

A Research on the Impact of Humble Leadership on Employees' Voice Behavior

Yuan-Yuan LIU¹

¹School of Economics and Management, Nanjing University of Science and Technology,
Nanjing 210094, China

Keywords: Humble leadership, Voice behavior, Zhongyong thinking, Organizational psychological ownership.

Abstract. Humble leadership is a new researching direction in the field of leadership, the effectiveness of humble leadership behavior has been proved, but how it influences employees' concrete behavior still needs to be further discussed. This study explored the influence mechanism of humble leadership behavior on employees' voice behavior on a matched sample of 213 employees. In particular, the article tested the mediating role of organizational psychological ownership (OPO) and the moderating effect of Zhongyong thinking. The results of analyses show that: humble leadership has a significant positive effect on employees voice behavior; OPO partially mediates the relationship between humble leadership and employees' prohibitive voice behavior and promotive voice behavior; Zhongyong thinking negatively moderated the positive effect of humble leadership on employees' prohibitive voice behavior and promotive voice behavior.

Introduction

The complexity and uncertainty of enterprise's living environment is increasing. Enterprises need to make full use of existing resources to develop employees' working motivation and ability when facing with the changing environment. Researches show that leadership is a kind of unique resource that can bring great influence on employees' psychology and behavior. Suitable leadership can effectively maintain the competitive advantage of enterprises.

Nowadays, emphasis has shifted to leaders engaging in more "bottom-up" approaches to exert its influence. Leaders need to adjust or give up the leading pattern that "figures it all out at the top" [1] [2], and then understand staff and yourself with a more open mind. "Bottom-up" leadership styles, such as servant leadership and participative leadership, are very similar but independent [3]. The common point of "Bottom-up" leadership is to take root in enterprise, pay close attention to the impact on employees during equal coexistence. The positive effect of humility on leadership effectiveness is emphasized [4]. Lao Tzu said: "the sea is the king of all kinds of rivers just because it's in the lower reaches." Similarly, leaders will get the support and trust of subordinates when they show tolerance and humility just like the sea.

This paper examines the effect of humble leadership on voice behavior, and explores the mediating and moderating mechanism. It's the continuation of the existing research.

Theoretical Basis and Research Hypothesis

Humble Leadership

Humility is regarded as a strategic resource for its valuable, scarcity and difficulty to replace or imitate, which can bring competitive advantage for the enterprise [5]. There are also many humble leaders at home and abroad. Google's senior vice president Laszlo Bock believes that “the ultimate goal is how to work together to solve the problem. I have done what I should do, and I should step back.” He explained: “humility is not only to give others the opportunity to flash, but also to show humility to their own knowledge. No progress can be made without humility.” On the contrary, it is difficult for narcissism leadership to recognize their limitations and achieve further development.

Humility refers to individual inherent personality trait that can understand their own and others objectively and achieve self transcendence through continuous learning [6] [7] [8]. Humility is considered to be a component of the “bottom-up” leadership initially. With the deepening of research, scholars have found that the humble leadership has its independence [9]. Humble leader is defined as a leadership style that recognizes their own shortcomings and disadvantages, appreciates the subordinates’ advantages and contributions, and then keeps open to new information [10]. It has a three-dimensional structure. Humble leadership can effectively change the psychological cognition of employees, motivate their work motivation and improve the employees' organizational identity and creativity [11] [12] [13].

Humble leadership is a new direction in the field of leadership. Research is still in the initial stage that theoretical researches about humble leadership and its impact on employees are more than empirical researches. More empirical studies are needed to demonstrate its effectiveness.

Voice Behavior

Liang argues that voice behavior is a two-dimensional structure that can be divided into prohibitive voice behavior and promotive voice behavior. Prohibitive voice refers to the suggestions for the problems that may harm the interests of the organization. Promotive voice refers to the new ideas which can improve work efficiency positively. The antecedents of voice behavior include personality, leadership style and organizational atmosphere. Superior-subordinate relationship [14] and perceived supervisor support [15] have a significant positive effect on employees’ prohibitive and promotive voice behavior. Organization self-esteem positively moderates the relationship between superior- subordinate relationship and promotive voice.

Ma and Fan [16] [17] believes that authoritarian leadership has significant negative influence on employees’ prohibitive voice behavior and promotive voice behavior, and the extent of its influence on the former is larger.

Hypotheses Development

It is conducive to promote trust relationship with the staff and establish conditions for equal communication if humble leaders can appreciate employees’ advantages and speak highly of their contributions. Humble leaders have an open mind to new information that they are willing to break the level between superior and subordinate forwardly. Modest learning behavior is also a kind of signal to accept suggestions [18]. Humble leadership can improve the staff's organizational commitment and responsibility [8]. The behaviors that leaders recognize

themselves objectively and dare to admit defects are helpful to increase the employees' critical thinking and encourage them to actively express their own ideas and suggestions. This will help leaders understand the real situation of enterprises and the real ideas of employees in turn. Furthermore, it will improve the comprehensiveness and universality of information collection, eventually improve the correctness of decision. We assume the following hypothesis.

H1a: Humble leadership is positively related to employees' prohibitive voice behavior.

H1b: Humble leadership is positively related to employees' promotive voice behavior.

Organizational psychological ownership (OPO) refers to employees' feeling of possession to the organization. The thoughts that the organization is mine will impel them consciously to change their attitude and behavior. When organization meets employees' three demands—the sense of belonging, self-efficacy and identity—it can precipitate staff produce psychological ownership [19]. OPO can be influenced by situational factors; accordingly, the humble leadership style will also have an impact on it.

Humble leaders dare to admit their shortcomings, seek advice in an open manner and learn from subordinates modestly. All these will enhance the employee's sense of self-efficacy to make employees more sure of their ability. Trust organizational climate and good relationship between superior and subordinate are more likely to produce accompanied by leaders' humble behaviors. This will lead to a sense of belonging to the staff, resulting in "home" feeling ultimately. Leaders' behaviors of appreciate subordinates' advantages and reward them accordingly can increase the subordinates' self-identity, which will make employees feel their own value to the organization and further produce OPO. Research shows that OPO can positively predict employees' organizational citizenship behavior and extra-role behavior [20], such as initiative behavior, individual accountability behavior, and organizational commitment. OPO can effectively stimulate employees' sense of ownership which can make them put forward their views energetically for the future development of the organization. Leadership can alter employees' behavior tendency through changing their psychological cognition. Presumably, humble leadership can change subordinates' voice behavior (VB) by influencing employees' OPO. We thus hypothesize:

H2a: OPO mediates the relationship between humble leadership and prohibitive VB.

H2b: OPO mediates the relationship between humble leadership and promotive VB.

To study employees' behavior in the context of China, we cannot ignore the cultural characteristics of Chinese, while Zhongyong thinking is a special thinking way that rooted deeply in the minds of Chinese. The core spirit of Zhongyong thinking is "holding the both sides impartially to seek neutral", that is, resolving conflicts in a harmonious way and dealing with problems by compromise.

Employees' behavior is not only affected by leadership, but also closely geared to their own characteristics. The study shows that Zhongyong thinking is an important moderating variable which can explain the reasons of different behaviors in the same situation. Employee with high Zhongyong thinking will produce more overall-oriented voice, individual innovative behavior and less disregard silence behavior. Zhongyong thinking of senior leaders will also have an impact on the subordinates' performance^[21]. Employees with high Zhongyong thinking can make more both internal and external considerations in order to achieve a harmonious state of compromise. They will correct themselves according to the changing situation to achieve harmony with the situation. They will figure out the intention of leaders more cautiously rather than put forward suggestions rashly. Employees with low Zhongyong thinking rarely consider

the possible adverse effects that voice behaviors bring. They will feel more charisma and show more responsibility and then put forward more suggestions. Thus:

H3a: Zhongyong thinking moderates the relationship between humble leadership and prohibitive voice behavior.

H3b: Zhongyong thinking moderates the relationship between humble leadership and promotive voice behavior.

A research model depicting the proposed relationships of four styles of humble leadership, voice behavior, OPO and Zhongyong thinking is presented in Figure 1.

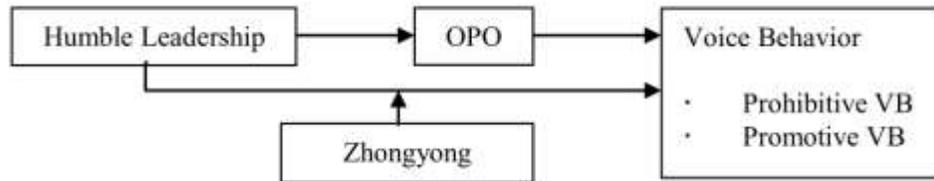


Figure 1. Theoretical model.

Methodology

Sample and Measurement

Data from the questionnaires were collected online (e-mail questionnaires) and on training scene. The subjects were informed that the results would be used only for academic research so that the choice may be as close as possible to the actual. A total of 242 questionnaires were issued and 213 questionnaires were selected, so the validity of the questionnaire was 88.02%.

We measured humble leadership (HL) using items from Owens et al. scales. We asked the subordinates to rate the leadership style of their immediate supervisors with 9 items (1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree). The Cronbach's α coefficient of humble leadership was 0.89.

Liang and Farch's scale was used to measure employees' voice behavior (VB) with 5 items on prohibitive voice behavior and 5 items on promotive voice behavior. The Cronbach's α coefficient of prohibitive VB and promotive VB was 0.84 and 0.83, respectively.

A 6-item 5-point scale of OPO rating developed by Pierce et al. was used. The subjects were asked to assess their perceived OPO using this scale. A sample item addresses "the company's achievements are made up of us". The α coefficient was 0.84.

Zhongyong thinking (ZY) was measured using 7 items developed by Wu Jiahui. Sample items are "I will listen to all opinions when voting opinions" and "I usually express conflicting opinions in a polite way". The α coefficient was 0.78.

We controlled for gender, age, education level and organizational information because these variables were found to directly influence on subordinates' voice behaviors.

Data Analysis

Data analysis consisted of structural equation modeling (SEM), factor analysis, reliability and correlation analysis and regression analysis.

SEM was conducted using Amos. Before examining the structural relationships, we conducted confirmatory factor analysis. The results show that factor loading of each variable is

greater than 0.500, and the corresponding t value is between 7.611~11.643, $P < 0.001$. This shows that the variables have sufficient convergent validity. χ^2 / df is 1.705 in the modified structural equation model. NFI=0.833, CFI=0.923, IFI=0.924, TLI=0.913, RMSEA=0.058. All of these indicate that the fitting degree between the established model and the data can be accepted.

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations and intercorrelations of all key variables. This provides a preliminary basis for the further hypothesis demonstration.

Table 1. Means, standard deviations and correlations.

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Gender										
2. Age	-.169*									
3. Education	-.084	-.114								
4. Nature of company	-.108	-.049	.000							
5. Industry	-.119	.186**	.050	-.050						
6. HL	-.066	.052	.121	.041	-.065					
7. OPO	-.097	.130	.134*	.066	.000	.771**				
8. ZY	-.072	.048	.030	.005	.007	.468**	.499**			
9. Prohibitive VB	-.042	.139*	.087	.098	-.039	.655**	.672**	.423**		
10. promotive VB	.000	.184**	.034	.092	-.065	.650**	.739**	.521**	.748**	
Mean	1.48	2.41	2.79	2.50	2.55	3.80	3.90	4.01	3.72	3.89
S.D.	0.50	0.82	0.66	0.98	0.88	0.62	0.64	0.49	0.68	0.62

Notes: n=213, **p<0.01, *p<0.05

The results of main effect and mediator effect were showed in Table 2. Humble leadership made a significant contribution to prohibitive voice behavior ($\beta=0.642$, $p < 0.001$) as well as promotive voice behavior ($\beta=0.642$, $p < 0.001$). Thus, H1a and H1b were verified.

Humble leadership significantly predicted OPO ($\beta=0.758$, $p < 0.001$), and OPO also has significantly positive effect on prohibitive voice behavior ($\beta=0.660$, $p < 0.001$) and promotive voice behavior ($\beta=0.735$, $p < 0.001$) at the same time. The influencing coefficient of humble leadership on prohibitive voice behavior ($\beta=0.342$, $p < 0.001$) and promotive voice behavior ($\beta=0.205$, $p < 0.01$) had declined after adding mediator OPO. OPO still showed a significant positive effect on prohibitive ($\beta=0.395$, $p < 0.001$) and promotive voice behavior ($\beta=0.576$, $p < 0.001$). The results showed that OPO partially mediates the relationship between humble leadership and prohibitive and promotive voice behavior. H2a and H2b were verified.

Table 2. Regression analysis of mediation.

Variables	Mediator: OPO		Dependent variable: prohibitive VB			Dependent variable: Promotive VB		
	M1-1	M1-2	M2-1	M2-2	M3-1	M3-2		
Gender	-0.07	-0.030	0.024	0.012	0.024	0.075	0.058	0.075
Age	0.145	0.088	0.070	0.117*	0.083	0.112*	0.170**	0.119*
Education	0.147	0.049	0.011	0.025	0.005	-0.042	-0.017	-0.045
Nature of company	0.079	0.043	0.053	0.075	0.058	0.038	0.066	0.041
Industry	-0.04	0.028	-0.046	-0.015	-0.026	-0.072	-0.043	-0.060
HL		0.758***		0.642***	0.342***		0.642***	0.205**
OPO			0.660***		0.395***	0.735***		0.576***
R ²	0.051	0.608	0.460	0.446	0.507	0.570	0.457	0.587
Δ R ²	0.051	0.557	0.414	0.400	0.061	0.512	0.399	0.130
F	2.22	53.30***	29.31***	27.67***	30.18***	45.49***	28.88***	41.58***
Δ F	2.22	293.01***	158.03***	148.64***	25.47***	145.28***	151.41***	64.40***

Notes: n=213, *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

The results about the moderating effect of Zhongyong thinking can be seen from Table 3. The interaction term of humble leadership and Zhongyong thinking also significantly influence prohibitive voice behavior ($\beta=0.129$, $p<0.05$) as well as promotive voice behavior ($\beta=0.115$, $p<0.05$). Results indicated that Zhongyong thinking played a negative moderating role in the relationship between humble leadership and employees' prohibitive and promotive voice behavior. It means that the higher Zhongyong thinking was, the weaker positive relationship between humble leadership and prohibitive and promotive voice behavior would be. Thus, H3a and H3b were supported.

Figure 2 and Figure 3 showed the trend of this interaction. Compared with employees with high Zhongyong thinking, slope of regression line of voice behavior on humble leadership was higher among employees with low Zhongyong thinking. The same changing degree of humble leadership would lead to changes of voice behavior to a greater extent in employees with low Zhongyong thinking. That is to say, voice behavior was more sensitive to the change of humble leadership when employees' Zhongyong thinking was lower.

Table 3. Analysis result of moderation.

Variables	Prohibitive VB			Promotive VB		
	M4-1	M4-2	M4-3	M5-1	M5-2	M5-3
Gender	-0.025	0.018	0.007	0.021	0.068	0.058
Age	0.166*	0.116*	0.112*	0.218**	0.168**	0.163**
Education	0.108	0.029	0.019	0.066	-0.009	-0.018
Nature of company	0.105	0.076	0.054	0.096	0.068	0.049
Industry	-0.073	-0.020	-0.020	-0.101	-0.053	-0.053
HL		0.571***	0.615***		0.510***	0.549***
Moderator: ZY		0.151*	0.104		0.280***	0.239***
HL×ZY			-0.129*			-0.115*
R ²	0.047	0.464	0.478	0.058	0.518	0.529
ΔR ²	0.047	0.417	0.014	0.058	0.460	0.011
F	2.024	25.337***	23.328***	2.536*	31.460***	28.640***
ΔF	2.024	79.770***	5.430*	2.536*	97.841***	4.807*

Notes: n=213, *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

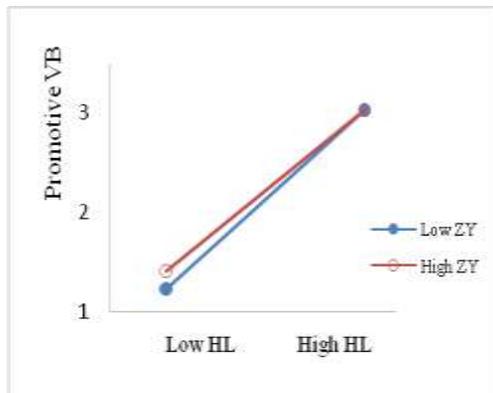


Figure 2. Moderating Effect of ZY between HL and prohibitive VB (Left).

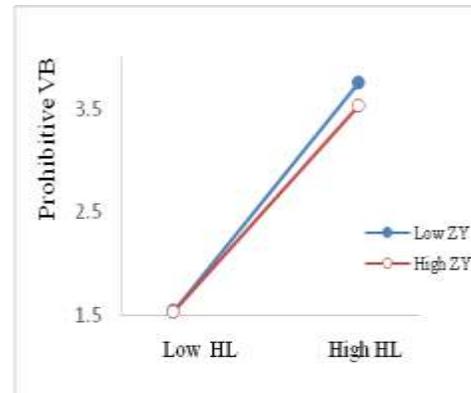


Figure 3. Moderating Effect of ZY between HL and promotive VB (Right).

Conclusions

Theoretical Implications

Overall, by investigating the influencing mechanisms of humble leadership in the Chinese context, the research not only adds a cultural perspective to humble leadership literature but also advances our knowledge of the underlying psychological processes that humble leadership works. This study also highlights the positive influence of humble leadership on employees' voice behaviors. Research on transformational leadership or paternalistic leadership is far more than the empirical research on humble leadership. This paper provides evidence on the positive impact of humble leadership, expand the research content of bottom-up leadership and make some theoretical contributions on opening the black box of mechanism of humble leadership on some outcome variables.

We take Zhongyong thinking as moderator and OPO as mediator in this paper. Zhongyong is a unique way of thinking and value orientation of Chinese employees which is compatible with Chinese unique culture. Both Zhongyong thinking and OPO are related to employees' intrinsic psychology. It can explain the mechanism of humble leadership on employees' voice behaviors more systematically if we incorporate both into the same research framework.

Practical Implications

Humble leadership has a significant positive impact on employees' prohibitive voice behavior and promotive voice behavior. Hence, the results may shed light on how practicing entrepreneurs and managers can foster appropriate leadership behaviors in order to foster subordinates' voice behaviors. Leaders should be low-key and reduce the up-bottom leadership appropriately. They should keep lower status to listen to different opinions initiatively rather than stay arrogant or intolerant. Even if the leadership does not have the quality of humility, they can also try to show humble behavior so that employees can feel the leadership of humility. As Google's vice president Laszlo Bock said: "you can learn even if you are not humble". Leaders should also pay more attention to the fostering of employees' organizational psychological ownership so that they can fully feel that they are an integral part of the organization. All those will stimulate subordinates' intrinsic motivation to exhibit more

organizational citizenship behaviors (such as organizational loyalty) and extra-role behavior (such as voice behavior).

Employees with high Zhongyong thinking aspire after harmony and compromise and they will consider all the possible consequences of voice behavior. Leaders should show humility to targeted employees with different characteristics which can make them feel the leaders' willingness and demand to accept suggestions. Then, the misgivings about the unfortunate outcomes of voice behaviors will be reduced. What's more, it can promote the harmonious relationship between superior and subordinate, increase trust and loyalty in the organizations and ultimately lead to active voice behavior.

Limitations and Future Research

However, there are few limitations in our study.

(1) Leadership style exerts an influence on employees' psychology and behavior. This paper doesn't control other leadership that may have an impact on employees' voice behavior, such as participatory leadership and paternalistic leadership, when discussing the influence of humble leadership. Future research can focus on the comparison of effect of different leadership on subordinates' voice behaviors, as well as how different kinds of leadership cooperate to carry out a greater impact.

(2) This study explores the moderating effect of Zhongyong thinking in the relationship between humble leadership and voice behavior. Nevertheless, the influencing process of humble leadership on voice behaviors will also be influenced by other situational factors, such as interactive justice, voice climate and so on. Future research can take these factors into the research framework in order to predict employees' voice behavior more accurately.

(3) Because our data were collected only in enterprises from East China, it is difficult to confirm whether our findings can be generalized to more companies or other areas. Future research can center on the influential mechanism of humble leadership on voice behaviors of the enterprise in specific development period (such as the start-up) or in other areas.

(4) The leading behavior of this study refers to the direct supervisor of the employees. While 2~5 different levels of leadership will have a direct or indirect impact on employees' behaviors in the real organization. Research on the function approach and influencing degree of leaders of different levels on subordinates can be made in the future.

References

- [1] Senge P M. The fifth discipline. London: Century Business, 1990.
- [2] Tang Hanying, Long Lirong, Zhou Ruyi. Journal of Management Science, 28 (2015)77-89. In Chinese
- [3] Weick K E. Leadership as the legitimation of doubt[A]. Bennis W, Spreitzer G M and Cummings T G (Eds.). The future of leadership: Today's top leadership thinkers speak to tomorrow's leaders[C]. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001.
- [4] Feng Jingming, Liu Shanshi, Wu Kunjin, Wang Hongchun. Foreign Economics & Management, 36(2014) 38-47. In Chinese
- [5] Zhang Yanqing, Zhang Xiujuan. Journal of Business Economics, 1(2015)27-34. In Chinese

- [6] Nielsen R, Marrone J and Slay H. *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies*, 17(2010)33-34.
- [7] Morris J A, Brotheridge C M, Urbanski J C. *Human Relations*, 58(2005)1323-1350.
- [8] Qn Qing, He Zhichan, Mei Zhequn. *Chinese Soft Science*, 7 (2013) 101~109. In Chinese
- [9] Owens B P, Hekman D R. *Academy of Management Journal*, 55(2012) 787-818.
- [10] Owens B P, Johnson M D, Mitchell T R. *Organization Science*, 24(2013)1517-1538.
- [11] Ou A Y, Tsui A S, Kinicki A J, Waldman D A, Xiao Z. Song L J. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 59(2014) 34-72.
- [12] Luo Jinlian, Hua Changhua, Zhong Jing. *Soft Science*, 29(2015)78-82. In Chinese
- [13] Lei Xinghui, Shan Zhiwen, Su Taoyong, Yang Yuanfei. *Journal of Management Science*, 28 (2015) 115-125. In Chinese
- [14] Zhao Jie, Pan Qingquan. *Journal of Guanxi University of Science and Technology*, 26(2015)103-110. In Chinese
- [15] Zhu Yiwen, Wang Anmin. *Human Resource Development of China*, 15 (2013)25-30. In Chinese
- [16] Ma Guimei, Fan Yun, Men Yi. *Forecasting*, 6 (2014) 1-7. In Chinese
- [17] Ma Guimei, Fan Yun, Yan Jing, Zhang Keqin. *Journal of Industrial Engineering and Engineering Management*, 29(2015)51-61. In Chinese
- [18] Cropanzano, R, Prehar, C.A., Chen, P.Y. *Group & Organization Management*, 27(2002) 324-351.
- [19] Van Dyne, L., Pierce, J.L. *Journal of Organizational Behaviour*, 25 (2004)439-459.
- [20] Yang Woon Chung and Hyoung Koo Moon. *International Journal of Business and Management*, 6(2011) 65-77.
- [21] Chert Jianxun, Ling Yuanyuan, Liu Songbo. *Nankai Business Review*, 13(2010) 132-141. In Chinese