadership in depth, examining each dimension of humility and their effect, and developed eight propositions. P1: Higher levels of narcissism predict lower levels of humility, P2: Machiavellianism predicts lower levels of humility; P3: Low self-esteem predicts lower levels of humility; P4: Defensively high self-esteem predicts lower levels of humility; P5: Higher levels of emotional awareness and management predict higher levels of humility; P6: Leader humility predicts supportiveness toward others; P7: Leader humility predicts a socialized power motivation; P8: Leader humility predicts participative leadership These propositions focus on the behavior of the leader as a potential source of humility and also the potential effects of the leader's humility. However Morris et al's conclusion mentions that the appearance of humility is on occasion questionable, and argues that the timing and extent of leadership humility should be taken into consideration. The inappropriate display of a leader's humility may be taken as hypocrisy and will likely be undermine his effectiveness with his subordinates' willingness to comply.

Etzioni [23] introduced the concept of humble decision making where the basic spirit of the leader must not be complacent or strongly opinionated. Leadership needs to maintain openness and flexibility. He also stressed that successful leaders have an unexpected high degree of humility. Having a well-developed degree of humility in a leader can give birth to an organization with a courteous, self-reflecting, understanding and harmonious culture. Humility allows leaders to be aware of the limits of their knowledge avoid being overly opinionated, so as to act as an example and accumulate social capital. In addition, the standard of leader humility is able to benefit the organization and staff well-being. Scheid [24] believes that humility in leaders is important, and that should be given new understanding and recognition. In fact, humility is not only an intrinsic value, but also an external strength. This research is based on the differences in Chinese and western culture and values and suggests another interpretation and definition of humility to explore the process of humility in the leadership role.

Leaders are determined by followers. Where there are outstanding followers, there will naturally be outstanding leaders. Therefore, leaders should allow subordinates to be willing to follow leaders, and strong leadership will produce long-term performance. Effective leaders are able to sincerely persuade subordinates to follow them, which is the most challenging task. However, compliance is not the same as conformity, the former is likely to result in unwilling behavior, whereas compliance is to sincerely and willingly accept requests and put them into effect. If achieved through forced compliance or through a type of power control then this is not effective leadership [25]. Mencius [17] suggested that sincerity could move people. However, if subordinates are compliant, the leader cannot only make use of their own power, also needs to allow subordinates to follow the leader's ability and trust the leader's other non-power factors. Therefore, this article wants to further develop the process of humility in leadership, which is capable of being a strong factor in persuading subordinate's acceptance. Among these is humility in hard (power influence) and soft (non-power influence) to see if it is able to develop the hard and soft results.

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