# Modeling How to Grow: An Inductive Examination of Humble Leader Behaviors, Outcomes, and Contingencies*

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## ABSTRACT

Although a growing number of leadership writers argue leader humility is important to organizational effectiveness, little is known about the construct, why some leaders behave more humbly than others, what these behaviors lead to, or what factors moderate the effectiveness of these behaviors. Drawing from 55 in-depth interviews with leaders from a wide variety of contexts, we develop a model of the behaviors, outcomes, and contingencies of humble leadership. We uncover that leader humility involves leaders modeling to followers how to grow and produces positive organizational outcomes by leading followers to believe that their own developmental journeys and feelings of uncertainty are legitimate in the workplace. We discuss how the emergent humility in leadership model informs a broad range of leadership issues including organizational development and change, the evolution of leader-follower relationships, new pathways for engaging followers, and integrating top-down and bottom-up organizing.[1]


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*Sense shines with a double luster when it is set in humility. An able yet humble man is a jewel worth a kingdom.* -William Penn

Within the last ten years, leadership thinkers have increasingly focused on the importance of humility in the context of leadership. The servant leadership (Greenleaf & Spears, 2002), level five leadership (Collins, 2001; 2005), and participative leadership (Kim, 2002) perspectives specifically pinpoint the virtue of humility as being critical for leader effectiveness (cf. Weick, 2001). Calls for leader humility have intensified in the wake of corporate scandals attributed to the unbridled ego, hubris, sense of entitlement, and self-importance of the corporate executives involved (Boje, Roslie, Durant, & Luhman, 2004; Knottnerus, Ulsperger, Cummins, & Osteen, 2006), and because leader arrogance and narcissism have been identified as reasons why leaders make bad decisions (Chatterjee & Hambrick, 2007; Dotlich & Cairo, 2003). As organizational environments become more dynamic, uncertain and unpredictable, it becomes increasingly difficult for any one leader to 'figure it all out at the top,' (Senge, 1990: 7); thus greater emphasis has been made for leaders to engage in more "bottom-up", humble approaches to leadership (Kerfoot, 1998; Weick, 2001; Morris, Brotheridge, & Urbanski, 2005; Vera & Rodriguez-Lopez, 2004). Indeed, the word humility itself comes from the Latin *humus* meaning 'earth' and *humi* meaning 'on the ground' (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2010), and thus the term 'humble leadership' literally means 'leading from the ground' or 'bottom-up leadership.'

Notwithstanding this call for greater humility in leadership, we currently have only a vague understanding of how humble leadership might operate within organizations. Leader humility is still viewed as a rare personality trait that somewhat mysteriously produces favorable organizational outcomes. We simply do not know what humble leadership looks like in terms of an overall leadership posture and way of being, what behaviors it involves, what personal and situational factors determine the effectiveness of these behaviors, nor how these behaviors might influence important work processes and outcomes. Lack of clarity about humility in leadership

inhibits further theoretical and empirical inquiry as well as any potential practitioner application. Because leader humility is new to the organizational landscape we take an inductive approach and ask organization members for humble leader behaviors that they have observed or personally enacted (Edmondson & McManus, 2007). Our approach is to discover the "lived meaning" of leader humility by learning from organizational leaders themselves about how leader humility operates within organizations.

We seek to piece together the facts obtained from our participants' eyewitness and personal accounts into a conceptual framework of how leader humility is manifested within organizations. We are not attempting to reconstruct every instance of leader humility our participants reported, nor are we proposing a definitive theory of leader humility. Rather, we have carefully sampled leaders from many different contexts in hopes of providing a foundational understanding of the meaning organizational members attach to the idea of humble leadership. We also seek to determine what they see as important outcomes of this approach to leadership, and the situational contingencies that determine the effectiveness of humble leader behaviors. Thus, we do not see this as the last word on the topic, but rather actively seek to inspire, call for, and shape future inquiry regarding humble leadership (cf. Payne & Williams, 2005). We begin by providing a brief, general review of the literature on humility as a virtue and then review what has been said with regard to humility specific to the role of leadership.

## THE VIRTUE OF HUMILITY

Humility has been identified as one of the core organizational virtues which are proposed to provide the foundation for moral action in the workplace and foster positively deviant behavior (i.e., exceptional performance, altruistic/prosocial behavior; Cameron and Caza, 2003). Virtues literally connote "moral strength, valor, excellence, and worth" (from the Latin *virtutem,* Online Etymology Dictionary); and within the context of organizations, virtues like humility have been generally viewed as that which is good, human, and produces social betterment

(Bright, Cameron, and Caza, 2006, p. 251). Because humility often entails the recognition and appreciation of knowledge and guidance beyond the self, it is a foundational principle in all major world religions— including Buddhism[2], Judaism/Christianity[3], Hinduism[4], Islam[5], etc. Philosophers have also identified humility as a "meta-virtue" that is foundational to other virtues such as forgiveness, courage, wisdom, and compassion (Grenberg, 2005, p. 133; see also McCullough, 2000). Humility may be foundational to other positive characteristics because as a "temperance virtue" that guards against excess (Park and Peterson, 2003) humility may help temper other virtues, keeping them within Aristotle's "golden mean" (Crisp, 2000), Buddha's "middle way" (Marinoff, 2007), or Confucius' "zhong yong" (translated as *doctrine of the mean*; Confucius, 2006); helping to buffer other characteristics from going to extremes. Though some view humility as merely low self-esteem or having an inferior sense of worth or importance, which has led at least one prominent philosopher to question humility's worthiness to be called a virtue (Hume, 1994, p. 219), this conception fails to capture the historically held view of humility as a "classical source of strength" that captures a person's proper self-perspective. (For more extensive reviews of the humility literature, see Exline, et al., 2004; Grenberg, 2005; Owens, Rowatt, & Wilkins, 2011; Tangney 2000).

**Humility in Leadership**

Increasingly, scholars and practitioners have argued the need for today's (and especially tomorrow's) leaders to approach their roles with more humility (Kerfoot, 1998; Morris et al. 2005; Vera et al. 2004). For examples, due to increasing general workplace complexity and requirements for adaptability (Weick, 2001), recent leadership theories have begun to place greater emphasis on the bottom-up aspects of leadership. Some even argue for a need to change

[2] From a Buddhist perspective, humility is a result of enlightenment and Nirvana (Snelling, 1991; Wilson, 2010).
[3] Exemplars of humility in Judeo-Christian religious texts include Moses from the Old Testament (Numbers 12:3), Jesus Christ from the New Testament (Mark 10:45; Philippians 2:7) and King Benjamin from the Book of Mormon (Mosiah 2:17, 26).
[4] "Hospitality and humility are of the most important values of Hinduism" (Das, 2005, p. 40).
[5] "The first requirement of worship in Islam is to be utterly humble…" (Engineer, 2003, p. 72)

"the very idea of leadership—what it is and how it works and even how people even know it when they see it" (Drath, 2001: 124). Researchers have suggested that leaders should move beyond the hero myth or 'great man' perspectives of leadership (Murrell, 1997), show their humanness by being open about their limitations in knowledge and experience (Weick, 2001), and place more focus on how followers influence the process of leadership (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Leadership writers have increasingly honed in on the virtue of humility as being at the core of many of these bottom-up approaches to leadership (Collins, 2005; Matteson & Irving, 2006; Weick, 2001).

More recently, many fields have called for professionals and leaders to approach their roles with more humility. For lawyers and judges, humility is argued to be an important component for effectively interpreting the law and balancing the ideals of justice and mercy (McConnell, 1996; Nava, 2010; Scharffs, 1998). In medicine, competence and humility are suggested as the two essential dimensions of medical professionalism (Butler et al., 2011; Gaughan, 2001; Lauer, 2002). Humility has also been spotlighted as important for political (Obama, 2008) and military leaders ("Humility is in style in today's military" Ruggero, 2009; see also Hughes, 2010; Meyer, 1997). In the management literature, most of the discussion of humility has also been in the context of leadership. Although a growing number of leadership writers argue that leader humility is important to organizational growth and survival, it is not totally clear what exactly leader humility is, what it produces, and what factors influence its effectiveness (e.g. Collins, 2001; Greenleaf & Spears, 2002; Kim, 2002). This lack of clarity about leader humility is due in part to the fact that the existing literature on this topic is speculative; evidence (qualitative or quantitative) supporting writers' ideas regarding leader humility is lacking. Below we briefly review existing perspectives in the management literature about the dimensions of leader humility, its outcomes, and its potential moderators, which

shaped our working hypotheses or substantive theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Suddaby, 2006) about humility in leadership prior to beginning our data gathering effort.

Existing perspectives on humble leadership mainly view humility as an innate virtue, or stable personality trait, rather than a set of behaviors that leaders can enact. For instance, some writers suggest that leader humility involves self-awareness, openness to new ideas, and the tendency to look past, or 'transcend,' oneself (Morris et. al, 2005). Similarly, others argue that humility entails a willingness to understand the self (strengths and weaknesses) and an orientation toward "others" more than the self (Nielsen Marrone & Slay, 2010). From the servant leadership perspective, leader humility involves the "ability to learn from and gratefully receive the gifts of the less powerful" (Greenleaf & Spears, 2002: 320) and the level five leadership perspective suggests that leader humility involves a lack of charisma, a sense of calmness and quietness, and a baseline assumption that success comes in part from good luck (Collins, 2005). In stark contrast to narcissism, which is often described as entailing volatile swings from grandiose to worthless self-views (Rhodewalt & Morf, 1998; Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006), humility has been labeled as a temperance virtue that has a stabilizing or grounding influence on self-perceptions (Park & Peterson, 2001). Thus, though likely to be negatively related, a humble leader is not merely the opposite of a narcissistic one. In addition, since being able to make accurate self-appraisals is often hindered by the strong negative emotions of envy and jealousy, scholars have suggested that effective emotional management and awareness are associated with humility (Morris et al., 2005).

Although there is still a great deal of disagreement about the precise leader behaviors that might be associated with humility, there is some consensus that humility generally involves how leaders tend to view themselves (more objectively), others (more appreciatively), and new information or ideas (more openly) (Exline & Geyer, 2004; Owens, 2008; Tangney, 2000; Templeton, 1997). We will use this general, virtue-based definition as an initial understanding of

humility going into our study and examine how leaders' and followers' personal theories of how humble leadership overlap with or differ from this virtue-based definition.

***Contingencies of Leader Humility.*** Leadership styles or approaches can be effective or ineffective depending upon the situation (i.e., see Hersey, 1985). We anticipated that there may be circumstances or contexts when behaving humbly as a leader may be less effective. Because of its absence in the literature, one major aim of this study is to uncover some of the boundary conditions for the effectiveness of humble leader behaviors and to learn when and under which contexts participants report humility as being associated with weak or ineffective leadership.

***Outcomes of Leader Humility.*** Leader humility may foster a less self-interested leadership approach, which is argued to increase followers' liking toward and trust of the leader (Nielson et al., 2010). Likewise, others suggest that leader humility may engender supportive leader-follower relationships, an unselfish use of power (Morris et al., 2005), and better decision-making (Kim, 2002). The literatures on servant leadership (Greenleaf & Spears, 2002) and self-sacrificial leadership (De Cremer, Mayer, van Dijke, Bardes & Schouten, 2009) suggest that when leaders engage in such bottom-up behaviors, such as service and self-sacrifice, it results in followers who are better equipped and more committed and organizations that are financially better off (cf. Graham, 1991; Greenleaf, 1977; Spears, 1998). Since few specific outcomes of leader humility have been suggested or empirically examined, we considered exploring the perceived outcomes of leader humility to be an important priority for this study.

This review of the literature provided us with important priorities for examining humility in leadership. Specifically, we still only have a vague idea about what leader humility looks like within organizations, we do not really understand how leader humility influences followers and work processes, and what the boundary conditions are for the effectiveness of humble leader behaviors. Thus, these priorities shaped our inquiry and interview protocol. By asking participants to report specific humble leader behaviors and their perceived outcomes, we seek to

gain a richer understanding of the leader humility construct within organizational settings. We will also seek to reconcile the conditions in which humble leader behaviors are thought to be more or less effective. To that end, we interviewed leaders from a wide range of organizations and leadership levels to examine whether the reported effectiveness of humble leader behaviors depends on the organizational context and other situational factors.

## METHOD

### Context

Because leadership is such a complex phenomenon steeped in context and symbolic interpretation (Conger, 1998) and because new organizational topics benefit from a qualitative foundation (Edmondson & McManus, 2007), we chose a qualitative research design. Along with other interpretivist researchers, we view leadership as a socially constructed phenomenon that is actively created through social interchange (Walsh, Henderson, & Deighton, 1988), which over time yields a collective frame of reference (Daft & Weick, 1984) that becomes a dominant logic or reality for collectives (Gephart, 1984). As leaders engage in their own leadership roles, they become careful observers of how other leaders behave and experiment with the leadership behaviors and approaches they observe (Armstrong, Allinson, & Hayes, 2002). Because most leaders are simultaneously followers (i.e., they are both senders and receivers of leadership behaviors), leaders are ideal candidates to gain insight about humble behaviors, enacted or observed, and the effects of these behaviors in the workplace.

What we view as sorely lacking from the literature on humble leadership are rich, 'real life' accounts of what leader humility looks like and the boundary conditions for leader humility. We were interested in exploring not only what leader behaviors are viewed as humble, but also the meanings (i.e., mental models or personal theories) of these behaviors and their observed outcomes across different leadership contexts. Thus, in line with Eisenhardt (1989) we employed a case study approach with follow-up interviews from multiple contexts because it offers the

prospect of producing results that are less likely to be deemed to be idiosyncratic to one case and allows for richer theoretical inferences. Though the approach of drawing from multiple contexts is the most common qualitative approach in leadership research (Bryman, 2004), this approach is not employed for purposes of generalizability, but because it allows researchers to observe more interesting differences across contexts and boundary conditions.

**Data Collection**

**Theoretical sampling.** When selecting our initial sample to begin to explore humble leadership, we took cues from our review of the leader humility literature, which suggests that a more humble approach to leadership might be fostered by a leader going through significant adverse challenges, feeling powerless or not in control, and making mistakes (Collins, 2001; Exline & Geyer, 2004). When we began our study in the summer of 2007, the housing bubble was bursting as home sales and prices experienced historic declines (Trejos, 2007). The regional mortgage bank we sampled was facing significantly lowered financial success, and the entire industry was facing a social stigma for being seen as contributing to an economic recession due to irresponsible lending practices (Poirier, 2007). The industry was described as being 'humbled' by current circumstances (DeSilver, 2008; Goodman & Morgenson, 2008). Leaders confirmed that they had feelings of uncertainty and lack of control amidst "unprecedented changes" (Interview #2) and their business was "being tested as much as you can be tested…with competitors going down every day" (Interview #2).

Thus, because of the adverse changes, uncertainty, and feeling a lack of control, we felt gathering data in a large northwestern United States mortgage banking firm was a theoretically meaningful context to begin exploring humble leadership. Within this firm, we interviewed 17 leaders from four different hierarchical levels (from regional president to branch manager); visited the corporate headquarters and 14 outlying offices; recorded and transcribed roughly 200 single-spaced pages of field notes about observed leader-follower interactions in meetings,

contextual artifacts, and musings before and after each interview; and held multiple face-to-face interviews with an outside leadership consultant which had been training the firm leaders for over a year prior to the interviews. We were exposed to leader training meetings, discussion of 360 degree feedback, day to day interactions with employees, and how leaders collaborated with their peers to work to overcome common challenges. Since we had access to the 360 evaluation scores which contained questions such as "demonstrates personal humility," we paid particular attention to the perspectives of those who were rated highly by others on this item. We also reviewed archival leader assessment and financial performance data over a two year period. Though the leader interview data gave us the richest view of the phenomenon, the other forms of field data shaped our interpretations of the first round of interviews and our emerging theory about humble leadership.

Our on-going analysis of the first round of interviews and field notes yielded the insight that power significantly influenced humble leader behavior. Level of power centralization is a core dimension of organizational culture (Burns and Stalker, 1961; Cameron & Quinn, 2005) and power is a basic underlying dimension of human relationships (Fiske, 1993). Because humility represents a bottom-up type of leadership, we wanted to examine whether it operated differently in power-centralized versus power-decentralized organizations. Thus, our subsequent sampling decisions were shaped by our desire to know how humble leader behaviors differed in organizations where power was generally more centralized versus those where it was typically more evenly distributed. Therefore, in our second round of interviews we interviewed leaders from organizations where power is traditionally more centralized (seven military leaders and three manufacturing/industrial leaders), where power is traditionally more spread out (five high-tech firm leaders and eight hospital leaders), and where power distribution is typically somewhere in between (seven leaders in financial and retail service companies). Religious organizations were also an intriguing context to us as they typically have a more hierarchical

structure[6] (Brinkerhoff, White, Ortega & Weitz, 2007), while also promoting virtues, such as humility. Thus, we interviewed eight leaders from religious contexts in hopes of documenting important insights about the boundary conditions of leader humility.

The first author approached leaders from each organizational type and used a snowball sampling technique to secure further interviews within each organization, until theoretical saturation was reached. Across all interviews, we sought to sample leaders from different levels (16 CEOs, presidents, high-level executives; 20 mid-level leaders; and 19 front-line leaders) to observe any differences in humble behaviors and their impact based on factors such as leader visibility and the degree to which the leader's influence was symbolic (usually higher levels of leadership, see Conger, 2000) or mainly interpersonal. Because most organizational leaders are male, only nine of our participants were female (16%). By the seventh interview with a female leader we began to feel we were reaching saturation with regard to differences in perceptions across leader gender. We sought out two more interviews with female leaders to make sure. On average, our participants were 44.20 years old, had worked 4.40 years for their current organization, and had 17.05 years of experience in their industry. A summary of demographic information for the groups of participants is given in Table 1.

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Insert Table 1 about here
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**Procedure.** Based on our literature review, we created an interview protocol aimed at eliciting anecdotes or critical incidents of humble leader behavior and its consequences and contingencies. The bottom of Figure 1 includes a sample list of questions from this protocol. Interviewees shared examples from their own leadership and their observations of those they considered to be humble leaders. For contrast, many interviewees also shared examples of what humble leadership is not, times when they or another leader displayed what they viewed as the

[6] The word "hierarchy" comes from the Greek *hierarkhia*, which means rule by a high priest.

opposite of humble leadership. All of these responses were useful in formulating our conceptual model. The self-reported examples provided more insight into the intrapersonal processes of humble leadership (i.e., beliefs underlying humble behaviors) and the personal outcomes resulting from a leader behaving humbly (i.e., psychological freedom), and the observed examples were more insightful for understanding how these behaviors were interpreted (i.e., follower perceptions) and the interpersonal results of humble leader behaviors. Though generally we observed a lot of convergence of self-reported and other-reported perspectives of humble leadership, there were some key differences that we discuss below.

Because past research suggests some associate humility with humiliation and self-contempt (Exline & Geyer, 2004; Grenberg, 2005), in the course of the interviews we felt it was important to provide a common frame of reference for participants by giving each leader the general, strengths-based definition of humility noted in the introduction. However, to ensure we were not unduly priming respondents descriptions of leader humility we experimented with not mentioning the definition until the middle or end of the interview, and in some interviews withholding the definition altogether. We also couched the definition with "this is how academics define humility, but what does humility mean to you in the context of leadership?" We did not observe any significant difference in the frequency of mentioning each of the humility behaviors we uncovered across these interviews. We also found triangulated evidence for the humility behaviors we uncovered from our first samples' 360 evaluation data, which we report below. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and was recorded and transcribed verbatim. As an accuracy check, we sent 30 interview transcripts to participants. Though several leaders said they appreciated the opportunity to revise their statements, we received no corrections. We took this as a signal that the transcriptions were ready to be analyzed.

**Data Analysis**

We conducted a theme analysis (Lee, 1999; Miles & Huberman, 1994) and an agreement analysis by independent coders (Cohen, 1960). Following Boyzatis (1998), our search for themes was initially sorted into rough umbrella constructs that appeared to adequately capture the humble leader behaviors, outcomes, mechanisms, and contingencies emerging in the data. Over a series of weekly meetings, we iteratively generated 39 sub-themes or codes until we had a set of themes within which each response could be categorized. Two other research assistants were then given these codes and asked to categorize all interview statements.[7] The coders independently coded 84 percent of incidents identically and then resolved discrepancies via discussion. Cohen's kappa from this round of coding was .81, which, according to Landis and Koch's (1977) ball-park descriptors, indicates "full agreement."[8]

Since our intent was to learn about both the similarities and differences of humble leadership across different organizational contexts, we then organized all interview statements within each coded category by organization type. We anticipated nuanced differences across types as the implementation of leader humility would interact with different situational demands, social expectations, and follower implicit theories of leadership. Over a series of meetings, we discussed and made note of differences in the subjective meanings attached to leader humility (Schutz, 1972) and the different contextual contingencies mentioned.

**Overview of Conceptual Model**

The purpose of Figure 1 is to give a summarized picture of how we organized, reduced, and interpreted our data. Explaining this figure from the bottom-up, the first row lists sample questions that guided each interview, the next row lists the codes used to categorize responses to these questions, the next row represents our model constructs, and the last (top) row represents the umbrella constructs that reflect the major organizing components of our model. Our first set

[7] Reviewers requested that we not report frequencies for every code. We do report, however, that all of our codes were cited in at least 16% and up to 85% of all interviews.
[8] We used the Atlas.ti software program to aid us in organizing and coding our qualitative data.

of constructs is organized under the umbrella construct of "Humble Behaviors." Participants reported why or how (i.e., "Follower Perceptions") these behaviors led to the outcomes they cited (i.e., "Reported Outcomes"), as well as what factors influenced the effectiveness of these behaviors (i.e., "Contingencies"). These linkages, themes, constructs and umbrella constructs provide the structure for the presentation of our findings and the foundation for the conceptual model that emerges from our results.

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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## HUMBLE BEHAVIORS AND CONTINGENCIES

In this section we report the elaborative insights we documented about the enactment of humble leadership beyond that which currently exists in the humble leadership literature. Though the interview descriptions of humble leadership were full of nuanced differences, these humble leader behaviors meaningfully fit into three general categories: 1) acknowledging personal limits, fault, and mistakes, 2) spotlighting followers' strengths and contributions, and 3) modeling teachability.

Our participants also reported many contextual and personal factors that influenced the appropriateness and effectiveness of humble leader behaviors. In answer to our questions about when behaving humbly would be less effective, responses varied from mention of leader traits to counterbalance humility (i.e. behaving humbly will be effective only if followers perceive the leader to be generally competent or sincere), to more contextual features such as the presence of extreme threat and time pressure, an organizational culture of learning, or level of adherence to hierarchy. Sample quotes from each contingency construct are also presented in Table 2. For sake of flow, in this section we discuss the humble behaviors and the most often cited boundary conditions and contingencies that were mentioned in reference to each of these behaviors. At the

end of this section, we summarize by discussing what we view as the "core essence" or "way of being" captured by humble leadership, as revealed from the interview data.

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Insert Table 2 about here
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**Acknowledging Personal Limits, Fault, and Mistakes**

When describing humble leaders, participants reported examples of leaders acknowledging personal limits, fault, and mistakes. From the accounts, humble leaders did not seem to be oblivious or blind to their strengths (i.e., "Humility is knowing what you are good at and not good at" Interview #3; "She was completely open to both strengths and weaknesses" Interview #50), but it was publically owning up to mistakes and acknowledging limits that formed much of the "quiet charisma" and strength of humble leaders. Contrary to the romanticized or "great man" perspectives of leadership where leaders are often viewed as superhuman heroes, our interviewees suggested that the humble leader's unique strength involved having the courage to show their 'human-ness' to followers, including admitting personal foibles, knowledge gaps, lapses in judgment, bad decisions, and generally acknowledging when they did not lead well. "He never professed to be an expert at something he wasn't" (Interview #41); "He is aware of his limitations. He understands what others are strong at and what he is weak at." (Interview #44). "He poked fun at himself. He never tried to appear more perfect than he was." (Interview #34).

In some cases, admitting weaknesses was accompanied by leaders requesting followers to help them remedy a weakness or compensate for it.

> In one training, I announced to my direct reports, 'I am not a good listener. I just charge ahead. And so, that's something that I need you to help me with because I'm just not good at it. When we're in these meetings and we're being collaborative, help me to remember to just be quiet and shut up for a bit and let people hammer out ideas.' (Interview #15)

> My leader does a good job of letting us know her weak spots. She lets us know how we can help to compensate for the things she doesn't do very well" (Interview #42).

Humble leaders were also described as accepting blame for failures. For example one participant reported, "We were not doing well and we all knew it….The leader was very forthcoming and upfront about assuming fault for that in front of everyone" (Interview #22). From both the interviews and our observational data of those others described as humble leaders we found evidence of humble leaders not only taking responsibility for their own mistakes, but also for those of the team, owning that it was their role to adequately prepare, guide, and provide enough resources for the team to succeed.

The above examples focus on humility 'looking back', like admitting limitations from past experience or assuming blame for past failures, but some leaders also reported that behaving humbly involved a leader acknowledging when they were losing control of their emotions in real-time interactions. Interviews suggested that humility also involved recognizing when a leader needed to disconnect from an interaction and let a "cooler head" take care of a tense situation (Interview #10). For example:

> Humility gives us the ability, not only to recover quickly when we are getting too emotional but to allow other people to know, 'Hey, I just have to let you know I need to step aside for a moment or you need to have a little patience with me right now, because I'm not myself.' Even with my husband, to say 'I just need a moment. I need to process this. I need to get myself back to a good place.' (Interview #11)

Following up on this idea, we asked leaders in subsequent interviews for insights about the emotional expression and emotional regulation of humble leaders. In all subsequent interviews, humble leaders were described as regulating their emotions well, handling anger or stress well, or only showing positive emotions. Thus, the "lived meaning" of humble leadership seems to extend to the domain of emotional management, enabling humble leaders to acknowledge when harmful or counterproductive emotions are getting the best of them in real-time interactions.

Self-reported accounts suggested that these behaviors were motivated by a belief that being human and showing humanness toward followers yields better interactions and more solid relationships than being (or trying to appear) 'perfect.' For instance, "I think it's essential [for humility] that your direct reports not see you as having an 'I'm perfect, I sit on a golden throne, I'm upper management' mentality" (Interview #8). "It's important that [followers] know that I don't think I'm perfect. If I make a mistake, and I don't acknowledge it, there's no buy-in on their part. So I'm going to try to lead by example, but I'm also going to make it known that I'm going to make mistakes" (Interview #1). Humble leaders, it seemed, are less susceptible to the trap of believing their position makes them immune from having to acknowledge weakness or admit mistakes (Burke, 2006).

**Contingency: Perceived competence.** The accounts suggested that humility was effective only to the degree the leader was also perceived as competent or able, especially with regard to the behavior of admitting mistakes and limitations (Interviews #34, 51)., Though humbly admitting weakness was itself described as a unique type of strength, our participants also insisted that more traditional leadership traits, such as intelligence, resolve, and persuasiveness, needed to work in tandem with humility in order for the leader to be effective. Looking closely at our accounts, we noticed that these attributions of competence in many cases depended on external signals of authority. For example, when a leader had a highly visible leader role (CEO or executive) or clear, external signs of authority (military chevrons on a uniform, religious regalia) a leader's competence was less likely to be called into question when displaying this humble behavior compared with a lower-level leader where signs of leader authority were lacking or were more ambiguous.

> Humility could be perceived as weakness unless the leader also is perceived as confident and effective. It's less important if you have a lot of positional power, like a CEO, but for somebody at my level competence matters a lot. If followers are turned off [i.e., don't see you as competent], humility will make you less effective. (Interview #1)

Our data also suggested that perceptions of competence as moderators of the effectiveness of humility were also influenced by demographic differences. Younger leaders with older followers believed they first needed to "prove themselves" (Interview #9, 54), to build-up or establish a reputation of competence, before admitting weaknesses. Without first having this reputation of competence behaving humbly by admitting mistakes and limitations was seen as too "risky." For example one younger leader promoted to lead a group of older employees said,

> As much as I want to show my people the real side of me, I *risk* not living up to their expectations. I *risk* them seeing me weak in some way. I *risk* showing that I am susceptible in some way. I *risk* opening the kimono and showing them something they don't want to see. I *risk* all of these different things. So I very much grapple with that on a daily basis. (Interview #13, emphasis added)

Similar to young leaders of more experienced followers, the female leaders we interviewed also felt this tension between behaving humbly and establishing a reputation of competence. In line with past research on emotional display (Tiedens, Ellsworth, & Mesquita, 2000) and agentic behaviors (Rudman & Glick, 1999), the women leaders we interviewed often experienced a "double bind" while trying to simultaneously meet gender role expectations and leader role expectations (Eagly, 2007; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Ragins & Winkel, 2008). It seemed that with regard to humility, female leaders operate in a more narrow range of acceptability, feeling pressure to be a strong leader on the one hand and a humble female on the other.

> What I've learned is that if you're a female people expect different things. I think humility is expected more for a female leader than a male leader, but they need to see you as competent too. As a woman leader that's a complex one for me. I've tried to dig deeper in this one. I'm petite and I look younger than I am and I'm a female, so I look back at certain events as a leader and go 'Gosh, did that command and control approach come from me because I thought I needed to prove something?' I've gotten comments from other males like, 'Gosh, I used to think you were so cute and sweet.' (Interview #14, female)

Several interviewees echoed this idea that non-humble female leaders are viewed more negatively (described as "overcompensating;" Interview #3, 5, 6, 53, 54), whereas non-humble males were more likely to be viewed as courageous, confident, competent, or strong. In contrast,

our data suggested that when men show humility they are less likely than women to be socially penalized, but are more likely to be admired: "In our society, women are expected to be more humble. Males are given more credit when they are humble" (Interview #20, male). Statements from both male and female leaders reflected a sense of injustice in the tendency they have observed to expect females to behave more humbly and then to question their competence for doing so (Interview #3, 7, 10, 11, 14, 16, 34, 51, 53).

Overall, social status differences based on age and gender were reported as important determinants of competence perceptions and the perceived effectiveness of leader humility expression, especially with regard to acknowledging mistakes and limitations.[9] Surprisingly, the influence of age and gender was described as less impactful in military settings for shaping competence perceptions because the clear hierarchical rankings and positions give strong signals of credibility (i.e., uniform chevrons and bars). "Though I think female leaders have to prove themselves more, there are lots of other ways to differentiate people. Military rankings, for instance, influence attributions of competence as much as or more than gender or ethnic status" (Interview #54). Our accounts suggest that lower-level leaders, younger leaders, and female leaders may have more reticence to display humility by admitting mistakes and limitations since their competence is more likely to be called into question.

Also, nearly all of those in business contexts mentioned competence as an important precondition for admitting weaknesses, whereas not one religious leader mentioned competence as an important precondition for the effectiveness of leaders humbly admitting weaknesses. We interpreted this finding to mean that perhaps humility is considered one of the core competencies of religious leadership (i.e., central to follower expectations of religious leadership) whereas in a

[9] Past research has shown that the feeling of social standing or interpersonal power stems from factors such as gender, age, and ethnic status (i.e., Status Characteristics Theory; Berger, Fisek, Norman, & Zelditch, 1977; Wagner & Berger, 1997) and that different standards are used to judge more powerful and less powerful group member behaviors (Biernat & Fuegen, 2001).

business environment, humility is more likely to be viewed as extra-role behaviors that supplement the core competencies of business leadership.

**Spotlighting Follower Strengths and Contributions**

Humble leaders were also described as being very deliberate in communicating the specific value that their followers had to the team or organization. In contrast to "non-humble" leaders who were sometimes described as suspicious toward and threatened by exceptionally intelligent or talented followers because they were worried these followers might "out-shine" them (Interview #10), humble leaders instead were intent on pushing their followers into the spotlight. These leaders frequently recognized, appreciated, and praised followers' strengths and complimented the work and efforts of followers. Humble leaders were described as students of their followers' strengths; and thus they were experts on the human capital around them. They actively engaged in behaviors to make these strengths known and salient to others. For example, "It was obvious that she knew followers' strengths and she even structured zone goals based on that knowledge. She always gave them genuine compliments" (Interview #21). Rather than drawing attention to themselves, humble leaders were described as using "we" rather than "I" when talking about the leader's accomplishments. For instance, when describing another leader's transformation from being arrogant to humble, the behavioral change that seemed to mark this transformation was giving credit to the team rather than taking credit for himself.

> I left one of my last companies because of my leader's arrogance….He was taking my ideas and coining them as his own to upper management. He had all the answers to everything in his mind's eye. He thought he had no weaknesses. So I left. But I just had a conversation with a couple of my previous coworkers and they said 'he's changed.' They said he'd received some tongue lashings from upper management that made him more humble and now *he always talks in terms of 'we', like 'As a region we're doing this and we're making this happen and we, we, we.'* I think he learned to be humble. [emphasis added] (Interview #8)

Humble leaders were described as attributing good ideas to followers when presenting to upper management, taking money out of their pocket to give to followers who had done a good job

(Interview #49), giving genuine rather than "empty" praise, and taking notice of the unique strengths of followers (Interview #25). Overall, humble leaders seemed to be continually shifting attention for positive events to others and shifting focus for negative events on themselves.

**Contingency: Perceived sincerity.** Participants reported that the behavior of spotlighting follower strengths and contributions was effective only if leaders were viewed as sincerely offering praise. Humble leaders were described as those who provide *honest* substantive compliments, describe *true* follower strengths, and *genuinely* appreciate the contributions of others. As one leader described, "She always gave genuine compliments and never handed out flattery or empty praise – it was real praise" (Interview #21). In contrast, descriptions of attempts to portray "false humility" or "instrumental humility" where accompanied with contempt and suspicion. Leaders who went "through the motions" of appearing humble by handing out false praise in a disguised attempt to win favor were not well regarded by followers. Moreover, false humility was reported as putting followers in a defensive and cautious mindset. For example a military leader told us, "I have seen a leader fake humility for their own benefit. When they are just going through the motions you lose respect for them and really distrust everything they say" (Interview #55). As Schimmel (1992: 39) said, "In a society which rewards humility with social esteem, some people may mimic behaviors typical of authentic humility."

Related to sincerity, we asked about what our participants viewed as the connection between leader humility and authenticity, a topic that has recently gained more attention in the leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005), emotion (Hareli & Rafaeli, 2008), and customer service (Grandey, Fiske, Mattila, Jansen, & Sideman, 2005) literatures. Though some felt that authenticity and humility were deeply intertwined (i.e., "The willingness to be authentic first comes from a place of being humble," Interview #2), others felt they were not necessarily connected, citing examples of leaders who were "authentically arrogant" (i.e., "I've had leaders who were authentically arrogant. They really believed they were superior to others," Interview

#34; "You can be a person who is self-centered and authentic about it…these concepts [i.e., humility and authenticity] are not necessarily intersecting," Interview #5). Thus, for many, authenticity was perceived to be the attribution about the motive behind a leader's behavior (regardless of the type of behavior) while humility reflects a certain set of leader behaviors. Notwithstanding some disagreement about the conceptual similarities and differences between leader humility and the general concept of authenticity[10], there was consensus that leader humility would be better received if it was seen as sincere or authentic.

**Modeling Teachability**

Perhaps the most central element of humble leader behavior to descriptions of leader humility (i.e., most often mentioned and emphasized by followers), humble leaders were described as being models of learning. Humble leaders showed openness to new ideas and information, had a habit of listening before speaking, and were very receptive to feedback. For example, "The leader would always take notes in meetings when others were talking. He really listened to people" (Interview #4). "This leader was very good at learning new things…a good listener" (Interview #38). The leaders' self-reported accounts of humility suggested that listening to others and showing an openness to feedback is enabled by debunking the belief that the leader has to know it all or have all the answers. Instead, the leaders suggested that this behavior was fostered by believing that everyone has much to learn:

> You can't go into a conversation where you learn without a level of humility. If you've got a mentality like 'Wow, I don't have to know it all and I don't have to be perfect and it's okay for me to admit that'—that's how you can go into a conversation and really learn from somebody else. You can't learn from others if you think you already know it all. (Interview #17)

Humble leaders were often described as receptive to the feedback and ideas of others because humility entails "recognizing there are a lot of different ways to accomplish something"

[10] We recognize that the term 'authenticity' used in this conceptual comparison exercise is referred to in the general sense and does not reflect the specific dimensions of the authentic leadership construct (see Walumba et al. 2008).

(Interview #55). Interviewees reported that stressful situations and failures were often resolved with the leader listening to followers and seeking their input to co-create solutions to challenges.

Humble leaders would also model teachability by initiating role reversals with followers—i.e., assuming the follower role and putting the follower in the leader/trainer role. Rather than merely telling followers how to do things, humble leaders were described as modeling follower tasks and then seeking feedback from the follower. For example:

> The leader would actually step into the role and say, 'Hey let's learn this together.'… 'Let's go out and make some sales calls together. Maybe you can see me making a call and you can give me some pointers in what I do right, and what I do wrong. Then you can try it.' (Interview #17)

Several interviewees described humble leaders as being willing to "get off the golden throne" (Interview #8) and "jump in the trenches" (Interview #40) to learn firsthand the challenges the follower faced. It seemed that no follower task was too menial for the humble leader. They would model in all kinds of follower tasks, from sales calls (Interview #17, 19) to custodial work (Interview #51) to grunt labor (Interview #54). In one example, a higher ranking military leader broke his leg helping lift a heavy generator off a truck with his soldiers. His only lament was that he would not be able to run with his soldiers for a while (Interview #53). Through modeling, humble leaders seemed intent on fostering a positive, proactive attitude about learning new things and gaining deeper understanding about how to best help followers overcome challenges.

**Contingency: Extreme threat and time pressure.** Participants reported that the effectiveness of humility in general, and modeling teachability especially, depended on the organization's culture as well as the nature of the contextual circumstances leaders faced. Specifically, we learned from our interviewees that modeling teachability was less effective when the status quo was seriously disrupted, time for action was short, or the threat toward followers was significant. In such situations, followers were described as needing re-

stabilization (i.e., reestablishment of order) more than development, appreciative comments, or the opportunity to express themselves and be listened to. For instance:

> While humility is important, I don't think it is applicable in every situation. Sometimes [behaving humbly] is not what followers need, because they may be feeling their own insecurities. It's a very isolated instance because I believe in humility in almost everything, but I can see in certain situations where you have extreme change and insecurity, when followers may be looking to their leader for self-confidence. The leader needs to step up and truly exhibit themselves. Then the leader can go home and privately freak out. (Interview #10)

Interviewees explained that modeling teachability and taking a more humble approach to leadership takes time, but in these high threat situations when immediate action is necessary, taking the time to learn and grow would be ineffective. For example:

> In the military, sometimes you have to get your soldiers out of there as fast as possible, whatever it takes to get them out of there. In some organizations and situations you just have to *go*. When time is scarce or it is *the* critical resource and every tick of the clock means something important, during those times being humble is not the best. (Interview #51, italics added)

> Humility in leadership is not a good idea when the safety of the population is at risk with disease control. Here people's lives are at stake and you have to move fast; humility cannot always be present, [you] have to be assertive. (Interview #22)

In situations of extreme time pressure or threat, statements from our participants suggest that enacting humble behaviors would be counterproductive and might cause followers to question a leader's worthiness to lead in that situation. As one contextual difference, we found it interesting that not one religious leader could think of a situation when humility would be less effective in a religious context. This fits with the idea that humility is perhaps more central to religious leadership than business or military leadership, and also that situations of extreme threat accompanied with time pressure is less common in religious leadership contexts.

**Contingency: Learning culture.** Our participants also mentioned that the over arching culture of the organization in which the leader and followers interact would influence the interpretation and perceived legitimacy of modeling teachability, and specifically that this

behavior was more effective in an organizational culture that encourages and reinforces learning. For example:

> The values of the organization are important for determining whether humility is recognized as a strength rather than a weakness….I think humility depends upon what type of upper-level leadership you have or what type of organization that you are in. One of the things that I see at this company is they allow their managers to take those risks and are learning-focused. I see this culture as fostering more humility and loyalty. (Interview #5)

According to the interview statements, the behaviors of top-level leaders had a large impact on shaping a learning culture and validating humble leader behaviors for the rest of the lower-level leaders.[11] As top-level leaders became known for modeling teachability, this behavior became symbolic of the culture of the organization and was the means of legitimizing this behavior for lower-level leaders. One humble executive leader reinforced this learning culture by encouraging organizational members to vocalize their concerns with the leader's decisions, "welcoming debate" (Interview #14), encouraging collaboration by saying "one of us is never smarter than all of us" (Interview #2) and emphasizing "openness and teachability" when socializing and training new leaders (Interview #8). One interviewee described the learning culture that was "catalyzed" by this executive leader's humble example and leadership. She said that after regional meetings where all the various leaders from across the state came together to be trained, after the meeting was over all present voluntarily huddled into groups, pulled out notebooks and spread sheets, and engaged in serious conversations about exploring ideas for solving local challenges. "They all could have gone home, but instead most everyone stayed for over an hour helping and learning from each other. In all the previous companies I've worked for in this industry, I have never seen anything like this" (Interview #8). This interviewee said that the learning culture fostered by this executive leader made it acceptable for middle and first-line leaders to admit where they were struggling and seek to learn from others to find solutions to

[11] This idea is in keeping with upper echelon theory (Hambrick & Mason, 1984), cascading leadership (Yukl, 2010, p. 486) and leader imprinting theory (Ballinger & Schoorman, 2009; Ritter & Lord, 2007).

challenges. She indicated that in other companies where she had worked, humble leader behaviors such as modeling teachability would not have been well received because of the culture of competition and rivalry that existed.

**Contingency: Hierarchical adherence.** We also found that the degree to which organizations were reported as having a hierarchical culture influenced the expression of all three types of humble behaviors. At the onset of this study we expected leader humility to be more countercultural or in violation of role expectations in organizations that more rigidly adhere to a hierarchical structure. The emphases on chain-of-command, norms of power centralization, and the presence of explicit signals of leadership authority (number of chevrons, bars, or stars on a military uniform; robes and clerical collars in religious organizations) present in hierarchical organizations all reinforce top-down functioning and power distance norms. Thus, viewing humble leadership as more of a bottom-up style of leading, we expected humble leadership would look differently or be expressed less often in hierarchical contexts. As an initial reaction to the data we found general differences in the tone of humble behaviors expressed—i.e., in less-hierarchical contexts, humble leaders were described as showing humility in playful, self-deprecating, or humorous ways, but expressing humility in more hierarchical contexts was always described as being more serious.

Looking more closely at the data we noticed more nuanced differences in the descriptions of humble leaders across less and more hierarchical contexts. For instance, we found that the behaviors of spotlighting follower strengths and contributions were expressed in a more "tempered" or less frequent way. Those described as humble leaders in military and industrial contexts "*shared some*" credit with followers while humble leaders in the less hierarchical organizations were described as "*give all*" the credit to followers for success. We observed the biggest difference in the behavior of admitting mistakes, limitations, and fault. Indeed, humble

leaders in these more hierarchical contexts were described as "self-aware" but did not outwardly acknowledge limitations and mistakes very often:

> He seemed to be self-aware, but he didn't articulate or share his limitations much. I think it had a lot to do with his contextual environment; it's not real cool to sit around and talk about personal stuff in the military. (Interview #52)

> Honestly, I didn't hear a lot about his failings or limitations, but I always felt able to go to him and really talk about mine. (Interview #53)

Understanding the differences of the enactment of humble leader behaviors across different levels of hierarchical rigidity became more clear when we applied a "temporal theoretical lens" to the data (Ancona, Goodman, Lawrence & Tushman, 2001; Mitchell & James, 2001) or a time-orientation referent for each humble behavior. For example, some expressions of humble leadership seemed more past-focused (i.e., evaluating past events like highlighting past successes, and taking the blame for past failures), some behaviors were present-focused (i.e., behaviors in real-time interpersonal interactions such as acknowledging when current emotions were getting the best of them, listening carefully and seeking feedback), and some humble behaviors were more future-focused (i.e., modeling tasks as a way to develop followers for future success). Viewing humble leader behaviors from this "temporal theoretical lens", statements from participants in military and industrial contexts suggested that leaders in these more hierarchical contexts expressed past-oriented humility (i.e., gave credit to their team after mission or project is accomplished, accepted blame for past failures) and future-oriented humility (i.e., modeling tasks to develop followers to succeed), but very little real-time humility (i.e., admitting weaknesses in real-time interactions). Responses suggested that this may be due to the task-oriented emphasis in these hierarchical contexts.

> He seemed aware of his limitations but I don't think he saw it as necessary to discuss those with other people unless it was immediately germane. This stems from him focusing on what is necessary and needed to accomplish the task at hand. It wasn't about denial of personal limitation, just 'let's focus on what we have to do.' (Interview #31)

When on a military mission or when the industrial assembly line is running, leaders are operating in a very strong, "top-down" situation where the objective is clear and the leader is expected to minimize deviations from a known end goal. Participants suggested that in such situations it was less appropriate and effective for the leader to divulge areas of weakness and initiate feedback-seeking discussions with followers.

Descriptions of humble religious leaders, like military leaders, also reflected a reticence to admit mistakes and personal weaknesses to followers, but for different reasons. Because religious leaders are generally expected to be focused on helping their parishioners overcome mistakes rather than spending time discussing their own, participants reported that church leaders' admitting weaknesses and mistakes to parishioners was seen as a violation of role expectations. In addition, since religious leaders are often seen as emblems of their religious organization (i.e., symbols of the doctrine and principles the sect adheres to, see Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006), religious leaders are also considered knowledge leaders of their organizations' tenets. Unlike business leaders who often are required to guide their groups in an uncertain, turbulent marketplace, religious leaders generally are expected to know the path that leads to a higher form of living. Thus, admitting knowledge gaps may be more acceptable in the minds of followers for a business leader than for a religious leader.

Taken together, these findings across differences in hierarchical culture made sense to us when we realized that the likely career and reputational costs of humble behaviors in hierarchical contexts were probably much higher than in non-hierarchical contexts. Military officers responsible for human lives and religious leaders responsible for human souls are held to a higher standard than office managers responsible for inventory and sales calls. But the greater risk of leader humility in hierarchical contexts may also yield a greater reward in terms of follower engagement because followers knew their humble leader would bear the brunt of ill will from the hierarchy for unit failures (i.e., what we viewed as the "martyr effect").

> As an officer, I would have my higher-ranking enlisted soldiers accompany me when reporting to my superiors. I wanted them to be able to be exposed to different leadership styles than my own for their own leadership development. Sometimes they got to see me get reamed out by my superiors, which was actually a good thing. It made them want to do their jobs better. (Interview #55)

Overall, in less hierarchical contexts it appeared that leader humility was less risky and had fewer interpersonal costs. However, because humility was more counter-normative in hierarchical contexts (i.e., less common, less expected), it seemed to have a relatively larger payoff in terms of follower engagement, trust, and loyalty.

**The Core Essence of Leader Humility**

While the purpose of our study was mainly to document the observed or "lived meaning" of humble leadership which yielded a great deal of information regarding specific behaviors, we also were curious if the statements gave any clues about the underlying essence or "way of being" captured by humble leadership. Though the data suggested to us that humble leaders possessed a general high moral character (i.e., unselfish, others-focused), exemplified a unique kind of courage or "quiet" charisma, and seemed to possess an underlying belief in personal and follower malleability, boiling our hundreds of pages of data down into one idea, leader humility at the most basic, fundamental level appears to involve the process of leaders catalyzing and reinforcing mutual leader-follower development by eagerly and publicly (i.e., outwardly, explicitly, transparently) engaging in the messy process of learning and growing. Simply put, humble leaders *model how to grow* to their followers. Rather than just talking about the importance of continual learning or supporting programs for followers' development and growth, humble leaders transparently exemplify how to develop by being honest about areas for improvement (i.e., acknowledging mistakes, limitations), encouraging the process of social learning by making salient the strengths of those around them (spotlighting follower strengths), and being anxious about listening, observing, and learning by doing (modeling teachability). In

our accounts, these three humble behaviors seemed to co-occur or foster one another[12] and their synthesized expression created this personified obsession with continual personal growth. Though humble leaders were intrinsically focused on personal growth, they also hoped their modeling would spread contagiously to followers:

> My goal is to continually be growing, and having that effect to trickle throughout my sphere. (Interview #1)

> This leader would tell us, 'I'm so committed to growing and learning and to be a member of this team, it's important for me that you are committed to growing and learning too.'(Interview #14)

In sum, humble leaders were reported as making outwardly explicit the step-by-step process of personal development. We now describe the influence leader humility had on followers; the reported outcomes of leader humility as well as the mechanisms linking humble leader behaviors to these reported outcomes.

## MECHANISMS AND OUTCOMES

In response to questions about what outcomes humble leader behaviors produced we heard general comments about increased relational satisfaction, loyalty, and trust, which are common to positive or relational approaches to leadership (see Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009 for review). In this section, we focus instead on some of the more novel and at times counter-intuitive insights revealed by our participants regarding the outcomes of humble leader behaviors and how these behaviors led to the outcomes reported (i.e., the mechanisms at work). Two such mechanisms emerged which reflected how followers interpreted these humble behaviors in forming ideas about workplace norms. We asked questions such as, "How did the leader's humble behaviors influence you as a follower?" or "What did these humble behaviors do to shape the work environment?" In the broadest sense, responses suggested that humble leader

[12] This insight was supported by triangulating 360 degree leader evaluation data from our first sample. Leaders whose direct reports rated them highly in their 360 evaluation on the item "Demonstrates personal humility" were also rated very highly on the items that reflect the humble leader behaviors: "Shares credit for success" ($r = .91$; $p < .001$); "Fosters awareness of strengths and weaknesses" ($r = .74$; $p < .001$); "Takes time to develop and mentor his/her staff" ($r = .70$; $p < .001$) and "Is willing to consider ideas that are contrary to his/her own" ($r = .83$; $p < .001$).

behaviors influenced how followers felt about both *doing* (i.e., method of going about the work) and about *becoming* (i.e., attitudes toward development and growth). More specifically, we categorized these responses around the idea of legitimization.[13] It appeared that followers viewed their leader's humble behaviors as *legitimizing followers' own developmental journeys* leading to follower psychological freedom and engagement; and these humble leader behaviors were seen as *legitimizing contextual uncertainty* leading to a preference for small continuous rather than large discontinuous changes and fluidity of organizing (i.e., ease and swiftness of transitioning to different ways of functioning). For continuity, we will discuss each legitimization perception and its associated outcomes together. Illustrative quotes for each construct are presented in Table 1.

**Legitimizing the Developmental Journeys of Followers**

As leaders showed they were not afraid to present themselves as 'in process' by being transparent about personal limitations and modeling a teachable orientation, interviewees described feeling validated in their own developmental efforts. What was described was more than merely feeling psychologically safe in their work environment (Edmondson, 1999). In a deep sense, these humble leader behaviors influenced followers' personal ideas about "becoming", shaping, as it were, a developmental identity for the follower as a member of the organization (see Dutton, Morgan-Roberts, & Bednar, 2010; Lord and Brown, 2001). For example, one interviewee colorfully emphasized how much his humble leader's approach had influenced his own self-perceptions and his work: "This [humble leader's] mantra was 'Failure finds its grace in adjustment.' This phrase has impacted *me and my work* a lot. If I were to tattoo something on my body, that phrase would probably be it" (Interview #13, emphasis added). Some quotes even reflected the idea that these humble leader behaviors catalyzed a

[13] We use Suchman's (1995) definition of legitimization as a generalized perception or assumption that certain actions are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions.

development-oriented relational identity between the leader and the follower:[14] "It is ok to be 'a work in progress' here. Mutual learning and development is what my relationship with my leader is all about" (Interview #34). Because of their leader's willingness to acknowledge their own inexperience, foibles, and shortcomings, followers believed the leader would be more understanding of follower mistakes. Leaders legitimized followers' process of development by telling followers, often with enthusiasm, that making mistakes is a normal and even a beneficial part of learning.

> I tell my people that mistakes are okay, as long as you learn from them. That helps them realize that we are all going to have failures consistently and they're only going to make us stronger and catapult us further in performance and progress, and we're going to learn from them and go forward. And actually they really crave this openness because growing is an awesome process - it's exciting. (Interview #11)

Though leader humility fostered a sense that mistakes are an acceptable part of development, it also reinforced follower accountability for acknowledging these mistakes.

> In my experience as both a leader and a follower, I've found that leader humility fosters follower accountability and the desire to own up to their own faults or inexperience. And this desire for honesty and improvement creates an incredible loyalty between the follower and the leader. (Interview #3)

Aside from the general outcomes of increased loyalty and trust already mentioned, this legitimization of followers' developmental journeys reportedly led to the outcomes of increased psychological freedom and follower engagement.

**Psychological Freedom.** Followers' accounts reflected that the legitimization of the developmental journeys of followers resulting from humble leader behaviors produced a profound intrapersonal sense of psychological relief and reduced evaluation apprehension. Followers of humble leaders felt "freed" to risk being transparent about their own developmental process and show others, without self-denigration, how they were working to bridge the gap

[14] Relational identities reflect the nature of a role relationship (e.g., leader-follower) which is shaped by the interaction between role-based identities (i.e., perceived expectations for a given role) and person-based identities (i.e., personal characteristics that influence the enactment of role-based identities; see Sluss and Ashford, 2007, p. 12).

between their real and ideal selves (Higgins, 1989). Humble leaders' admissions of limitations and mistakes were described as showing followers that leaders were interested in follower development more than just performance, which 'freed' followers from the psychological burdens of hiding their inexperience and mistakes, as well as the burden of maintaining and defending an unrealistically high self-image. "It [the leader's humility] let down the tension inside. It let down any sense of having to prove yourself. It gave me permission to be honest about my shortcomings" (Interview #30). Some cited the connection between this psychological freedom and improved performance.

> Leaders who are humble foster a kind of comfort [in followers]….When you have that in followers, you get better results. (Interview #9)

In addition, evidence from self-report accounts suggested that behaving humbly had its own psychological benefits for the leader as well. For example, when asked about the potential benefits of humility one leader said, "Freedom, I mean absolute freedom. To enjoy yourself and enjoy others around you and see them for who they are. It takes a burden off your shoulders." (Interview #8). "Behaving humbly as a leader is a good use of power. I can go to bed with peace of mind" (Interview #52). Another leader told us, "Humility helps me be real. I just feel like humility lets me live the life that I desire as opposed to having the psychological hurdles getting in my way" (Interview #14). As leaders and followers experience more freedom from "psychological hurdles" as a result of humble leader behaviors, more psychological and emotional resources are freed to expend toward more productive ends. In other words, this psychological relief or "comfort" may lead to "better results" because followers are freed from the cognitive burdens associated with the fear of making mistakes or showing inexperience leaving more cognitive resources for in-depth (rather than heuristical) processing (Baumeister & Bushman, 2008; Fiske & Taylor, 1984) and creativity (Edmondson, 2004).

**Follower Engagement.** Our participants also told us that followers often responded to humble leader behaviors with increased job engagement and motivation to do their work. The legitimization of personal development appeared to enhance followers' intrinsic motivation to learn and master job tasks and shift followers from a goal of meeting external performance standards (i.e. praise from the boss, getting a bonus) to one where they were trying to meet internal performance standards (cf. Dweck, 1999). At the onset of this study we wondered whether humble leader behaviors might cause followers to relax their focus, or not be kept on their toes. However, many followers of humble leaders reported enhanced motivation due to leader humility.

> I actually enjoy working late and going above and beyond the call of duty when [my humble leader] genuinely asks for help about something or admits they are confused about an issue. My [non-humble leader] thought he had all the answers and so it seemed like no matter what I did it wasn't good enough or the way he liked it done. Part of the problem was that he expected me to read his mind, so it was safer just to do the bare minimum. (Interview #47)

Participants reported that a small humble leader behavior stimulus (e.g. asking for advice) could produce a tremendous amount of follower work effort, whereas a very strong stimulus from a non-humble leader (e.g. yelling at followers to do everything their way) was demotivating to followers. For example:

> When my leader shows humility and is open to what others have to say it creates an environment of energy. I come to the meetings prepared. Rather than stepping in the room and saying 'okay, he's going to set the agenda and we are going to sit here and listen for an hour,' it's more interactive, we feel like we have more impact. Changes the whole thing up. (Interview #14)

> My previous regional president was kind of like, 'I know everything. I'm the boss' and if you didn't agree with him you were disagreeing and he took it personal… It got to a point where if I didn't have the same opinion, I didn't say anything at all. (Interview #10)

Those described as non-humble leaders effectively shut down the discretionary contributions of the follower (followers psychologically detached from the non-humble leader and did the bare minimum, Interview #10, 52), whereas humble leader behaviors reportedly unlocked and

amplified follower intrinsic motivation. The interview responses also suggested that humble leaders' willingness to model follower tasks (as part of the modeling teachability behavior) helped enhance the perceived meaningfulness and importance of the tasks to followers, which are also important factors for fostering job engagement (Kahn, 1990).

Humble leaders were also described as adept at "parlaying employees into the right places" (Interview #31) and capitalizing on the unique aptitudes and skills of followers: "Knowing my employees allows me to play to their strengths and procure for them new and different duties that create a passion that excites them about what they do" (Interview #6). Not only were humble leaders more 'hands off,' but also their followers were more 'hands on' and even were ready to take the leadership role when necessary:

> I had a recent situation in our branch where I told the district manager, 'Please take the lead. I'm getting too emotionally reactive here. I am not fit to be dealing with this right now.' She took the responsibility and she was wonderful. She stepped up and took care of it. (Interview #10)

> When hard-nosed leaders 'crack' in combat, followers just sit back and think the leader is weak. However when humble leaders 'crack' in theater, their followers usually step up and shoulder more of the leader role. (Interview #55)

In sum, all humble leader behaviors led followers to feel that personal development was a legitimate workplace goal, which increased follower intrinsic motivation to be engaged in their jobs.

**Legitimizing Uncertainty**

In seeking to learn how and why the humble leader behaviors led to the outcomes described we noticed an important perception followers seemed to have that we have labeled legitimizing uncertainty. Most of our interviewees, even those in bureaucratic contexts such as the military and industrial organizations, reported a work context of uncertainty, turbulence and dynamic change. The humble leader's acknowledgment of their own uncertainty helped to validate followers' uncertainty and encouraged an environment of experimentation and learning

dialogue. For instance, one interviewee said, “We as a group never felt uncomfortable saying to this [humble] leader, ‘This doesn’t make sense’” (Interview #53). In contrast, non-humble leaders who were described as pretending to “know it all” were perceived as disconnected with the dynamic context where organizational members operate, and followers said they were reluctant to acknowledge what they did not understand or even ask clarifying questions.

Interviewees suggested that leaders set the tone of adopting a certainty posture or acknowledging uncertainty. When leaders set a ‘certainty posture’, followers felt they should bottle-up their uncertainty until they could present a well-polished, more certain plan: “You’d better have all your ducks in a row. Every word you say would need to be measured and proven” (Interview #53). Instead of being paralyzed by uncertainty and making mistakes, humble leaders enabled and encouraged followers to vocalize their uncertainties and doubts, and begin feeling their way forward by experimenting through trial and error. Humble leaders reinforced the value of experimenting and staying in motion by encouraging followers to “just make the decision and go with it. If it is wrong we’ll learn from it” (Interview #55). According to those we interviewed, this legitimization of uncertainty and trial and error learning led to a preference for continuous small changes over discrete large changes and greater fluidity in organizing.

**Preference for Continuous Small Changes.** On a unit level, the frequency and magnitude of change was mentioned as being influenced by humble leader behaviors and the legitimization of uncertainty. Units led by humble leaders functioned in a way that favored small, continuous changes rather than large, infrequent changes. Participants reported that humble leader behaviors enabled teams to adapt to the environment better by constantly updating and matching team member strengths with changing environmental demands. The behaviors of modeling teachability and admitting ignorance were described as especially important for helping followers not interpret uncertainty as a threat (see Staw, Sandelands, & Dutton, 1981), but as a common and valid assessment of the environment. This legitimization of uncertainty

fostered acceptance of unpredictability, openness to new information, and more trial and error experimenting. Thus, units led by humble leaders were in learning mode much of the time, favored frequent course reevaluation and updating: i.e., "making small, day-to-day changes" (Interview #34), had a "line upon line, fix little things here and there" approach (Interview #18) and "favored incremental changes" (Interview #50). While legitimizing uncertainty, these leaders fostered a culture that recognized that on-going information should be used to evaluate the accuracy of initial decisions. Thus, they questioned initial decisions and made constant adjustments. "Humble leaders improve the effectiveness of the decision-making process and speed the process of effective adaptation" (Interview #7). Humble leaders were less likely to escalate commitment because of their openness to feedback and being less likely to make and adhere to decisions for purposes of self-validation or enhancement. For instance, "Someone who has humility would…be better able to listen to peers and other resources so they don't keep going down paths that are non-productive" (Interview #29).

Humble leaders also helped followers value staying in motion and creating fixes that were 'good enough for now' rather than permanent, perfect fixes. Thus, humble leader teams were reported as valuing moving in the right direction rather than making the right decision. Humble leaders also fostered more of a "'if it isn't broken, don't fix it' mentality" (Interview #50); where the humble leader was more likely to build off current foundations rather than start fresh to build something that was all their own creation (i.e., "willing to stand on the shoulders of those who had gone before" Interview #31). The small, continuous change approach humble leaders fostered seems to contrast with the bold, all or nothing approach of narcissistic leaders that are aimed at drawing attention to the leader, are often vehemently defended, and result in either big wins or big losses (Chatterjee and Hambrick, 2007).

**Fluidity in Organizing.** The units in which humble leaders led were also described as being more able to make swift or fluid transitions between different types of organizing (i.e., top-

down vs. bottom-up) in response to changing situational demands. Because humble leaders legitimized uncertainty, follower responses reflected greater understanding of the need for adapting to different environmental challenges and reported being more receptive when the humble leader initiated changes in the unit's way of functioning. Specifically, though humble leader units typically functioned in a bottom-up manner, followers of humble leaders more quickly "bought-in" (Interview #8) and "jumped on-board" (Interview #34) when the leader felt the situation called for the team to function in a more top-down fashion. For instance, one interviewee described how the firm needed to make a momentary transition from their "collaborative and democratic" culture in order to respond effectively to immediate challenges. "Things are going to be coming down the pipeline in a more edict-military type way, because the situation that we're in calls for that. We [the followers] understand that this is not a total departure from our culture, but it is a momentary departure from our culture" (Interview #2). Followers appeared to be more receptive and "aligned" (Interview #11) to these changes because followers and leaders freely acknowledged the uncertainty they were facing. Leaders and followers agreed that sometimes uncertainty demands a top-down mode of organizing, such as when the unit was facing an significant, urgent threat.

Units with leaders described as "non-humble" in contrast, were reported as being much less fluid in organizing their structure. When these leaders saw the need to try a more bottom-up approach, followers were described as more suspicious and reticent to participate for fear of saying something out of line with the leader's thinking. "From my experience, when a command-and-control leader decides to try a humble, team approach, at first followers are like, 'What's the catch?' It takes a while to change the dynamic. Followers won't buy into it immediately. It takes time to believe it" (Interview #8). "Because of my previous experiences [with a non-humble leader] it took me a while to open up and really share what I was thinking" (Interview #6).

In relation to fluidity in organizing, from leaders' own perspective (our self-report accounts), humility enabled leaders to "get out of auto-pilot mode" (Interview #12) and recognize when their leadership approach was not working and the unit needed to function in a different manner. Participants reported that leader humility plays a self-regulatory function, helping leaders more effectively adjust their leadership styles or approaches to initiate different types of unit functioning.

> I think it is critical to have the ability to reflect inward and recognize when you need to try a different approach….Humility entails opening your eyes in seeing that in leadership you can't just treat people like you want to be treated, or the way you operate. You have to realize what their needs are and lead according to that. (Interview #53)

Many leaders said humility spurred them to temper initial adherence to traditional, top-down approaches to leadership; enabling them to see when they have been too rigid, too forceful, or too ascendant (Interview #8, 14, 15, 16, 28). But we were surprised to hear that sometimes humility tempered leaders in the other direction, making leaders more tough, forceful, and "top-down" when they saw it necessary. For example one leader said, "It took humility to realize that my being too relational with followers was in an effort to fulfill my own needs, not theirs. It was not serving them or the business well. I saw that I needed to adjust my leadership-style back toward the more firm, command-and-control approach" (Interview #7). In short, leader humility was described as enabling leaders to acknowledge when their leadership was out of balance and temper or regulate their leadership in either direction (harder or softer). Thus, we found that leader humility does not necessarily mean a leader will have difficulty making hard decisions and being forceful when necessary, but rather that they will be more mindful in evaluating whether their approach is appropriate to the situation. Overall, leader humility helped leaders recognize when they needed to change the way their unit functioned, and followers of humble leaders were more receptive to these changes in organizing.

## DISCUSSION

In response to recent calls for a deeper examination of bottom-up leadership (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Weick, 2001), our findings highlight the behaviors, mechanisms, contingencies and outcomes of humble leadership. Though many have speculated about what humble leadership is and why it is important, this is the first study that we are aware of that documents the lived meaning and the enactment of humble leadership. Through an inductive approach, we identified the behaviors that organizational members across a variety of contexts view as humble, as well as the outcomes and the boundary conditions for the effectiveness of such behaviors. Leadership research and theory has been criticized as being too segmented and calls have been made for more integration of findings from different leadership approaches (i.e., integrating leader traits, leader behaviors, follower cognitions, situational/contextual factors, see Yukl, 2010, p. 491). We examined and built this theory of humble leadership with this in mind as our theory touches on leader behaviors, leader underlying beliefs, follower cognitions, contextual and situational factors, as well as outcomes for both leaders and followers. Though uncovering the "lived meaning" of humble leadership in organizations is important, the main contribution of this study is our process model that describes in detail exactly how humble leader behaviors legitimize follower development and follower uncertainty. These follower legitimization cognitions provide an explanatory mechanism that is often lacking in existing leadership theory (Yukl, 2010, 496). In response to another major criticism of leadership theory that it is too decontextualized (Yukl, 2010, p. 492), we have structured our study to illuminate boundary conditions, situational constraints, and contextual factors that influence the appropriateness and effectiveness of humble leadership by sampling a broad array of organizational types and leadership levels. The contingencies of leader perceived competence, sincerity, situational level of threat and time pressure, organizational learning culture, hierarchical rigidity, and level of threat and time pressure are important contributions to the humble leadership literature, which may also have important application to other bottom-up leadership theories. Below we discuss the theoretical

implications of this study on the field of leadership, leader and follower development, follower engagement, emergent change, transitioning between top-down and bottom-up approaches to organizing, and how we view our theory of leader humility is unique to other bottom-up leadership approaches,.

**Theoretical Implications**

Both in theory and in practice the topic of leadership has a long history in holding up leaders as demigods, heros, and superhuman saviors (Murrell, 1997; Yukl, 1998). Our theory and findings provide a substantive theoretical counterweight to such models by identifying the positive developmental influence leaders can have on followers by modeling how to be *effectively* human rather than superhuman. Certainly top-down heroic leadership may be useful in some contexts, and our results identify extreme situations when top-down approaches should be taken over bottom-up approaches. However, our findings suggest that bottom-up leadership approaches are more wholly appropriate and greatly needed in today's knowledge-driven economy (Lichtenstein et al., 2006). The humble leader behaviors we identified (e.g. acknowledging mistakes, spotlighting follower strengths, modeling teachability) as well as the mechanisms (e.g. legitimization of uncertainty and personal development) were often described in our interviews as directly challenging the more popular top-down conceptions of leadership.

While some common leadership pundits and approaches appear to legitimize *pretending* ("fake it till you make it", "show no fear", power posing, macho posturing, see Weick, 2001; Carney, Cuddy, & Yap, 2010), humble leaders legitimize the actual process of *becoming*. In other words, the core impact of leader humility on followers appears to be followers' constructive and adaptive responses to their own inexperience, gaps in development, and mistakes. By helping to reduce follower anxiety and evaluation apprehension during the process of development, humble leaders help free up followers' psychological resources to be used toward more productive ends. Such a finding has important implications for the leadership

development literature, helping to form a bridge between *leader* development (describing the growth of intrapersonal skills, etc. of those in formal leadership positions) and a context of *leadership* development (work environment where both leaders and followers are able to develop leadership skills and engage in self-leadership regardless of position; Day, 2000). Leader humility appears to be a specific and effective way to foster this context of leadership development through the process of rendering the *intrapersonal* (internal) states of leaders *interpersonal*; making self-awareness, emotional regulation, social learning, and teachability explicit and salient in the process of leader-follower interactions. In addition, leader humility may have important implications for fostering "developmental readiness" (a topic leadership scholars have pinpointed as critically needed in future leadership research, Avolio et al., 2009) between both leaders and followers as the behaviors of leader humility appear to catalyze a type of interaction where leader and follower developmental activities are mutually reinforced.

In addition, the difference between legitimizing pretending versus actual becoming also appears to have important implications for the evolution of leader-follower relationships. As our data suggest, followers of humble leaders are less likely to experience *disillusionment*—and the associated mistrust, disloyalty, contempt, and dissatisfaction—with their leader over time because the leader never tried to create any *illusions* to begin with. Thus, the development of a humble leader-follower dyadic relationship may follow a more steady, upward path marked by increasing trust, mutual respect, and loyalty, compared to the suggested leader-follower relational stages of honeymoon, disillusionment, and (hopefully) reconciliation (Agashae & Bratton, 1999). Leader humility may lead to more stabilized leader-follower relations because humble leaders effectively foster identification (i.e., through conveying being in a common predicament with followers with regard to uncertainty and the need for constant development) without fostering overdependence (Kark, Shamir, and Chen, 2003) or leader idealization where

followers "elevate leaders to heights from which they can rarely fail [to] disappoint" (Gabriel, 1997, p. 317).

Our findings also contribute to the growing literature on job engagement which is not yet definitive about what specific leadership approaches best foster follower engagement.[15] Rather than seeking to engage followers through charisma, energy, idealism, and stimulation (empirical evidence has been inconsistent about these approaches to engage followers, see Dvir, Eden, Avolio, & Shamir, 2002), our study suggests that the 'quieter' approaches of modeling teachability and validating follower developmental processes and experimentation are important for fostering intrinsically engaged employees. Our results suggest that leader humility may help reduce some of the obstacles that inhibit followers from feeling engaged in their work (Scahufeli & Bakker, 2004). Specifically, beyond feeling psychologically safe and supported by one's leader (Bakker, 2005; Kahn, 1990), our data suggests that humble leader behaviors help affirm followers' process of development, foster a more adaptive attitude toward mistakes and trial and error learning, and free more of followers' psychological resources (i.e., psychological freedom) to dedicate to work related tasks. In addition, humble leaders' modeling of follower tasks, large or menial, helped to ennoble or elevate the task in the minds of followers making it more likely that followers will not see the tasks as merely unimportant "grunt" work, but as intrinsically worthwhile. Thus, this study provides important elaborative insight revealing a constellation of specific leader behaviors which influence follower cognitions, which in turn foster a heightened sense of job engagement. Recent empirical study supports this connection between leader humility and follower engagement (Owens, Johnson, and Mitchell, 2012).

Aside from the individual-level implications of our study, our model of bottom-up, humble leadership also adds important insight into the literature of bottom-up change in

[15] We know little about what leadership behaviors or approaches best foster job engagement beyond the general ideas of supportiveness (Bakker, 2005) and managerial effectiveness (Mauno, Kinnunen, & Ruokolainen, 2007).

organizational units (Burns, 2004; Cummings & Worley, 2001; Dawson, 1994; Weick, 2000). While some advocate more top-down strategic change approaches (Conger, 2000) others argue the need for organizations to learn to "grow strategy from below" (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1998; Sayles, 1993), seek bottom-up "small wins" (Kouzes & Posner, 1997) and engage in "opportunistic experimentation" at lower levels of the organization (Collins & Porras, 1994). Advocates of emergent change (Burns, 2004) argue the importance of organizations being willing to live on the "edge of chaos" in order to achieve the level of flexibility and adaptability required for continuous transformation. Our findings contribute to this research by identifying the previously unspecified leadership behaviors that facilitate this type of change or growth.[16] We suggest that the inertia that keeps organizations from adapting in pace with a changing environment may be in large part due to leader rigidity in decision-making (rather than teachability), creating over dependence on the leaders knowledge and expertise (rather than acknowledging and encouraging the strengths and contributions of followers), and leader's overconfidence in their own ability to anticipate the future (rather than admitting limitations and knowledge gaps). Leaders admitting limitations, modeling teachability, and legitimizing uncertainty may provide the "disequilibrium" or shock to the system needed to stay in a continuous change state and foster the unit reflexivity (reflection, planning, and adaptation) needed for continual unit learning (Swift & West, 1998). As matching resources with evolving opportunities, constraints, and demands is a key skill in emergent change (Hays, 2002, p. 37), humble leadership appears to help foster this matching since the humble leader behavior of spotlighting follower strengths may produce a consensual awareness of what human resources the team has to allocate to meet evolving demands. In sum, we believe that the behaviors of

[16] One of the few specific examples of leader behaviors to facilitate bottom-up growth include Jenner (1998) who proposes decision delegation to followers.

humble leadership help give more clarity to the specific leadership approaches that facilitate emergent change in organizations.

In light of theory suggesting that top-down and bottom-up approaches be integrated for optimal change effectiveness (Dunphy, 2000; Conger, 2000), our study contributes the important insight with regard to an asymmetric effect in transitioning between top-down and bottom-up organizing styles. Transitioning from a humble, bottom-up to a top-down functional approach was described as much easier (i.e., a quicker transition, followers were more responsive) than transitioning from a top-down to a bottom-up approach. This difference in going from top-down to bottom-up organizing versus from bottom-up to top-down organizing appears to be because humble leader-follower interactions are more complex; there is more blurring of role boundaries, more uncertainty in role expectations, and the presence of dynamic, mutual influence. Top-down leader follower relationships are generally less complex, as leaders give orders and followers carry them out. For leaders whose default position is to take a more top-down leadership posture, it is more difficult to transition to the bottom-up, humble leadership approach because it requires the melting of heretofore rigid role relationships and followers have not been developed to take part in the leadership process. Thus, humble leaders have a much easier and quicker time transitioning to a lower-order relational mode (i.e., less complex, top-down mode) than top-down leaders who try to transition to a bottom-up mode.

Our findings also contribute to research on leader behaviors that are thought to promote flexibility in rigid organizational bureaucracies—i.e. the literatures regarding dynamic delegation, constrained improvisation, and authority migration (Bechky, 2006; Bigley & Roberts, 2001; Klein et al., 2006). Each of these leader behaviors involves leaders relying on followers for direction within bureaucratic organizations. Our results support what we perceive to be the main point of these literatures – that bottom-up leader behaviors are useful in hierarchies, even if they occur less often. However our model expands and enriches this finding by revealing some

boundary conditions for the effectiveness of bottom-up leader behaviors (i.e., situations of extreme threat and time pressure, presence of a learning culture, perceptions of leader competence and sincerity). Furthermore, this research also answers calls to understand more fully the mechanisms behind team learning and reflexivity (Swift & West, 1998). Though recent research has helped us to understand some structural methods for facilitating team learning (see Vashdi, Bamberger, Erez, & Weiss-Meili, 2007), our research uncovers specific leader behaviors that influence the perceptions of followers en route to establishing a unit culture conducive to learning and adaptation.

*Construct Differentiation.* Looking over the above implications of this study we feel that in order to clearly identify the contributions of this work, it is critical to differentiate how our emerging theory of humble leadership is unique to existing and related bottom-up leadership theories. Though an extensive review of all closely related leadership theories is not possible here, in Table 3 we summarize the elements of our humble leadership model and compare each of these elements is related to what we view as the most closely-related leadership perspectives: developmental, servant, participative, and shared leadership.[17]

At its core, developmental leadership entails "advis[ing] staff on their careers, carefully observ[ing] and record[ing] followers' progress and encourage[ing] staff to attend technical courses" (Raferty & Griffin, 2006: 39). Developmental leadership is tied to the mentoring literature, though it focuses on the career-oriented rather than the psychosocial aspects (Kram, 1985). Humble leadership, in contrast, appears to capture a much more informal and mutual developmental relationship with followers. It focuses on the influence of leader behaviors on follower cognitions rather than on structured programs for follower career development.

[17] To check our view of how humble leadership is unique, we sent this section and Table 3 to prominent scholars who have published articles in these leadership areas and made adjustments according to the feedback received.

Servant leaders view their most salient role to be servants first and leaders second toward their organizational members and "view the development of followers as an end, in and of itself, not merely a means to reach the leader's or the organization's goals" (Ehrhart, 2004: 69). Though there are several similarities, a general focus on development being the most obvious, in our view, the core differences between servant and humble leadership entails humble leadership's focus on modeling to followers the process of becoming (different than modeling serving others) and the legitimization of uncertainty. Humble leadership also implicates leader and follower psychological freedom, fluidity of organizing, fostering tendency toward continuous, small changes, and initiating leader-follower role reversals, processes that are not a major emphasis in the servant leadership literature.

At its core, participative leadership involves "joint decision-making or at least shared influence in decision-making by a superior and his or her employees" (Somech, 2003: 1003). While participative leadership describes a decision-making approach or structure, it does not focus on specific interpersonal behaviors that reflect modeling development and how these behaviors influence follower (and leader) cognitions and attitudes. Similarly, shared leadership—often used interchangeably with distributed leadership, team leadership, and democratic leadership—occurs when "all members of the team are fully engaged in the leadership of the team" and is most germane to the contexts that entail interdependence and complexity (Pearce, 2004: 48). While we view the humble leadership of a vertical leader as potentially antecedent to fostering a norm of shared leadership in a team, shared leadership and what type of leader approach fosters it says little about the specific humble leader behaviors and the process of legitimizing development and uncertainty. Instead the focus of vertical leaders seeking to foster shared leadership is on issues of team boundary management and team design.

Overall, while all the closely-related leadership perspectives have some focus on follower development—structuring career advancement goals (developmental leadership), sharing

decision-making power and leadership influence throughout the group (participative and shared leadership), and viewing follower development as an end in itself (servant leadership)—humble leadership is unique because of its major focus on leader transparency about their own developmental processes. Though there is some conceptual overlap between leader humility behaviors, processes, and outcomes and these other related constructs (as reflected in Table 3), there is also important novelty and uniqueness that is not captured by the core elements of these existing bottom-up constructs, such as modeling teachability, legitimization of follower development and uncertainty, the initiation of leader-follower role reversals, continuous small-scale adaptation, fluidity of organizing, and leader/follower psychological freedom.

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Insert Table 3 about here
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**Limitations and Future Research**

Because of our retrospective study design, the incidents reported to us may suffer from participant self-enhancement or sensemaking biases. We sought to minimize problems associated with a retrospective design by asking participants to talk about someone else and by using a courtroom style of questioning (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Furthermore, many of our participants reported unflattering aspects of themselves, indicating that some sort of rosy retrospective bias may not be a major cause for concern (Mitchell & Thompson, 1994). Though we feel our method of learning about the "lived meaning" or mental models of humble leadership was appropriate for our goals, we recommend future research to directly explore to what degree these mental models of humble leader behaviors and their connection to the outcomes and moderators that we have identified bear out in subsequent behavioral observation studies.

Our model also does not speak directly to the enablers, sources, and antecedents of leader humility. There have been some ideas put forth about what precipitates or fosters humility in

leadership (i.e., low narcissism and Machiavellianism, moderate self-esteem, Morris et al. 2005; a collective orientation, Nielson et al., 2010; undergoing traumatic events or one's religious upbringing, Collins, 2001), but nothing yet has been substantiated. Future research should explore the potential personal and contextual antecedents of leader humility to gain insight about how humble leadership might be selected for or fostered in an organizational context. Specific to our leader competence contingency, Status Characteristics Theory (Berger et al., 1977) supports the idea that the effectiveness of humble leader behaviors may also be influenced by factors in addition to age and gender, such as a leader's ethnicity, race, and education level. Future research should explore how other demographic differences besides the ones we identified may shape when a leader decides to behave humbly and how humble leader behaviors are interpreted. Since age and gender attribution biases are more operative in ambiguous contexts (see Hekman, Aquino, Owens, Mitchell, Schilpzand, & Leavitt, 2010 for review), we documented evidence that external leadership signals of authority found in more hierarchical organizations (i.e., military chevrons, religious leader regalia) may reduce the tendency for followers to view humble behaviors of young and female leaders as weakness. Future research should explore the possibility that the presence of external signs of authority mollifies the stereotyped biases against female (Eagly, 2007; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Ragins & Winkel, 2008) and minority (Rosette, Leonardelli, & Phillips, 2008) leaders. Lastly, as we identified beliefs about personal and others' malleability as part of the roots of humble leadership, we also recommend future research examine how leader humility may be associated with or driven by incremental implicit person theories (Dweck, 1991; Dweck, Chiu, & Hong, 1995)

Future research should also examine how humble leader behaviors interact with other leadership approaches. As our study suggests, humility appears to play a self-regulatory function that prevents one's leadership approach from going to extremes. It may be that humility enables a leader to temper visionary, charismatic, or transformational approaches to influencing others so

as to prevent the dark side of such approaches (i.e., over identification, Kark et al., 2003; "pseudo-" transformational leadership, Morris et al., 2005; abuse of power, Conger, 1990). Future research should examine, for instance, whether and in what contexts humble transformational leaders are more effective than less humble ones.

Because all of those we interviewed were from organizations in North America, we recommend future research examine the relationships we uncovered in other cultural contexts. Given our findings related to hierarchical culture, it may be particularly interesting to examine leader humility in countries with generalized differences in the dimensions of uncertainty tolerance, collectivism/individualism, and masculinity/femininity (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005). In addition, future research should also examine further how leadership level influences the effectiveness and appropriateness of leader humility. Though we report some differences in the function of humble leader behaviors between higher and lower levels of leadership (i.e., higher-level leaders setting the tone of a learning culture which makes humble behaviors of lower-level leader more acceptable), more examination is needed to understand how leader level differences in decision latitude, task regimentation, and external signals of authority influence the interpretation and effectiveness of humble leader behaviors.

## CONCLUSION

Humility in leadership is a topic that becomes more relevant as the market continues to globalize and firms grow more complex and diverse. In such environments, it becomes less feasible for any single leader to know everything (Senge, 1990). When summarizing the literature on why leaders fail, Burke (2006) said, it is "not what [leaders] know or how bright they are that leads to success or failure; [rather] how well they work with others, and how well they understand themselves" (94). We suggest that in order to effectively lead their firms amidst growing market complexity it is increasingly important for leaders to be able to humbly show their followers how to grow by admitting what they do not know, modeling teachability, and

acknowledging the unique skills, knowledge, and contributions of those around them. Our hope is that the inductive insights presented in this study spur further interest in exploring humility in the context of leadership.

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**TABLE 1**
**Interview Sample Information**

| Wave | Context | N | Average Tenure as Leader (yrs) | % Male | % Upper-level[a] |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Mortgage Banking | 17 | 4.36 | 59 | 35 |
| 2 | High-Tech Firm | 5 | 5.00 | 100 | 80 |
| 2 | Hospital | 8 | 4.17 | 50 | 25 |
| 2 | Financial Services/Retail | 7 | 9.00 | 86 | 57 |
| 2 | Religious | 8 | 4.46 | 88 | 29 |
| 2 | Manufacturing/ Industrial | 3 | 6.89 | 100 | 87 |
| 2 | Military | 7 | 7.07 | 100 | 57 |

a. Reflects senior and executive positions in organizations (i.e., above middle management).

**TABLE 2**
**Evidence for Humble Leader Behavior Model Constructs**

| Umbrella Construct | Construct | Examples |
|---|---|---|
| Humble Behavior | Acknowledging Limitations, Fault, and Mistakes | I made a business decision where I put something in place, went forward and then got feedback it was not working. And I said, 'You know what, I messed up. We need to redo this.' I just tried to be upfront and honest that I had made a mistake and that we needed to redo it. (Interview #16) |
| Humble Behavior | Spotlighting Follower Strengths and Contributions | This incredibly complex project was delivered as a huge success and the leader gave everybody on the team all the credit. (Interview #23)<br>When there was a success among the team he made sure the person who did the work gets due recognition. He will make sure they get noticed. (Interview #29) |
| Humble Behavior | Modeling Teachability | And so that humility has helped me…listen to others and allow them to ask questions and then to respectfully go about answering them. (Interview #11)<br>Even though he had the ability to run things well on his own, he would still ask input and advice from his staff. (Interview #31) |
| Follower Perception | Legitimizing Follower Development | I have always stressed with the people who report to me that it is okay to make a mistake. They quickly realize that most mistakes don't cost us that much and we fix it and move on. We learn from it and make the whole process better as a result. (Interview #4) |
| Follower Perception | Legitimizing Uncertainty | I tell followers that the changes we are facing are unprecedented and there is no history to fall back on. But that we don't need to fear. We'll just make the best decisions we can and execute. (Interview #2) |
| Reported Outcomes | Relational Trust and Loyalty | Humility builds loyalty. That was the difference between me and my peers. My leadership approach fostered loyalty; that was my brand. (Interview #55)<br><br>You may get the job done without humility but people don't seem to be happy. (Interview #54) |
| Reported Outcomes | Psychological Freedom | Coming from a spirit of humility allows you to be more of yourself and drop those guards. (Interview #9)<br>With humility, you don't feel the pressure to be the expert at everything. Takes |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | | the pressure off. (Interview #17) |
| Reported Outcomes | Follower Engagement | Employees walk away with more sense of responsibility and accountability. In some ways, his humility actually increased pressure to perform. (Interview #41) |
| Reported Outcomes | Small, Continuous Change | I think [humility] increases the rate of adjustment because you are probably more open to outside criticism or ideas or the external environment and I think that's what's needed to help improve adaptability. (Interview #3) |
| Contingencies (Leader Traits) | Leader Competence | Good leadership is a constellation of several positive traits. Humility is definitely one of them. But a leader who is humble without competence won't do well. There has to be a reason for followers to follow this leader. So humility might be considered the icing on the cake. (Interview #34) |
| Contingencies (Leader Traits) | Leader Sincerity | [Leaders] sometimes try to manipulate people by *acting* humble and I think most people figure it out fairly quickly. ….If they figure out who you really are and you are not faking it and you are humble, then they are more willing to accept it. (Interview #10, emphasis added)<br>Your humility has to be real in order for it to work. (Interview #16) |
| Contingencies (Contextual Factors) | Extreme Threat and Time Pressure | In environments were decisions need to be made quickly a humble leader may not be able to make them as quickly. There are some situations where humility is not good, like when timeliness is everything. Situations of timeliness which don't call for quality; in these circumstances it's possible a humble leader couldn't get it done. When you need to get your soldiers over the hill, it is not a time to get opinions. (Interview #34) |
| Contingencies (Contextual Factors) | Organizational Learning Culture | Our collaborative culture is a strength of our organization. This culture has been set by our CEO and filters down from there. I would say this allows for humility to play into what we do. (Interview #2) |
| Contingencies (Contextual Factors) | Hierarchical Adherence | As a military leader, you can't be humble all the time. At times you have to be aggressive and mean what you say and say what you mean. (Interview #52)<br>I think that leader humility would clash more with a command-and-control type culture. (Interview #2) |

a. Frequency: Represents the percentage of interviewees who mentioned the construct.

**FIGURE 1**
**Model of Data Reduction Process**

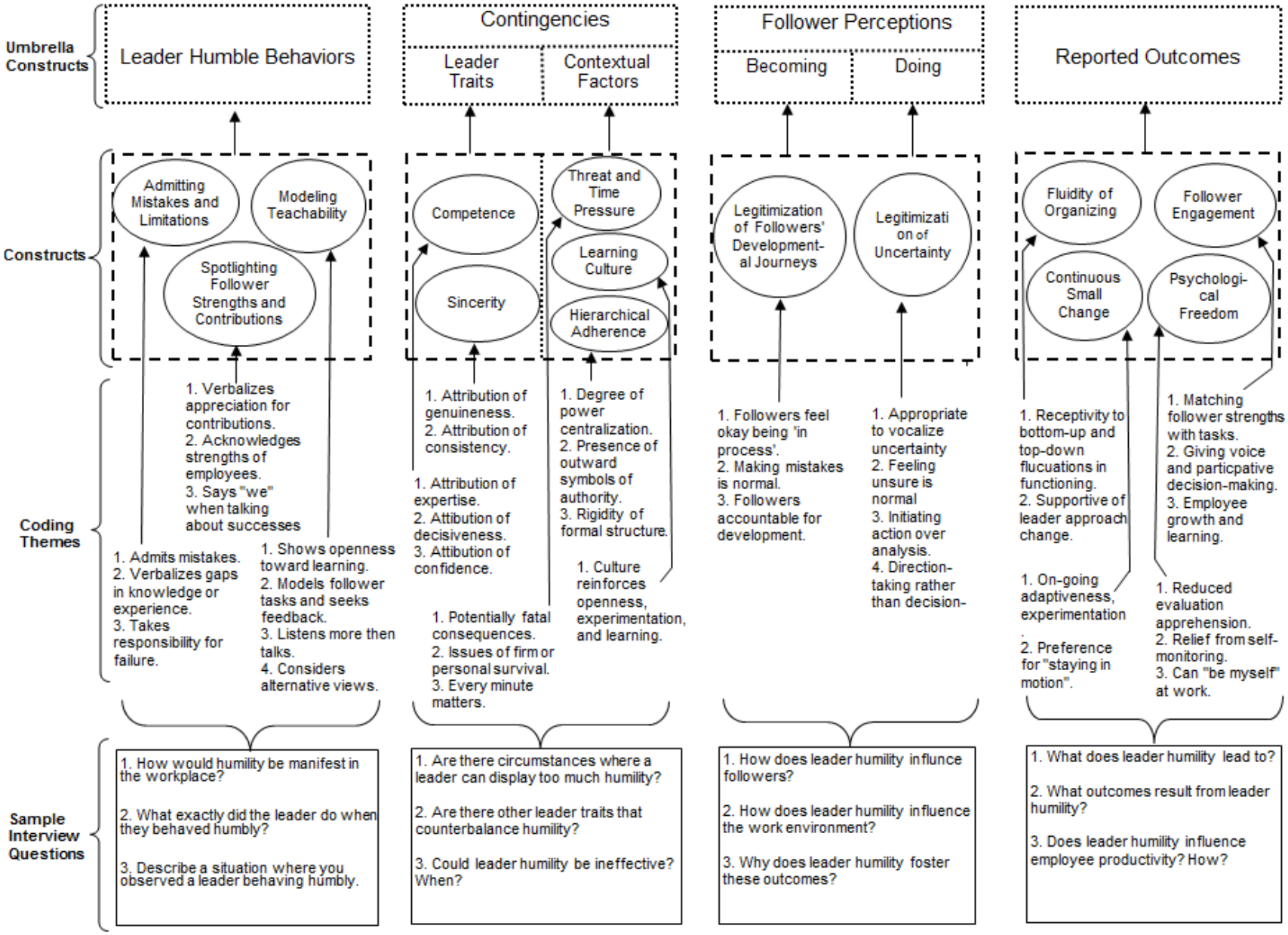

**TABLE 3**
**Bottom-up Leadership Approaches**

| | | Humble Leadership | Developmental Leadership | Servant Leadership | Participative Leadership | (Fostering) Shared Leadership |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Core element(s)** | | Leaders catalyze and reinforce mutual leader-follower development by publicly and eagerly engaging in the process of growth and learning. | Leaders structure a program for follower career advancement. | Leaders' key role is serving and nurturing followers, helping others accomplish shared objectives. | Leaders involve followers in the process of decision-making. | Vertical leaders foster the dispersion of leadership responsibility throughout the team. |
| **Core idea statement** | | Modeling to followers how to grow and learn. | I am developing you. | I will do all I can to serve and help you. | We have shared influence in decision-making. | We are all leaders on this team. |
| **Leader Behaviors** | **Admitting mistakes, weaknesses, and fault** | **X** | | **x** | | |
| **Leader Behaviors** | **Spotlighting follower strengths and contributions** | **X** | **x** | **x** | | |
| **Leader Behaviors** | **Modeling teachability** | **X** | | | | |
| **Leader Behaviors** | **Structuring formal follower career development program** | | **X** | | | |
| **Leader Behaviors** | **Team Boundary Management** | | | | | **X** |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Leader Behaviors** | **Team Design** | | | | | **X** |
| **Processes** | **Legitimization of follower development** | **X** | | **x** | | |
| **Processes** | **Legitimization of uncertainty** | **X** | | | | |
| **Processes** | **Initiating leader-follower role reversal** | **X** | | | **x** | **x** |
| **Processes** | **Granting voice** | **x** | | **x** | **X** | **X** |
| **Outcomes** | **Psychological freedom (leader)** | **X** | | | | |
| **Outcomes** | **Psychological freedom (follower)** | **X** | | **x** | | |
| **Outcomes** | **Follower engagement** | **X** | **x** | **x** | **X** | **X** |
| **Outcomes** | **Fluidity of organizing** | **X** | | | | **X** |

Note: Large “X”s suggest major theoretical component, small “x”s suggest a minor theoretical component.

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