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The role of humble leadership for follower creativity and innovation

Abstract

Although leadership scholars and management development practitioners have recently devoted increasing attention to leader humility, almost no research to date has explored the role of humble leadership for followers' creativity and innovative behaviour. Therefore, the primary purpose of this developmental paper is to identify specific facets of humble leadership exhibited by leaders in innovative organisations, to examine their potential role in enhancing idea generation as compared to idea implementation, and to uncover situational contingencies associated with their enactment and effects. So far, 51 semi-structured qualitative interviews have been conducted with leaders from software development firms, e-commerce start-ups and other innovative companies in Germany engaged in new product or service development. Using a combination of grounded theory and template analysis, we intend to develop an inductively derived model explicating the relevance of specific humble leadership behaviours to follower creativity and innovation as well as the circumstances of their manifestation and effectiveness.

Keywords: Humble leadership, creativity, innovation, qualitative study

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The role of humble leadership for follower creativity and innovation

In recent years, leadership scholars as well as management development practitioners have devoted increasing attention to leader humility (Nielsen, Marrone, & Slay, 2010; Ou, Tsui, Kinicki, Waldman, Xiao, & Song, 2014; Owens & Hekman, 2012; Owens, Johnson, & Mitchell, 2013; Vera & Rodriguez-Lopez, 2004). This increasing interest in humble leadership has partially resulted from corporate scandals and unethical actions that were attributed to "the unbridled ego, hubris, sense of entitlement, and self-importance of the corporate executives involved" (Owens & Hekman, 2012, p. 787). In contrast to the narcissism and arrogance inherent in such leader characteristics, expressed humility has been described as a virtue and defined as "an interpersonal characteristic that emerges in social contexts that connotes (a) a manifested willingness to view oneself accurately, (b) a displayed appreciation of others' strengths and contributions, and (c) teachability" (Owens et al., 2013, p. 1518). As Owens and Hekman (2012) noted a few years ago, very little was known about the specific behaviors involved in humble leadership, the influences of these behaviors on important work outcomes, and the contingencies affecting their effectiveness.

Although considerable advances have recently been achieved with respect to these three issues (Oc, Daniels, Greguras, & Diefendorff, in press; Ou et al., 2014; Owens & Hekman, 2012; Owens et al., 2013), a major gap in this nascent stage of leader humility research is the lack of studies examining the role of humble leadership for innovation. Therefore, the primary purpose of this developmental paper is to explore the role of humble leadership for followers' creativity and innovative behaviour, i.e. the development of novel and useful ideas as well as the implementation of such ideas in the workplace (Amabile, Conti, Coon, Lazenby, & Herron, 1996; Anderson, Potočnik & Zhou, 2014; George, 2007; Rank, Pace & Frese, 2004). In their recent review, Anderson and coauthors (2014) emphasised the importance of distinguishing between creativity and innovation, because the former

encompasses primarily employees' intraindividual cognitive processes, whereas the latter comprises predominantly interindividual social processes, including the actual application of new ideas for products, processes or services in a group or organisation.

Literature review and research questions

Several scholars have stressed the pivotal role of supervisors' leadership styles for follower creativity and innovation (Anderson et al., 2014; Marion, 2012; Mumford, Scott, Gaddis, & Strange, 2002; Shalley & Gilson, 2004; Tierney, 2008) and discussed relationships between specific leadership variables and these outcomes. For example, in quantitative studies, creativity or innovation were associated positively with transformational leadership, authentic leadership and leader-member-exchange (Gumusluoglu & Ilsev, 2009; Jung, Chow, & Wu, 2003; Nederveen Pieterse, Van Knippenberg, Schippers, & Stam, 2010; Rank, Nelson, Allen, & Xu, 2009; Rego, Sousa, Marques, & Pina e Cunha, 2012; Yuan & Woodman, 2010) and negatively with transactional leadership and abusive supervision (Nederveen Pieterse et al., 2010; Rank et al., 2009; Zhang, Kwan, Zhang, & Wu, 2014). Furthermore, several prior qualitative interview studies have considerably added to a fine-grained understanding of the management of creativity and innovation (e.g., De Jong & Den Hartog, 2008; Gotsi, Andriopoulos, Lewis, & Ingram, 2010; Hemlin & Olsson, 2011; Unsworth & Clegg, 2010), including specific leadership issues such as the enactment and effects of certain facets of charismatic and shared leadership on creativity in teams (Murphy & Ensher, 2008).

Although no published research to date has explicitly linked humble leadership to creativity or innovation, a few recent quantitative studies (Ou et al., 2014; Owens et al., 2013) revealed significant associations between leader humility and outcomes such as employee empowerment or work engagement, both of which were related to innovative behaviour in prior research (e.g., Aryee, Walumbwa, Zhou, & Hartnell, 2012; Spreitzer, 1995; Zhang & Bartol, 2010). Furthermore, the groundbreaking qualitative study by Owens and Hekman

(2012) identified potential consequences of humble leadership that partially overlap with creativity and innovation, such as the facilitation of bottom-up organisational change. Moreover, theorists proposed that humility may result in specific leader behaviours conducive to subordinate creativity and innovative behaviour. For example, Nielsen and colleagues (2010) suggested that humility may enable leaders to engage in genuine intellectual stimulation, to request viewpoints from followers and to be responsive to their input. In an earlier conceptual contribution, Morris, Brotheridge and Urbanski (2005) proposed that leader humility may result in greater support of follower growth and higher levels of participative leadership. In conclusion, theoretical work as well as the few qualitative and quantative studies available so far suggest that humble leadership may facilitate creativity and innovation. However, little is known about the specific facets of humble leadership that may relate to these outcomes as well as beneficial or inhibiting situational factors for the occurrence and effectiveness of expressed leader humility in innovation-orientated contexts.

To help reduce the aforementioned research gaps, we are conducting and analyzing qualitative interviews with leaders from small innovative companies in Germany, particularly e-commerce start-ups and software development firms, to explore three specific research questions. First, which specific forms of humble leadership are reported by leaders in innovative companies where followers' creative and innovative behaviour is essential? Second, from the perspective of leaders in innovative companies, which specific facets of humble leader behaviour are relevant to subordinates' creativity (i.e., idea generation) as compared to innovative behaviour (i.e., idea implementation)? Third, which role do situational factors, including time pressure and other contextual issues, play in leaders' accounts for the occurrence of specific humble leadership behaviours and their potential impact on follower creativity and innovation?

With respect to the first research question, it should be noted that there is currently a lack of consensus in the literature regarding the specific facets or factors of humble

leadership. Whilst Owens and Hekman (2012) identified three forms of humble leadership (acknowledging personal limits and faults, spotlighting follower strengths and contributions, and modeling teachability) in their qualitative interview study, other researchers (e.g., Oc et al., in press; Ou et al., 2014) deviated from this proposal and included several other factors of humble behaviour in their studies. Furthermore, no research to date has identified the specific forms of humble leader behaviour that are particularly widespread or beneficial in contexts high in the need for creative and innovative work behaviour.

Regarding the second research question, several authors (e.g., Anderson et al., 2014; Baer, 2012; Mumford et al., 2002; Rank et al., 2004) called for research identifying differential antecedents of idea generation as compared to idea implementation. Moreover, empirical research separately assessing these two constructs has confirmed that creativity does not necessarily result in innovation and that both variables tend to be predicted by distinctive facilitators (Baer, 2012; Gumusluoglu, & Ilsev; 2009). Third and finally, although Owens and Hekman (2012) identified several potential situational contingencies influencing the occurrence or effectiveness of humble leadership (e.g., time pressure, leader competence, hierarchical structure of the organisation), this aspect of humility research is in its nascent stage in regard to contextual factors that may affect the relevance of humble leadership to follower creativity or innovation. Clearly, time pressure is worthy of particular consideration, as it has been identified as a critical factor in prior creativity and innovation research (e.g., Amabile et al., 1996; Amabile, Barsade, Mueller, & Staw, 2005; Baer & Oldham, 2006), although we also intend to capture other potentially relevant situational contingencies.

Method and preliminary results

Because of the lack of previous studies on the role of leader humility for creativity and innovation, the resulting inductive nature of the present research, and our intention to adopt a phenomenological perspective and to capture rich accounts reflective of the lived experience

of business leaders, we are conducting and analysing qualitative semi-structured interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008; Symon & Cassell, 2012). The sample of the present study is currently composed of 51 leaders (49 male and 2 female, age range from 26 to 65, number of subordinates ranging from 3 to 150) from innovative companies in Germany, including e-commerce start-ups, software development firms and several other organisations engaging in the development of new services or products ranging from new nutritional products to robotics machines. We adopted a purposive sampling strategy, defining specific inclusion criteria and pursuing multiple recruitment avenues (e.g., company listings and professional social networks). The theoretical sampling process began with leaders from one of Germany's leading e-commerce firms and its spin-offs and subsequently led to the inclusion of leaders from an increasingly broader range of organisations, including unrelated software development and other firms engaged in new product or service development.

The interview guide comprises approximately 10 open-ended questions, including introducing, specifying and probing questions about the leaders' use of specific humble leader behaviours, his or her followers' creativity and innovative behaviour and the circumstances surrounding both of these issues (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008). In particular, a critical-incident interview portion (Chell, 2004; Hemlin & Olsson, 2011) explored examples of specific humble leader behaviours exhibited by each leader as well as the situational circumstances and the creativity or innovative behaviour shown by the followers in these incidents. The data analysis includes a combination of iterative techniques derived from grounded theory analysis such as constant comparisons and open as well as axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) and from template analysis (e.g., developing an initial template of categories and subsequently modifying it; King, 2012). The latter approach involves the inclusion and alteration of several a priori codes derived from the literature, including the distinction between creativity and innovative behaviour (Anderson et al., 2014; Rank et al., 2004) and the three forms of humble leadership (acknowledging personal limits and faults, spotlighting follower strengths and

contributions, and modeling teachability) identified in the qualitative interview study by Owens and Hekman (2012). However, we remained open to the generation of new and the deletion of a priori codes, with the majority of our codes being newly developed based on the interview transcripts.

The 51 interviews conducted so far have been transcribed and subjected to an open-ended coding approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), resulting in 25 pages of codes covering the specific leader behaviours, examples of creativity and innovative behaviour as well as the contextual issues reported in the interviews. Data collection and analysis (including axial coding, theoretical coding, and the elaboration of a final template) will be completed within the next few months, depending on the exact number of interviews needed to reach theoretical saturation and to achieve the completion of an inductively built model grounded in the data. The open coding of more than 800 pages of interview transcripts has resulted in a total of eight different categories of humble leadership, including the three facets identified by Owens and Hekman (2012), with one of these dimensions (acknowledging own limits and weaknesses) being reported in almost all of the interviews.

Of particular interest are the detailed first-order codes illustrating specific approaches to humble leadership in innovative firms, such as leaders' honest acknowledgment of their limited technology-related domain-relevant skills (Amabile & Mueller, 2008) or their propensity to encourage followers with particular strengths to improve creative proposals that were originally developed by the leader. An example of an additional category of expressed humility featured in the majority of the interviews that appears to be relevant in our innovation-orientated contexts is the dimension 'relating to followers on an equal footing' (Nielsen et al., 2010), which is somewhat different from the dimensions established by Owens and Hekman (2012), because it does not necessarily imply that leaders admit own limits or emphasise follower strengths but that they engage in an egalitarian exchange of ideas and information with followers. Further preliminary findings include several relevant situational

factors beyond time pressure (e.g., follower competence and follower humility) and suggest that certain humble leader behaviours (e.g., acknowleding own limitations) are more relevant to follower creativity as compared to innovative behaviour, although results from the additional interviews and further axial and theoretical coding should be considered before drawing final conclusions. In case of acceptance, further findings based on an analysis of the complete data set, a draft of the inductively derived model and a discussion of the results shall be presented in September.

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