Scientific Research Publishing

Does Humble Leadership Behavior Promote Employees' Voice Behavior?—A Dual Mediating Model

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Abstract

Humble leadership behavior consists of acknowledging personal faults, mistakes and limits; spotlighting their followers' contributions and strengths; modeling teachability. Previous studies have suggested that humble leadership behavior leads to a number of positive outcomes for organizations, such as high levels of learning goal orientation, performance and engagement, yet almost nothing has been confirmed by empirical research and the mechanism through which humble leadership behavior influences follower's behavior is still unclear. In this paper, we explore the potential mediator between humble leadership behavior and employee's voice behavior by examining the mediating role of trust in leadership and positive affect. The results of this study expand our understanding of mechanisms of humble leadership behavior in Chinese context. It has a certain amount of theoretical and managerial implications.

Keywords

Humble Leadership Behavior, Trust in Leadership, Positive Affect, Voice Behavior

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of the business model and the constant change of the economic environment, the external environment of the enterprise is more complicated and changeable, which requires the enterprise to have the ability to quickly update and adapt to the new environment. Business leaders must maintain a high degree of sensitivity to employees, in order to ensure the continued appreciation of the value of the enterprise. *Voice behavior*, which is defined as *proactively challenging the status quo and giving constructive suggestions* [1], is important to organizations depending in-

creasingly on innovation and rapid reactions to accumulate a core competitive force. Although most of the researchers and management practitioners have realized, the voice behavior is crucial to the development of enterprises, but in reality employees to give advice to the higher level is still relatively rare. Therefore, how to effectively stimulate employee voice behavior becomes common concern of the organization researchers and managers of enterprises.

As a newly received attention of leadership behavior, humble leadership behavior mainly reflected as a leader acknowledging personal faults, mistakes and limits; spotlighting their followers' contributions and strengths, and modeling teachability [1]. Humble leadership behavior can significantly affect employee performance, job satisfaction and willingness of contribution, and has an important impact on the positive behavior of employees [2]. While a number of authors have suggested that humility facilitates greater leadership effectiveness [3] [4], the how and the why of this relationship remains unclear (*i.e.*, through which mechanisms). We suggested that because humble leaders present greater "openness to new ideas, contradictory information, and advice" [5], they adopt more balanced processing of information. Humble leaders will provide an important external environment reflection and recognize their own shortcomings, so they are more willing to accept the new knowledge and new ideas from the employee voice behavior; besides, they will actively tap the strengths of others, can effectively enhance the subordinate self-efficacy [3]. It is thereby likely that humble leaders are perceived as having a stronger impact on employee voice behavior. So the focus of this study is to explore the excitation mechanism of employee voice behavior from the humble leadership behavior such an important external context perspective.

At the same time, according to the literature research results, a majority of researchers have explored the mechanism of voice behavior from the social exchange perspective. Although this perspective can explain the dynamic input and output exchange process between individuals and organizations, but it emphasize too much on the expected return and reciprocity norms and thus ignore the emotional factors of employees. In fact, due to the voice behavior has high risk, it is necessary to consider emotional factors which promote employees regardless of the risk of voice behavior. So, in order to overcome the social exchange theory in explaining the voice behavior mechanism, this study adopts the cognitive affective personality system (CAPS) perspective [6]. As the latest development in the field of cognitive psychology, cognitive affective personality system theory illustrates the dynamic process between the external environment and the specific behavior, personality system in cognitive and affective units. The most prominent contribution of the theory is that it can take into account the two factors of cognition and affect at the same time, so CAPS can well explain the relationship between the external situation, personality traits and behavior motivation. In view of this, exploring the mechanism of voice behavior through cognitive-affective combined path not only can better describe the real process, there will also be greater theoretical significance. Based on the above analysis, this study will explore the mechanisms between humble leadership behavior and employee voice behavior from the cognitive-af-

fective combined perspective, in order to provide enlightenment for theoretical research and management practice.

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis

2.1. The Effect of Humble Leadership Behavior on Voice Behavior

Even though plenty of researchers have mentioned that leadership behavior has significant effects on employees' voices, only a few researches have empirically investigated this axiom [7]. Hsiung revealed the authentic leadership has a positive effect of on employee voice [7], Walumbwa and Schaubroeck found a positive relationship between ethical leadership and employee voice [8]. While the leadership theory is regarded as an important factor in improving the effectiveness of leadership, there is still few researchers bring the leader's "humility" behavior characteristic to notice. In recent years, with the continuous development of the management practice, some researchers take the lead in introducing the humble into the management research field, and developed the operational definition and measurement methods. Humble leaders is a bottom-up style of leadership and leaders by modestly open to others learning, appreciate the contributions of others and advantages, open their own shortcomings and errors etc. a series of behavior, to improve leadership effeteness and manage staff [2]. Oriental culture has always been advocating humility, western philosophers Augustine and Luther have called for people to pay attention to and practice humility, the Christian doctrine also believes that humility can lead to glory, there is a causal relationship between the two. Studies in China and the western countries have found that the humble leadership can promote the trust of subordinates, have a positive impact on organizational learning and organizational flexibility, and play a positive role in shaping the organizational climate [2] [3].

In the modern organizational context characterized by high complexity and requirements for adaptability, a greater emphasis on the bottom-up aspects of leadership is necessary. Leaders who admit they do not have all the answers in a complex and unknowable world are more credible. A leader who accepts mistakes and failures and embraces the unknown, along with maintaining a grounded self-view and perspective of others, while acknowledging the team members' strengths, provides many benefits for voice behavior. We extrapolate that the benefits of humble leadership on voice behavior might include a greater openness to new paradigms and a focus on exploration, a capacity to learn from others, a willingness to recognize personal failings or limitations, a greater likelihood of initiating efforts to learn and correct past mistakes, a willingness to follow advice, greater respect for those with more experience, the mentoring of juniors, and the avoidance of self-complacency [9]. Voice behavior is often accompanied with risks, it will lead employees be labeled as trouble maker, damage their relationship with others and thus damage their social capital, even be punished by supervisor. So a leader who can tolerate mistakes will make employees don't have to worry too much about the loss failure may bring about, so workers dare tell the truth to the humble leaders. At the same time, ranking affirmation and appreciation can enhance the confidence of subor-

dinates; so as to facilitate the staff put forward their views. The humble characteristics make leaders think, it is not the only way to solve the problem, and often is not the best way, so they are willing to work with subordinates to establish the relationship between the two-way communications for feedback seeking. Nielsen found that, it's a distinctive feature of the humble leader that as far as possible to understand the views of others before the establishment of the overall vision [2]. Once this feature is perceived by subordinates, they will be more organizational identification, more willing to express their ideas.

Hypothesis H1: humble leadership behavior has a positive impact on voice behavior.

2.2. The Mediating Role of Employees' Trust in Supervisor

Employees' trust in supervisor is formed after the long-term interaction, and will produce dynamic changes within the interaction [10]. In the workplace, if the supervisor gives employees feedback beyond the psychological expectations, the staff will strengthen the trust to their supervisor; otherwise it will weaken and reduce the positive psychological expectations. Therefore, when the supervisor implement humble leadership behavior, with a low profile honestly treat employees and actively give praise the staff, the staff will reinforces the subjective trust because it was beyond the psychological expectations of positive feedback and the exchange relationship responded with higher expectations. Trust is the foundation of social relations; the staff to enhance the trust in the supervisor can further strengthen the relationship with their leaders. According to positive feedback principle of social exchange theory, the more intimate the relationship between employees and supervisors, employees are more willing to provide returns, so as to more actively safeguard the interests of the organization or leadership, and therefore present voice behavior [11].

Hypothesis H2: employees' trust in leadership played a mediating role in the correlation between humble leadership behavior and voice behavior.

2.3. The Mediating Role of Positive Affect

Affective events theory believes that employees in the workplace exposure to events will bring positive or negative emotional reactions, after a long time of accumulation, these emotional reactions will produce significant influence on employee behavior. As one of the most important contact objects in the place, the management style of the supervisor has a great influence on the employee's emotional experience. Specifically, humble leaders tend to take the initiative to admit their mistakes and shortcomings, so that subordinates have less psychological burden, bring more mental freedom, employees could get more "psychological release" in front of the leaders for their lack of secretive [12], therefore strengthen the positive mood. And humble leaders often take the initiative to appreciate and praise the subordinate, let subordinates aware of the existence of their own advantages and unique contribution [2], these positive feedback will enable the staff encouraged, burst of energy. According to the Broaden-and-Build theory of positive emotions [13], the positive emotion can bring competitive advantage for indi-

viduals to, improve action ability and reaction within a short time, and enhance the flexibility of thinking, so there are more convenient conditions for employees to produce new ideas and suggestions. Overall, affected by the humble leadership style subordinates will experience more positive emotional feeling, those emotional experience will affect employee's cognition and evaluation, and they are more likely to classified themselves into the present organization, and be more positive to express advice.

Hypothesis H3: employees' positive affect played a mediating role in the correlation between humble leadership behavior and voice behavior.

The frame diagram of our research was showed in Figure 1.

3. Methodology

3.1. The Sample and Data Collection

Participants were 286 employees (response rate = 92%) who worked in 25 Chinese companies in Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen and Foshan through personal contacts with top level managers and human resource managers. Industry types were financial, electronic products manufacturing, communications, electricity, and logistics. After we had deleted records with more than 3 items unanswered, the remaining valid questionnaires were 244 (effective rate = 93%). In our simple of 244 employees, 53% were men and 47% were women; at the age of 26 to 30 years (38.3%) were relatively more; 64.9% had a bachelor's degree; nearly four to participates (40.4%) had been working in their company for more than 5 years, 32.4% of the respondents were common staff, 38.9% were middle managers.

3.2. Questionnaire Structure and Variable Measurements

All items adopted from existing instruments and used in the present study were translated into Chinese using a standard translation and back-translation procedure. All items were measured on a 5-point scale, with response categories ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

1) Humble leadership behavior was measured using 9 items of Owens, Johnson and Mitchell's 9-item scale [14]. The table contains three dimensions: acknowledging personal limits, faults, and mistakes (typical problems such as: your leader will admit himself or herself in some ways less), spotlighting follower strengths and contributions (typical topics such as: your leader will appreciate others in the team's unique contribution),
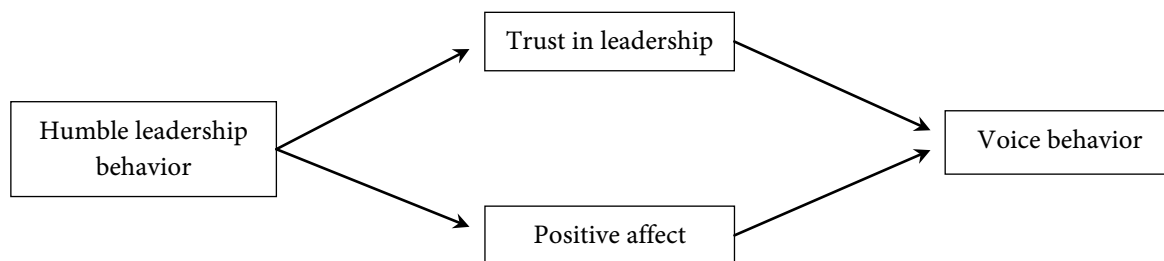

Figure 1. Theoretical model.

modeling teachability (typical questions such as: willing to learn from others). In the present study, the Cronbach Alpha for the self-reported data was 0.925.

2) Trust in leadership is based on the scale of Gao, Janssen and Shi [15], and includes a total of 5 items (typical topics such as: I believe that my leadership will be fair and impartial treatment of subordinates). In the present study, the Cronbach Alpha for the self-reported data was 0.916.

3) Positive emotion is based on the scale of Thompson [16] adaptation of Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS), a total of 10 items, five items were measuring positive affects (decisive, active, attention, alertness, encouraged). Employees evaluate their own experience in the past period of time to the extent of the above emotions. In the present study, the Cronbach Alpha for the self-reported data was 0.854.

4) Voice behavior is based on the scale of Dyne Van [1] developed a questionnaire, a total of 6 items (typical topics such as: I'm proposed to affect the operation of the team and to invite other team members to solve the problem). In the present study, the Cronbach Alpha for the self-reported data was 0.867.

3.3. Discriminant Validity Test of Variables

We used AMOS19.0 to conduct a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) of the variables. The hypothesized model fit the data reasonably (Table 1). CFA results showed that the four-factor model (*i.e.*, humble leadership behavior, trust in leadership, positive affect, voice behavior) fit the data better than alternative models, according to results for incremental fit index (IFI), normed fit index (NFI), comparative fit index (CFI), and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), goodness of fit index (GFI), adjusted goodness of fit index(AGFI). For example, the four-factor model in which $\chi^2/df = 1.511$; RMSEA = 0.046, GFI = 0.888, CFI = 0.959, AGFI = 0.826, IFI = 0.959, RMR = 0.032, yielded a better fit than a three-factor model formed by combing trust in leadership and positive affect: $\chi^2/df = 1.511$; RMSEA = 0.046, GFI = 0.888, CFI = 0.959, AGFI = 0.826, IFI = 0.959, RMR = 0.032, with a χ^2 change of 159.8.

4. Hypothesis Testing and Analysis of Results

There was a significant positive relationship between humble leadership behavior and voice behavior (r = 0.57, p < 0.001; Table 2). This is consistent with Hypothesis 1. Following the procedures of Edwards and lambert [17], we tested the hypotheses through

Table 1. Comparison of measurement models.

Model	Description	χ^2/df	RMSEA	GFI	CFI	AGFI	RMR	IFI
The baseline four-factor model	HLB, TL, PE, VB	1.511	0.046	0.888	0.959	0.862	0.032	0.959
The three-factor model	HLB, TL combined with PE, VB	2.059	0.066	0.836	0.912	0.804	0.041	0.889
The two-factor model	HLB combined with TL and PE, VB	2.661	0.083	0.781	0.861	0.741	0.049	0.762
The one-factor model	All variables were combined	2.927	0.089	0.758	0.839	0.714	0.051	0.740

Note: HLB = Humble leadership behavior, TL = Trust in leadership, PE = Positive affect, VB = Voice behavior.

Table 2. Means, standard deviations, and correlations (aggregated data).

Variables	1	2	3	4
1) Humble leadership behavior				
2) Trust in leadership	0.56***			
3) Positive affect	0.57***	0.59***		
4) Voice behavior	0.57***	0.53***	0.61***	
Mean	3.95	3.60	3.89	4.03
SD	0.79	0.95	0.72	0.62

Note. n = 244, ***: p < 0.001; **: p < 0.01; *: p < 0.05; HLB = Humble leadership behavior, TL = Trust in leadership, PE = Positive affect, VB = Voice behavior.

the mediation model. Specifically, we tested the following equations:

Employee voice behavior = $b_{01} + b_{02}$ Control + b_{03} Humble leadership behavior + e (1).

Trust in leadership = $a_{01} + a_{02}$ Control + a_{04} Humble leadership behavior + e (2.1).

Positive affect = $a_{11} + a_{12}$ Control + a_{13} Humble leadership behavior + e (2.2).

Employee voice behavior = $b_{11} + b_{12}$ Control + b_{13} Humble leadership behavior + b_{13} Trust in leadership + b_{15} Positive affect + e (3).

Edwards and Lambert recommend generating 95% bias-corrected bootstrapped confidence intervals (CI) to evaluate the significance of the conditional indirect effect. Using Hayes's PROCESS macro (Model 4) [18], we tested the above equations and obtained bias-corrected bootstrapped CI (using 1000 bootstrap samples) for the conditional indirect effect. Humble leadership was positively related to employee voice behavior; therefore, Hypothesis 1 was supported. Humble leadership behavior was positively related to trust in leadership and positive affect. Trust in leadership partially mediated the relationship between humble leadership behavior and employee voice behavior. Positive affect partially mediated the link between humble leadership behavior and employee voice behavior. The estimates and bias-corrected bootstrapped 95% CI for the conditional indirect effects were as follows: humble leadership behavior had a total effect on employee voice behavior (P = 0.57, p < 0.001, bias-corrected CI: 0.50 - 0.65); humble leadership behavior had an indirect effect on employee voice behavior through trust in leadership (P = 0.07, p < 0.05, bias-corrected CI: 0.01 - 0.15) and positive mood (P = 0.24, p < 0.05, bias-corrected CI: 0.14 - 0.36). Thus, Hypotheses 2 and 3 were supported.

5. Discussions and Conclusions

5.1. Theoretical and Practical Significance

To our knowledge, we are the first researchers who have examined the mediating roles of trust in leadership and positive affect in the relationship between humble leadership behavior and voice behavior. Our findings also expand on previous results and contribute to the literature on the relationship between humble leadership behavior and voice behavior. We have shown that humble leadership behavior at the individual level can

positively predict employee voice behavior. This is consistent with previous findings that humble leadership behavior is an important antecedent of employees' individual performance and contextual performance [14], and has a significant impact on employees' attitudes and behavior in the workplace [19]. The results also showed that humble leadership behavior increased employee voice behavior through cognitive and affection mechanisms, empirically supporting Hsiung's argument that ethical leadership behavior impacted on employee voice behavior via cognition (leader-number exchange) and affection (positive mood) process [7].

Our findings have several important implications for organizational managers. By showing that trust in leadership and positive affect are mediators, we have signaled that, when determining how to increase employee voice behavior, managers should consider devoting more effort to cultivating humble leadership behavior and increasing employee trust in leadership and positive mood. That is, they should encourage activities and positive mood. Moreover, leaders in organizations should act as moral role models for employees and should design appropriate human resource policies that emphasize high humble standards.

5.2. Research Limitations

There are several limitations in our research. First, the measures were self-reported by the stuff members. Common method bias may be a concern. Therefore, ideally, future researchers should measure the predictors from different sources. Second, the analysis in our study was at individual level. Future researchers could examine these relationships from a team perspective, especially given the increasing role of teams in the workplace. An example of this is the impact of the humble leadership of a team on the voice behavior of employees in that team. Finally, more attention should be paid to the examination of the mechanisms underlying the relationship between humble leadership and employee voice behavior.

5.3. Conclusion of the Study

This study explores the mechanism of humble leadership behavior which affects employee voice behavior. According to the cognitive affective personality system theory (CAPS), researchers find that trust in leadership, which represents the social exchange cognitive factor, and positive emotion which represents the emotional factor play a common-mediated role between humble leadership behavior and employee voice behavior. Research results show that: 1) humble leadership can have significant positive influence on employee voice; 2) employees' trust in leadership and workplace positive affects play an intermediary role in the relationship between humble leadership behavior and voice behavior.

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