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Leader humility improves employee mental health

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*Academics have often focused their studies on how to improve leader performance. Lately, research has been showing that humble leadership can enhance employee performance and reduce corporate misconduct. **Thomas Kelemen, Michael Matthews, Brad Owens and Samuel Matthews** find evidence that leader humility has another benefit for organisations: it improves workers' mental health.*

Enron's 2001 scandal of dubious accounting practices and corporate self-interest seemed to be a bellwether of things to come in the following decade. Indeed, in the aftermath of the financial crises, additional tales of corporate greed, financial irresponsibility and

executive hubris fuelled public resentment and sparked the 2011 Wall Street protests.

Against this backdrop of CEO maleficence, leadership scholars in the early 2010s across the globe sought to provide a recommendation for how leaders could do better and be better. What emerged in studies from the **US** to **China** was an informative answer: humble leadership.

Although leader humility had been discussed previously, it wasn't until the early **2010s** that it began to pick up steam and emerge as a major focus in leadership studies. As evidence, in the last decade alone, nearly 200 research studies have explored the value of humble leaders.

Across these many studies, research has found how it can enhance employee and organisation performance as well as reduce corporate misconduct. However, although leader humility emerged, in part, as a response to corporate greed and misconduct, a question remains: can leader humility combat the newest challenge faced by the current workforce – mental health?

This is one of the major trials facing the **workforce**, with mental health issues soaring to become the number one workplace injury, per a 2023 **Forbes** article. Indeed, nearly 81 per cent of all workers deal with burnout or mental health issues, and nearly two-thirds of workers reported that their workday has been interrupted by **mental health challenges**. Likewise, these problems only appear to be accumulating, with the **rising generation** suffering at alarming rates.

As researchers who study humble leadership, we here list three reasons why we believe leader humility can help us address the 21st-century mental health epidemic.

Humble leaders normalise mistakes

Mental health is often undermined by pressure to avoid making mistakes and by **perfectionism**. Indeed, the decorated US gymnast Simone Biles, who famously stepped away from gymnastics to attend to her mental health, noted that the pressure to be perfect and perform were key factors that contributed to her **mental health** challenges. Organisations can be competitive. Employees feel **pressure** to perform and all too often don't want to appear incompetent.

Fortunately, leader humility is all about normalising mistakes and limitations. In particular, the foundational **definition** of leader humility includes admitting one's own limitations. Imagine how refreshing it is for one's own mental health to hear a leader admit their mistakes or acknowledge their limitations. Indeed, research shows that when leaders express humility and admit that they don't know everything, it provides space for followers to be more **authentic** and bring their entire selves to work, including both their strengths and weaknesses.

Acknowledging others' strengths

Negative cognitive patterns that diminish one's worth are key predictors of mental health challenges. For example, discounting the positive events that happen in our lives, such as thinking a promotion was due to luck or giving yourself negative labels such as "I'll never be good enough" are harmful cognitive traps that can lead to anxiety and depression.

Again, humble leadership can combat these drivers of mental health problems. Another core dimension of leader humility is acknowledging others' strengths. When leaders take the time to proactively recognise the virtues of their followers, negative thought patterns are replaced with positivity. Supporting this idea, research shows that employees become more confident in their **abilities**, experience **positive relational energy**, and are more **hopeful and optimistic** when led by a humble leader.

Leaders' own mental health

Up to this point, we have highlighted how leader humility can effectively combat the mental health challenges of employees. However, leaders are employees themselves, and research suggests that they too face mental health challenges such as **anxiety** and **loneliness**.

The good news is that being humble is likewise a benefit to one's own **mental health**, and in this way represents a win-win. For example, research suggests that humility buffers the negative effects of **stressful** life events on individual well-being and has been found to reduce specific types of **anxiety**. Thus, leader humility not only benefits followers and humanises the workplace, but it can also help leaders who face many of the same mental health challenges.

Returning to our question posed earlier: yes, leader humility can effectively combat mental health. Although scholarly interest in leader humility emerged to address corporate greed, evidence implies it is also equipped to fortify the mental health of followers and leaders alike.

Thus, choosing to embrace a humbler approach to leadership may not only prevent corporate greed but also promote the mental health of both followers and leaders. As such, we call on leaders to try a bit harder to be a bit humbler.

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