Leadership and Governance

Interactive Session

Humility in Leadership – Innovating a Classic

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ABSTRACT: '*It can be said that humility has its roots in the 'classics' of historical, theological and philosophical literature and yet there is a resurgence of interest, particularly in positive psychology, as to its applications for leaders today. This renewed interest offers an opportunity to 'innovate' the classic view of humility to one that has validity in contemporary leadership contexts. As a young field, the conceptualisation and definition of humility is still emerging. However initial research indicates that leader humility has applications for employee engagement, team performance and adult development. This paper will explore a short review of the academic literature before proposing to further explore 'humility as a marker for professional growth in leaders and their direct reports'.*

Keywords: Leadership, Management Education and Development, Organisational Behaviour, Human Resource Management

PAPER

Introduction

The word humility evolved from the word *humilita*s which, in turn, originated from the Latin word *humus,* meaning the earth beneath us (Argandona, 2014a; Dickson, 2011). Since its inception, the concept of humility has been influenced by philosophical, theological and psychological bodies of knowledge which, in the past, has defined humility as having elements of self-sacrifice, unworthiness or weakness (Argandona, 2014a; Garcia, 2006, 2015; Hill & Sandage, 2016; Roberts & Wood, 2003; Tangney, 2000; Žiaran, 2015). The resurgence of interest in humility (Chancellor & Lyubomirsky, 2013), has led to redefining humility as a position of strength, particularly in the organisational literature (Ou, 2011; Owens, 2009b; Owens et al., 2013; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). As an emerging field, academics are not yet in agreement as to how to define or measure humility, (Ancona et al.,

2007; Hackett & Wang, 2012; Nielsen et al., 2013; Oc et al., 2015; Owens & Hekman, 2011). However, there is fast growing acknowledgement that humility in leadership matters (Argandona, 2014a; Frostenson, 2015; Garcia, 2015; Hill & Sandage, 2016; Nielsen et al., 2009; Ou et al., 2014) and a previously unacknowledged positive impact on leaders, individuals and organisations (Argandona, 2014a; Davis et al., 2015; Hill & Sandage, 2016; B. P Owens & D. R Hekman, 2015; Robinson, 2015; Žiaran, 2015). Although the research field of humility is an emerging and rich opportunity for discussion, this paper will narrow its focus on 'innovating a classic', that is, leaders with humility in the contemporary context of organisations and any possible impacts.

Themes in the Literature

The positive psychology movement, has 'reclaimed' humility after suffering a distinct lack of attention (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) and there is now a sustained growing interest in character strengths and virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) in organisational literature. As an emergent field the themes in the literature tend to be focused on the need for academic alignment of the conceptualisation, definition and measurement of humility. This review of the literature was contained to the most relevant fields which included positive psychology and organisations and leadership. The search included the last fifty years, however 80% of the articles were published in the last ten years. The search was narrowed to include: humility, humble, leader, leadership, organisation's, organizations terms used in the title, abstract and key word searches.

Conceptualisation of humility

The different conceptualisations of humility are evident in the wide variety of terms used to classify humility, such as; a trait (Worthington & Berry, 2005), a state (Chancellor & Lyubomirsky, 2013), a virtue (Nielsen et al., 2013), a value, a strength , a behaviour, a personality factor or dimension (Ashton & Lee, 2008), a characteristic and an attribute. Further to these descriptions, humility can be depicted using adjectives and nouns in order to 'contain' a particular aspect of humility or emphasise a 'type' of humility like; expressed humility (Owens et al., 2013), demonstrated humility, intellectual

humility (Whatley, 2014), cultural humility (Hodgin, 2014), civic humility (Knippenberg, 2007), personal humility (Collins, 2005) , leader humility (Owens, 2009a). In more recent years, there has been a distinct shift in the literature to refer to humility as a virtue and strength (Argandona, 2014b; Nielsen et al., 2013; Nielsen et al., 2009; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Samuelson et al., 2014; Worthington, 2008) (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). More recently Owens and Hekman (2015) have conceptualised a framework of humility that includes humility as:

- An interpersonal characteristic that emerges in social contexts and suggests:
  - A willingness to view oneself accurately
  - An appreciation of others' strengths and contributions
  - Teachability, or openness to new ideas and feedback
- It is also connected with:
  - Self-transcendence, or acknowledging something greater than self and connecting with things outside the self

This may well be a framework that can be used, developed and refined to then be able to better measure humility.

Defining humility

Humility is understood to be a complex and multifaceted construct (Byerly, 2014; Kellenberger, 2010; Snow, 1995). This is particularly apparent when researchers attempt to synthesise historical perspectives and conceptual categorisations, and try to shift from a 'classical' definition of humility of, self-abasement, low self-esteem and meekness to a more 'innovative' version of the classic description summarised as a virtue or strength. Characteristics of this more innovative description of humility include; an accurate view of self, ability to acknowledge mistakes, openness to receiving feedback, advice and learning, a recognition of those who have contributed to their success, low self-focus and high focus on others, a sense of awe and gratitude, and appreciation of the value of all things. (Argandona, 2014a; Davis et al., 2015; Hill & Sandage, 2016; Paine et al., 2015; Wright et al., 2016). While researchers describe these characteristics in different ways, this summary shows the

collective trend of what constitutes humility today, which has been a significant positive change taking research in a promising new direction.

Measuring humility

Given the previously identified challenges with accurately conceptualising and defining humility, it then follows that there are similar challenges with the measurement of humility. Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches have all been used to date in the measurement of humility. The HEXACO personality inventory (Ashton & Lee, 2008) is an example of a trait based measure of humility. Owens (2014; 2009a, 2009b; 2011; 2015; 2013; 2012; 2015) uses both qualitative and mixed methods to research humility. In addition, further challenges are the use of self-report measures and informant measures. The development of a self-report measure of humility is very difficult to do. In asking a humble person if they are humble, the answer could be yes and no, and both could be correct. (Bollinger, 2010). Furthermore, in certain situations, the person may perceive a positive or negative outcome of stating they are humble which can influence their results. Even when using informant ratings of humility there are still challenges, including issues with face validity, the time and expense involved in collecting multiple informants for each participant and it is possible that informants may report that the person is more humble than they actually are (Davis, 2010).

Humility and the applications for Leadership

If leadership is the most important contextual factor in shaping individual and team performance (Hambrick & Quigley, 2014), then it also makes sense that humility as a characteristic of leadership could be a positive contributor. While there are many applications for humility, the scope of this paper is beyond describing all of them. However, the next session addresses those most pertinent for the proposed research, which include: humility as an enabler of employee engagement, team performance and professional development.

Humility as an enabler of employee engagement

Employee engagement is about creating an emotional connection that the employee feels for their organisation and work, which then motivates them to exercise greater discretion at work (Heger, 2007). The leader's role, then is critical in ensuring that an effective emotional connection is created. The humble leader is known to develop strong interpersonal relationships (B. P Owens & D. R Hekman, 2015) and exhibits qualities of empathy, gentleness, respect, appreciation for the value of others, gratitude and a willingness to share credit (Wright et al., 2016). In addition, Wright et al. (2016), posit that humble leader's show a shift of preoccupation from self to others. These qualities strengthen the humble leader's approach resulting in a positive impact on engagement of employees and workplace culture. There is also a downstream impact of these positive behaviours. When leaders behave humbly, their followers emulate those behaviours, creating a shared interpersonal process, which, in turn, creates a team focused on striving towards its highest potential (B. P Owens & D. R Hekman, 2015). The flow on effect of the leader's humility through to the followers can lead to a tipping point, or change a in culture that has an impact wider than just their team. The humble leader has an 'other person' orientation, rather than a self-orientation, which helps to develop a stronger bond in the workplace creates a perception that 'my manager really does care about me', and 'I am valued by my manager / organisation' which are common questions in engagement surveys. Owens (2015) discovered that leaders who display humility can be a counter balance to other leaders who may exhibit narcissistic tendencies.

Humility as an enabler of team performance

Hambrick & Quigleys (2014) research has previously established that leadership is the most important contextual factor in shaping team performance. Further research (Paine et al., 2015; Wright et al., 2016) established that a humble leadership style has a number of positive characteristics, such as a tendency toward more ethical leadership, abiding by moral codes, recognition of and engaging with

other perspectives, a warm style and conscientious approach, an inclination toward forgiveness, proactivity rather than an avoidance of conflict and unwillingness to take revenge (Wright et al., 2016). While a direct link between humble leadership and team performance cannot be made on this information alone, on the surface, this coupling seems to make sense and is worthy of further exploration. Humble leadership is also associated with a more empathic writing style and an ability to build authentic relationships and demonstrate appropriate vulnerability (Paine et al., 2015). These positive characteristics, combined with a low self-focus and high focus on others, with a willingness to admit mistakes (Owens & Hekman, 2011) bode well for a leader's humility to be an enabler of team performance.

Humility as an enabler of adult development in the workplace

A growth mind-set, or the belief to influence or change one's intelligence, skills and abilities, is a primary factor in people's capacity to develop. The characteristics of humility that assist with a growth mind-set and development could be, an accurate view of self, the ability to acknowledge mistakes, an openness to receiving feedback and advice, learning and an appreciation of the value of all things. If development requires an accurate understanding of both the current and future state of skills and ability, and the capacity to receive feedback and information to fill that gap, then humility has a lot to offer as an enabler of a growth mind-set and development. The ability to self-reflect, to take criticism, to recognise of the importance of others over self (Paine et al., 2015) and to grow as a leader, sets a powerful and symbolic example for others to follow. It has the potential to send a message that 'managed' failure can be acceptable at times, if there is growth and development. In fact, it is possible that being 'humbled' through learning, may in fact be a pathway to further humility (Wright et al., 2016). Further to this, humility has been identified as a necessary, but not sufficient, virtue for the development of other virtues, which in and of itself is a potential enabler of development and has a run on effect to the direct reports of leaders (Wright et al., 2016).

Further gaps in the research

Despite the increased interest in humility, the literature still points to further areas of exploration including humility is conceptualised and defined, how humility can be effectively measured, contexts in which humility can flourish, the impact of leader humility on employee engagement and how leader humility contributes to developmental growth.

Proposed Research Question

The emerging field of humility in leaders is gaining the attention of both academics' and practioners' and is an area that is rich with research opportunities. Given then, the research opportunities this offers, it is the author's intention to use a qualitative approach to identify the extent to which humility is a marker of professional growth in senior leaders and their teams. The results of this research, will help create an innovative and sustainable future through a humbler approach to leading others. A 'senior leader' will be defined as someone who has accountability for the profit and loss for their division or company and typically a person who has direct reports who also have direct reports. The organisations used in this forth coming study will be a combination of public and private sectors located in Australia and New Zealand. It is proposed that the research uses a range of methodologies including semi-structured interviews of leaders and their direct reports, possibly using two time intervals. There is also the potential to use 360-degree feedback tools if a suitable scale for humility is identified. In terms of participant selection, it is intended to use the author's and supervisor's networks. It is anticipated, if possible, to interview participant's direct reports first to help establish the presence of humility and then interview the participants themselves.

Conclusion

Humility as a virtue as demonstrated by leaders in organisational contexts is enjoying a resurgence of popularity and is even debuting in various forms of media as a point of discussion. It seems the days of humility being 'the most overlooked and under- appreciated virtue' (Chancellor & Lyubomirsky, 2013) appear to be numbered. This paper attempts to explore the evolution of a concept from a classical, more negative perception of humility, to a more innovative form of humility that is relevant to contemporary forms of leadership that aim to create sustainable futures in organisations. While humility is still a young and emergent field that has yet to achieve significant academic alignment on its conceptualisation, definition and measurement, this has not dampened the voices of those who are saying that humility in leadership 'matters' and does have substantial positive impacts on individuals, teams and organisations. More recent research in particular has highlighted the positive impact of humility on employee engagement, team performance and professional development. Given then, the research opportunities this offers, it is the author's intention to use a qualitative approach to identifying the extent to which humility is a surface marker of professional growth in senior leaders and their teams. The results of this research, will help create an innovative and sustainable future through a humble approach to leading others.

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