



LEADERSHIP HUMILITY AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY: A PATHWAY TO HIGH-PERFORMING TEAMS

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Abstract

The present paper examines the relationship between leadership humility and psychological safety in team context. The humility of leadership, which involves self-awareness, openness to feedback, and admiration towards others, is a major value influencer of psychological safety, where the individuals feel free to put interpersonal risks without facing the fear of punishment. The present article describes the theoretical insights and empirical evidences of how modest leadership behaviors are the major source of trust, open communication, vulnerability, which are the essential components of team learning, innovation along with performance. Viable advice is provided to the leader who strives to promote the humility and psychological safety as component of high-impact leadership practice.

Keywords: Humble leadership, Team dynamics, Organizational trust, Feedback culture, Employee engagement, Reflective leadership.

Introduction

The environment today in the workplace is one in which change occurs at high speed, cross-cultural collaboration, and increased demand of inclusion and wellbeing. The key areas that organizations need to create in this changing environment are the cultures where the employees feel free to share ideas, accept any errors and question assumptions. The psychological safety, as coined by Edmondson (1999) has risen up to be a vital foreboding of team prosperity, as well as flexibility.

While various leadership styles support psychological safety, leadership humility has recently gained attention as an underutilized yet powerful approach. Humble leaders challenge traditional notions of power by promoting shared learning, mutual respect, and authenticity. This paper investigates how leadership humility strengthens psychological safety, thereby enhancing collaboration, creativity, and resilience within teams.



Understanding Leadership Humility

Core Characteristics

Leadership humility encompasses several interconnected traits:

- Self-Awareness: Recognizing personal limitations and strengths.
- Receptiveness to Feedback: Actively seeking input and adjusting behavior accordingly.
- Appreciation for Others: Valuing team contributions and diverse perspectives.
- Willingness to Learn: Demonstrating openness to growth and acknowledging areas for improvement.

According to Owens et al. (2013), leaders who display humility maintain a realistic view of themselves, remain teachable, and engage with team members in a collaborative, non-defensive manner.

Differentiating Humility from Other Traits

Humble leadership is often misunderstood as passivity or low self-confidence. In reality, it reflects confidence grounded in authenticity rather than ego. Unlike authoritarian or narcissistic leaders who may suppress input, humble leaders invite collaboration and reduce power distance, fostering trust and engagement.

Relevant Leadership Theories

Several leadership frameworks intersect with the concept of humility:

- Servant Leadership: Advocates for prioritizing the needs and development of others, strongly aligned with humility (Greenleaf, 1977).
- Authentic Leadership: Emphasizes transparency and self-awareness (Avolio & Gardner, 2005), both essential to humility.
- Transformational Leadership: Encourages individual consideration and inspirational motivation, but does not inherently require humility.

While these models support aspects of humility, this paper focuses specifically on humility as a distinct, impactful leadership trait.



Defining Psychological Safety

Concept and Significance

Psychological safety is the shared belief that one can speak up, make mistakes, and engage in interpersonal risk-taking without fear of humiliation or punishment (Edmondson, 1999). It is a foundational element of learning organizations and inclusive teams.

Key Dimensions

- **Risk-Tolerance in Relationships:** Comfort expressing vulnerability.
- **Leader Support:** Confidence that leaders will respond fairly and empathetically.
- **Inclusive Climate:** Assurance that all voices are valued regardless of status or background.

Google's Project Aristotle (2016) identified psychological safety as the most important factor contributing to high-performing teams—above even technical expertise or organizational structure.

How Leadership Humility Enhances Psychological Safety

Mechanisms of Influence

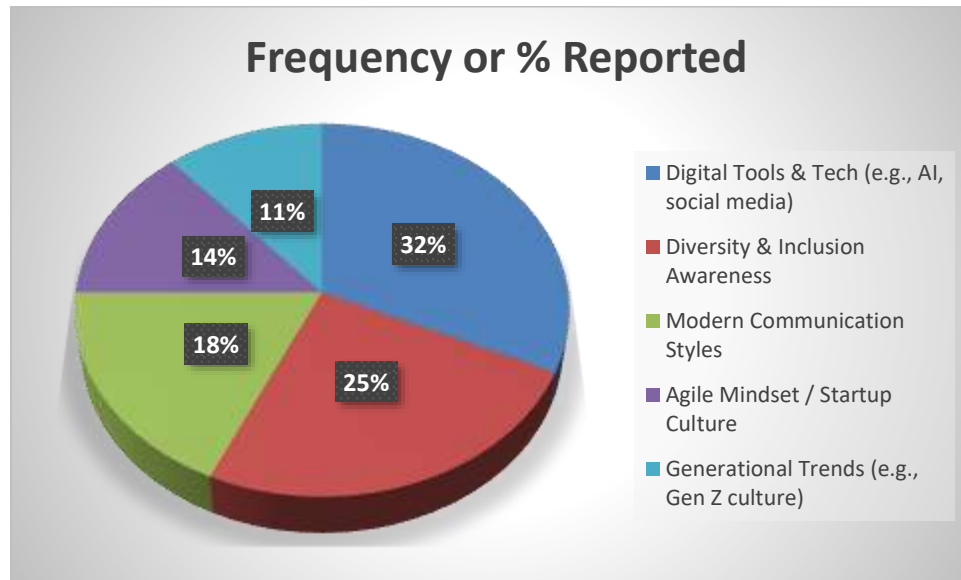
- 1. Normalizing Vulnerability:** Leaders who admit mistakes and uncertainties set a tone that makes it safe for others to do the same.
- 2. Promoting Voice Behavior:** Humble leaders actively invite participation and create space for diverse opinions.
- 3. Flattening Hierarchies:** A non-authoritarian approach reduces fear and encourages open communication.
- 4. Building Trust:** Acknowledging contributions and responding respectfully enhances psychological security and mutual respect.

Bar Graph: Skills Transferred Through Reverse Mentoring

Skills Learned by Mentees (Older Leaders)	Frequency or % Reported
Digital Tools & Tech (e.g., AI, social media)	70%
Diversity & Inclusion Awareness	55%
Modern Communication Styles	40%



Agile Mindset / Startup Culture	30%
Generational Trends (e.g., Gen Z culture)	25%



Purpose: Highlights the type of knowledge shared in reverse mentoring.

Empirical Insights

- Studies consistently link humble leadership to psychologically safe and high-performing teams:
- Rego et al. (2017): Demonstrated that humility in leadership enhances psychological safety, which in turn supports team learning.
- Owens et al. (2013): Found that team members under humble leaders are more likely to express ideas and engage proactively.
- Avolio et al. (2009): Connected leadership humility with increased trust, commitment, and employee morale.

Benefits for Teams and Organizations

Enhanced Learning and Innovation: Psychologically safe environments foster experimentation and knowledge sharing. Teams led by humble leaders report higher levels of error reporting and constructive feedback cycles (Edmondson, 2019).

Improved Collaboration and Conflict Management: Humble leaders facilitate open dialogue, enabling teams to resolve conflicts productively and build stronger interpersonal relationships.



Increased Employee Engagement and Wellbeing: Psychological safety reduces stress and fear, increasing job satisfaction, psychological wellbeing, and retention rates (Gallup, 2022).

Organizational Agility and Performance: The combination of humility and psychological safety enhances adaptability in volatile environments and drives superior performance metrics.

Impact on Organizational Outcomes

Outcome	Effect Description	Key Sources
Innovation	Increased experimentation and knowledge sharing	Edmondson (2019), Google (2016)
Employee Engagement	Higher motivation and emotional wellbeing	Gallup (2022)
Team Learning	Open error reporting and collaborative problem-solving	Rego et al. (2017)
Retention	Greater loyalty, especially among underrepresented groups	Owens et al. (2013), Ou et al. (2014)

Practical Applications

- Fostering Humility in Leadership
- Engage in Reflection: Tools like journaling, coaching, and 360-degree feedback can build self-awareness.
- Seek Input Proactively: Model openness by actively asking for and acting on feedback.
- Show Vulnerability: Be transparent about mistakes or uncertainties to build team trust.
- Celebrate Others: Publicly recognize team contributions and highlight shared successes.

Building Psychological Safety

- Set Clear Norms: Define expectations around respectful dialogue and idea-sharing.
- Facilitate Inclusion: Use structured methods (e.g., round-robin input) to ensure equal participation.
- Respond to Mistakes Constructively: Emphasize learning over blame.



- Provide Ongoing Training: Equip teams with communication, emotional intelligence, and conflict resolution skills.

Organizational Integration

- Embed in Leadership Development: Include humility as a core competency in training and evaluation.
- Revise HR Systems: Align recognition, promotion, and performance metrics with inclusive values.
- Encourage Learning Culture: Promote curiosity and continuous improvement across all departments.

Reverse Mentoring as a Tool for Humble Learning

A useful application of humble leadership is reverse mentoring—where senior leaders learn from younger or less experienced employees. Insights are:

Skill Area	% of Senior Leaders Reporting Learning
Digital tools & emerging tech	70%
Diversity and inclusion awareness	55%
Modern communication practices	40%
Agile mindset and startup culture	30%
Generational values (e.g., Gen Z)	25%

This discipline not only stresses humility but also leads to cooperation and acceptance of a change or alternation within a workplace.

Conclusion

One of the key factors in the establishment of psychologically safe workplaces where innovations, team work and resilience succeed is leadership humility. Servant-leaders welcome candor, embrace their own mistakes, and encourage participating inclusion--creating a culture of positive interaction and improved group development. As the challenges organizations must negotiate become even more complicated, one should implement humility into leadership training and organizational cultures as a tool of maintaining both human health and organizational profitability.



The subject matter of the future research is consideration of how humility affects the organizational success in the long run as well as investigation of context-dependency of the ways in which concepts of psychological safety and leadership effectiveness can be measured.

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