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From humble beginnings to a critical juncture: redirecting research on humble leadership

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ABSTRACT

Recent reviews portray humble leadership as a near-universal asset, yet a close inspection of 217 journal articles (274 studies) suggests the construct rests on shaky ground. Prevailing definitions conflate self-insight, appreciation of others, and teachability, variables rooted in other literatures, creating tautologies and valence-based halo. Measurement issues compound the problem: 84% of studies rely on surveys, so ratings of "humble leadership" are conflated by various mechanisms (e.g., evaluative judgments, performance-cue effects, omitted variables) and should not be used as independent variables. We argue that progress on this topic depends on shifting attention from traits and evaluations toward the behaviors that humility denotes: voluntary, public, status-minimizing acts through which leaders redirect credit away from themselves. With this definition, we integrate signaling theory with an idiosyncrasy-credit perspective, arguing that self-effacement behaviors function as costly signals: they translate into humility perceptions only when paired with accrued credit that is placed at risk. It follows, for instance, that signaling humility in the absence of established credit is likely to backfire. We develop testable propositions, a conceptual model linking accrued credit to signal credibility, and an incentive-compatible laboratory paradigm that enables identification of the causal effects of instrumented humility signaling. We conclude with recommendations for behavioral coding, archival text analysis, and experimentally grounded field designs that can replace halo-laden survey inferences with more credible evidence on when humility signaling helps, when it harms, and when it goes unnoticed.

Introduction

"If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants." This maxim, often credited to Isaac Newton, emphasizes the virtue leaders display when acknowledging their debt to others. Yet, another quip, commonly attributed to Golda Meir, warns, *"Don't be so humble—you're not that great,"* highlighting the risk that a leader who downplays their achievements without first establishing credibility might be dismissed as falsely modest or incompetent. Together, these sayings expose the tension at the heart of humble-leadership research: when does self-effacement signal virtue, and when might it backfire?

Despite more than two hundred empirical studies as well as several systematic and meta-analytic reviews (see Chandler et al., 2023; Kelemen et al., 2023; Luo et al., 2022; Wu, Chen, & Zhang, 2025), the construct of humble leadership (or leader humility[1]) remains conceptually ambiguous and methodologically fragile. Existing definitions (e.g., Oc et al., 2015; Ou et al., 2014; Owens et al., 2013) blend together a wide range of elements, including intrapersonal traits such as accurate self-view, interpersonal tendencies such as appreciation of others, and follower assessments such as perceived teachability. This conflation of

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[1] The terms 'leader humility', 'humble leadership, 'expressed humility', and 'leader-expressed humility' are used interchangeably in the extant literature. Following prior reviews (e.g., Kelemen et al., 2023), for consistencies sake we refer to these as 'humble leadership' throughout our manuscript, later advancing a new and distinct definition of "leader humility signaling".

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traits, states, and judgments stretches the construct well beyond what the label "humility" ordinarily denotes. Measurement relies heavily on follower-rated surveys that entwine observable behavior with evaluative judgment and thereby introduce endogeneity that undermines causal claims (Banks et al., 2023). Together, these issues make the domain of humble leadership ripe for conceptual and operational reset. To avoid the definitional sprawl that has hampered prior work, we explicitly distinguish humility as a behavioral construct from related intrapersonal and interpersonal domains. Traits such as modesty, Honesty–Humility, or openness may predispose leaders to act humbly; states such as self-awareness may facilitate humility in a given moment; and interpersonal tendencies such as consideration or appreciation of others may co-occur with humility. Yet none of these focus on what leaders do – specifically, how observable behaviors are interpreted as humility in leadership contexts characterized by informational asymmetry (see Connelly et al., 2011).

Our aim is to disentangle these strands and refocus inquiry on what can be observed and tested (see Fischer et al., 2020, 2023). By anchoring humility in observable behavior, traits and states are treated as antecedents or moderators, clarifying that humble leadership is enacted rather than possessed (e.g., Ferris et al., 2007). Consistent with signaling theory, which emphasizes that credible leadership signals must be grounded in observable acts that are meaningfully linked to underlying qualities (Connelly et al., 2011; Schimmelpfennig et al., 2026; Spence, 1973), we distinguish between cheap talk—costless, easily produced claims that do not constrain the sender—and costly signals, which involve production, opportunity, or penalty costs and are therefore more difficult to imitate (Austen-Smith & Banks, 2002; Kleinert, 2024). Specifiaclly, we define leader humility signaling as voluntary, public acts through which a leader who has accrued warranted credit via demonstrated competence, status, or achievement redirects that credit away from themself. Such redirection may involve directing credit toward others or the collective, or attributing success to external factors. In doing so, leaders forgo reputational or status benefits that could otherwise have been claimed, rendering these acts potentially costly.

This behavioral focus does not imply that humility is reducible to observable acts or that internal dispositions and follower perceptions are unimportant. Humility can be meaningfully conceptualized at multiple levels, including traits, psychological states, and evaluations (e.g., Weidman et al., 2018). Rather, the signaling lens isolates the observable behavioral layer through which humility becomes visible and interpretable, allowing it to be studied without conflating behavior with global impressions or inferred motives.

This understanding aligns humility with its classical opposite, hubris: where hubris denotes overreaching pride, humility denotes deliberate self-lowering once credit has been accrued. The Latin *humilitas*, from *humus* (earth), reinforces the notion of remaining grounded despite having reasons to claim recognition. Tracing these roots directs attention toward grounded action—specifically, the public redirection of warranted credit.

Crucially, such behavior can only credibly signal humility when the leader holds sufficient idiosyncrasy credit (Hollander, 1958; Hollander & Julian, 1970) to make the gesture costly. Without this, self-effacement may be interpreted as weakness, false modesty, or strategic ingratiation. Viewed through signaling theory, credit redirection functions as a costly signal: publicly forgoing earned recognition in ways not all leaders can credibly sustain. Observers may therefore interpret these acts as evidence of underlying qualities such as credibility, legitimacy, or secure standing.

Importantly, this behavioral emphasis does not render perceptual measures invalid. Rather, the concern lies in treating such ratings as exogenous predictors. When estimating the effects of perceived humility, researchers must account for endogeneity, for instance by manipulating exogenous causes and instrumenting the rated construct (Sajons, 2020). We return to this identification logic when discussing measurement and experimental designs later in the paper. Finally, this approach aligns with a broader shift in leadership research toward conceptualizing behaviors as informational signals rather than solely as traits or perceptions. Work on charisma, ethical leadership, and related domains similarly emphasizes observability, costs, and inference processes (e.g., Antonakis et al., 2016; Banks et al., 2021, Banks, Ross, et al., 2023; Grabo et al., 2017; Stock et al., 2023), situating our reconceptualization within a wider effort to clarify how leader behavior conveys information about underlying qualities and intentions.

Based on the premise outlined above, our review seeks to undertake a reset of the humble leadership field. First, we audit 274 empirical studies for conceptual clarity and causal identification, revealing fatal limitations including conflation and endogeneity. Second, we elaborate the behavioral definition introduced above, specifying its boundaries and differentiating it from other constructs. Third, we develop a signaling-theory framework, integrating the notion of idiosyncrasy credit, that predicts when leader humility signaling helps, when it harms, and when it goes unnoticed, including a timeline tracing how credit and cost interact. Finally, we outline a future research agenda that has the potential to establish causal effects without the endogeneity bias that, alongside conceptual issues, hampers current progress. Defining leader humility signaling as an observable, costly act of credit redirection establishes the conceptual and methodological foundations needed for systematic theoretical and empirical development.

Section one: A critical review of humble leadership

Search strategy and inclusion criteria

To critically assess the current state of the empirical literature on humble leadership, we used two search approaches to identify relevant empirical studies for our review (see Fig. 1 for PRISMA diagram). First, we searched for journal articles published in English in the scientific databases ProQuest and PsychInfo up until June 2025, using specific keywords linked to leader humility or humble leader(ship), such as "leader", "supervisor", "manager", and "leadership" combined with "humility" and "humble". Second, we searched the reference lists of recent review articles and meta-analyses on humble leadership (e.g., Chandler et al., 2023; Wu et al., 2025).

We applied three criteria to select primary studies for our review. First, we included any study that reported measuring or manipulating humble leadership, including leader self-reported and follower-rated humble leadership. Second, to focus on the established literature, we included only published journal articles, omitting grey literature such as dissertations, theses, conference proceedings, abstracts, and working papers that may not have undergone peer review. Finally, given our interest in how humble leadership has been conceptualized and operationalized in empirical work, we only included articles that contained a qualitative or quantitative examination or manipulation of humble leadership. Conceptual papers were therefore excluded from our review sample. Duplicate articles were removed before the remaining titles, abstracts, and method sections were screened for inclusion. A total of 217 journal articles, comprising 274 unique studies, met the inclusion criteria and were used in our review. A full list of the articles included in the review, along with a summary of the article coding, can be found in Appendix A.

To capture how humble leadership has been conceptualized in empirical studies, two co-authors coded the articles according to how humble leadership (or leader humility; see footnote 1) was defined. Whereas some articles referred to a single definition originating from seminal conceptual work (e.g., Owens & Hekman, 2012), many drew upon multiple definitions to describe humble leadership (e.g., Deng et al., 2019; Lin et al., 2019; Oc et al., 2020). Consistent with previous reviews, the majority (approximately 68%) of articles were primarily underpinned by the dominant conceptualization of leader-expressed humility by Owens et al. (2013), with approximately 80% adopting the respective questionnaire measure or adapting related measures

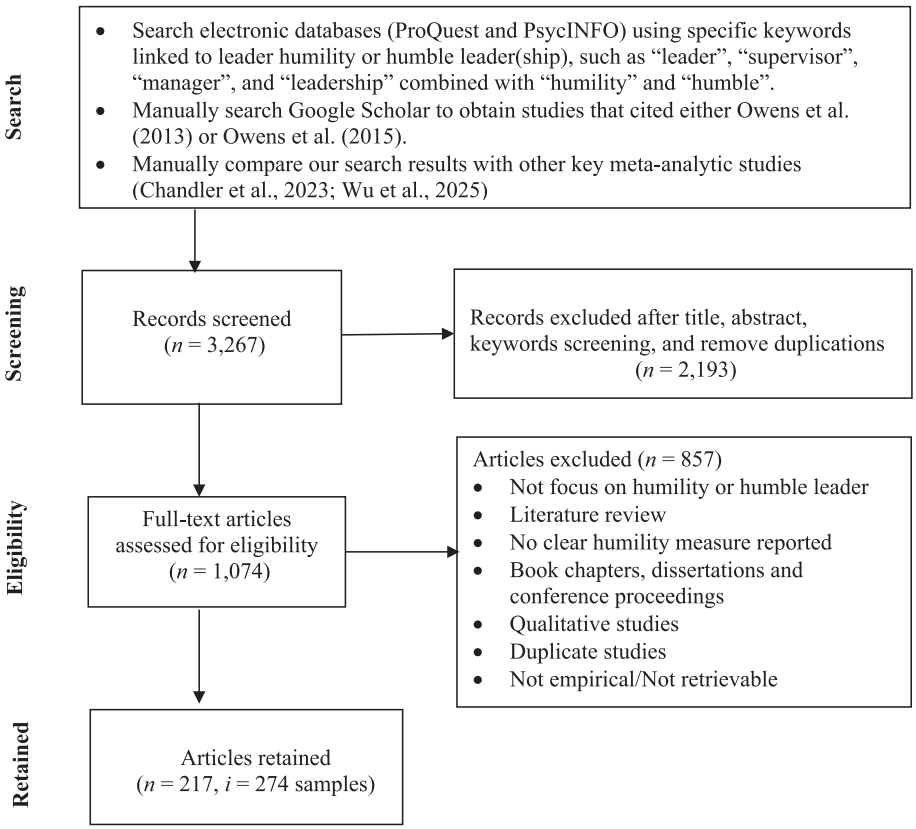

Fig. 1. PRISMA Diagram of the Literature Selection Process.

(Owens et al., 2015). Based on 55 in-depth interviews with a diverse but non-random sample of leaders, Owens and Hekman (2012) drew on leaders' retrospective accounts of their behavior and its consequences to inductively derive the construct of humble leadership based on three emergent dimensions: accurate self-view, appreciation of others, and teachability. Owens et al. (2013) then deductively tested this model by developing a quantitative measure based on these components. In doing so, they refined and formalized the definition of leader-expressed humility as "an interpersonal characteristic that emerges in social contexts and connotes (a) a manifested willingness to view oneself accurately, (b) a displayed appreciation of others' strengths and contributions, and (c) teachability" (p. 1518). In most research since, these three components are treated as highly interrelated and as core reflective indicators of humble leadership.

Beyond the work of Owens et al. (2013); also captured by Owens & Hekman, 2012, 2016), other conceptualizations include that of Ou et al. (2014; approximately 11% of articles), who extended Owens's primarily perception-based behavioral framework to incorporate cognitive (transcendent self-view) and motivational (low self-focus and self-transcendent pursuit) components (e.g., Wang, Ou, & Song, 2022). Although often described as behavioral, these formulations largely capture follower evaluations of leader conduct rather than directly observed acts, thereby blending behavioral referents with interpretive judgments. Another approach was that of Oc et al. (2015; approximately 1% of articles), who developed a conceptualization of humble leadership specific to an Asian context. Whereas four of their dimensions directly overlap with prior conceptualizations (Ou et al., 2014; Owens et al., 2013; Owens & Hekman, 2012), the other five were unique, tapping into follower-oriented or humane aspects as well as modesty. Transcendence (low self-focus) did not feature, distinguishing Oc et al. (2015) from Ou et al. (2014).

A small subset of articles departed altogether from the above conceptualizations. This subset included articles (approximately 4%; e.g., Otto et al., 2021) that conceptualized humble leadership as a dimension of servant leadership (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). Others (approximately 2%) exclusively conceptualized humility as an intrapersonal trait based on the definition of Morris et al. (2005), for example using the Honesty-Humility dimension of HEXACO (Ashton & Lee, 2007; Ryan Kirkland et al., 2021). Rego et al. (2018) noted the lack of scholarly consensus on a definition of humility and aligned their work with Tangney (2009) and Davis et al. (2013), suggesting that humble leadership includes "a combination of modesty, the ability to acknowledge one's mistakes, and a relatively low self-focus" (p. 206). This definition contrasts with the approach of Owens et al. (2013), who intentionally demarcated their interpersonal definition from the trait perspective, clarifying that "though our construct focuses on external, observable behaviors that can be perceived by others, we discuss general insights from the humility literature about the motives and cognitions that are thought to undergird the behavioral manifestations of humility" (p. 1518).

Notwithstanding this attempt to conceptualize humble leader behavior as distinct from associated traits, motives, and intentions, our review uncovered a clear mixing of interpersonal and intrapersonal perspectives on humility in the extant literature. For example, Petrenko et al. (2019) defined humble CEOs as those who "avoid arrogant and self-contemptuous behaviors (Clark, 1992; Tangney, 2009), are deeply self-aware (Ou et al., 2014: 38), are fully aware of their abilities and limitations (Tangney, 2009; Templeton, 1997), and are externally perceived as weaker or less confident (Emmons, 1998; Weiss & Knight, 1980)." Despite mixing intra- and interpersonal perspectives, the authors ultimately rely on follower observations of leader HEXACO traits to operationalize humble leadership, thereby exacerbating issues of conceptual confusion.

Conceptual challenges

Our review reveals two interconnected conceptual problems. First, the field's dominant definition, Owens et al.'s (2013) leader-expressed humility, illustrates semantic inflation. Its three pillars import constructs that pre-date the focal construct without capturing the distinctive act of status lowering. "Accurate self-view" comes from self–other agreement research (Atwater et al., 1998; Lee & Carpenter, 2018) and concerns cognitive calibration rather than humility. "Appreciation of others" replicates the consideration dimension documented in the Ohio State studies and revived in transformational leadership and related styles (Avolio & Bass, 1995; Fleishman, 1957; Judge et al., 2004). "Teachability" maps onto openness to experience (Ashton et al., 2004; Costa & McCrae, 1992) and again requires no act of self-effacement or surrender of personal credit, which underlies the semantics of the word humility. Collapsing these disparate qualities into one construct increases the likelihood of halo-based bias: leaders rated high on the composite are automatically perceived as warm, open, and prosocial, which can bias correlations with downstream outcomes, whether those outcomes are follower rated or ostensibly objective (Fischer et al., 2024).

The same definition also blurs description and evaluation. The phrase "a manifested willingness to view oneself accurately" presupposes an internal motive or willingness, rather than specifying an observable act, creating behavior–intention conflation (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023). Labeling humility as "accurate" folds execution quality into the construct, which constitutes a behavior–execution confound, whereas "teachability" asks observers to judge both the intention to learn and evidence that learning has occurred. Because most studies rely on follower questionnaires, the resulting measure captures inferences about the leader's motives or competence and the perceived consequences of such behavior, rather than the public act itself. The definition therefore becomes tautological: a leader is humble when followers judge the signal to be well intentioned and effectively executed (Fischer, 2023), a problem amplified by the broader tendency in leadership research to conflate observable behaviors with subjective evaluations (Banks, Woznyj, & Mansfield, 2023). In many cases, the causal ordering may run from favorable global impressions of the leader arising from liking, value congruence, or prior success cues, through inferences about the leader's intentions or character, to the application of the humility label, rather than from discrete credit-redirection acts to outcomes. This pattern is consistent with research on halo effects in leadership evaluations, whereby generalized positive affect can impact attributions about leader behavior and motives (e.g., Lord et al., 1984; Hansbrough et al., 2015; Fischer & Sitkin, 2023). Without isolating observable and voluntary leader self-effacement once credit is accrued, antecedents, manifestations, and effects collapse into a single, non-falsifiable bundle.

Second, although the literature appears to converge strongly around Owens et al. (2013), this convergence is primarily at the level of measurement rather than conceptualization. Many studies adopt the scale while simultaneously incorporating dispositional, relational, or evaluative elements that extend beyond its original behavioral framing. Thus, what looks like consensus reflects nominal alignment around an instrument, while substantive theoretical interpretations of humility vary considerably. Authors regularly conflate trait-based "experienced" humility (Morris et al., 2005; Nielsen et al., 2010; Ou et al., 2014) with behavior-based "expressed" humility (Davis et al., 2011; Owens et al., 2013). Part of this ambiguity likely stems from the inductive origins of the construct in the fieldwork of Owens and Hekman (2012), which examined leaders' retrospective accounts of their behavior and its impact. Although such an approach can be useful for advancing understanding of under-theorized phenomena, it is inherently subjective and susceptible to researcher influences (such as confirmation of prior assumptions) and participant influences (such as social desirability, memory distortion, or self-serving bias). It is also embedded in specific relational and organizational contexts that may not generalize across populations or cultural settings. Consequently, despite the rigorous and systematic approach used to define and operationalize leader-expressed humility (Owens et al., 2013; Owens & Hekman, 2012), the qualitative data on which the definition rests may have inadvertently contributed to the conceptual challenges outlined above.

Many studies that cite Owens and colleagues also import dispositional definitions from the broader humility literature (Tangney, 2000, 2009), blending levels of analysis without acknowledging their theoretical incompatibility (MacKenzie, 2003). Around 13% of articles reference Morris et al. (2005) trait model—self-awareness, openness, transcendence—even though these dispositions are more appropriately conceptualized as potential antecedents to leader behavior rather than components of humility itself. This distinction is consistent with broader leadership research separating personality traits from observable signaling behaviors (e.g., Akstinaite et al., 2024). Similar conflation appears in work that adopts Ou et al. (2014), Nielsen et al. (2010), or Exline and Geyer (2004), each embedding emotional or motivational traits within the construct. Davis et al. (2011) go further by framing humility as a relational emotion set comprising other-orientation, positive affect, self-emotion regulation, and accurate self-view, effectively relabeling a mixture of antecedent traits and follower attributions as humble leadership.

Blending intrapersonal dispositions with interpersonal acts leaves the field uncertain whether humble leadership is something leaders are or something leaders do. The interchangeable use of "leader humility" and "humble leadership" across the literature sustains this ambiguity and hampers construct identification, operationalization, and theory integration. Critically, none of the prevailing definitions pins humility down as a clearly specified leader behavior. Instead, most definitions blend dispositions, intentions, and follower evaluations, leaving the construct without a stable behavioral referent. Without such clarity, researchers lack a precise target for measurement, making it difficult to determine whether observed relationships reflect leader actions, follower inferences, or shared antecedents. We recognize that leadership scholarship encompasses diverse epistemological traditions, including those focused on perceptions, meaning-making, and relational experience; our argument is not that these perspectives are misplaced, but that causal claims about leadership effects require greater separation between behavior and evaluation. Establishing a behavioral anchor therefore strengthens both construct validity and the interpretability of empirical estimates for leadership.

Methodological challenges

Having critically reviewed the conceptualization of humble leadership, we now shift our focus to its operationalization. To do so, we first

Table 1
Summary of study designs.

Study Design Characteristics	Frequency	% of Design Type	% of Total ($N = 274$)
Survey-Based Study Designs	231	–	84
Cross-sectional; follower-rated	70	30	26
Cross-sectional; multiple source ratings	37	16	14
Time-separated; follower-rated	65	28	24
Time-separated; multiple source ratings	59	26	22
Experimental Designs	42	–	15
Randomized control: scenario-based	37	88	14
Randomized control: confederate as leader	2	5	<1
Randomized control: recall-based	2	5	<1
Field-experiment	1	2	<1
Archival data	1	–	<1
Total	274	–	100

examined the range study designs used in the review sample (see Table 1). Although the appropriateness of any study design should be evaluated regarding the study goals and context, these statistics can provide us with an overview of how researchers have approached the study of humble leadership to date.

In brief, most studies (approximately 85%) used surveys to measure evaluations of humble leadership and its correlates, with 42 studies (approximately 15%) utilizing experimental methods, one study using archival and observational data (e.g., Hong, 2020) and another utilizing publicly available data (Hong, 2020). Those using survey methods employed either a cross-sectional (approximately 46%) or time-separated design (approximately 54%). Of these studies, evaluations of humble leadership were mostly assessed from the leader's immediate followers (approximately 93%), with some studies using alternative rating sources, namely significant other/peer (e.g., Chan et al., 2024), senior management (e.g., Sun et al., 2023) or objective ratings (e.g., Hu et al., 2024). Twelve studies (approximately 5%) asked leaders to self-rate their humility (e.g., Qin et al., 2020) and four studies (approximately 2%) measured humble leadership from both the leader and follower (e.g., Chiu & Hung, 2022).

The evidence summarized above constrains what can be inferred about humble leadership from the existing empirical record (Fischer et al., 2024). Around four-fifths of extant humble leadership studies depend on survey designs, the same weakness that afflicts much of leadership research more broadly (Fischer et al., 2023). When surveys are analyzed without appropriate identification strategies (e.g., Bastardoz et al., 2023; Sajons, 2020), any estimates of cause and effect are vulnerable to endogeneity (Antonakis et al., 2014). Approximately half of the survey studies in our review used time-separated measurements, a design often considered stronger than purely cross-sectional approaches. However, temporal separation alone does not resolve identification concerns, as such designs remain susceptible to omitted variables, reverse causality, and shared perceptual biases unless exogenous variation is introduced. Endogeneity arises through omitted variables, non-random selection, simultaneity, common-method variance and measurement error, each of which can distort coefficients beyond recognition (Hill et al., 2021). Take a typical study in which followers rate their leader's humility, rate their own motivation, and the leader rates follower performance. Reverse causation is plausible—leaders may display more humility to already motivated employees. Common rater bias is built in whenever followers supply both the predictor and the mediator (Podsakoff et al., 2003). And omitted variables abound: follower personality, liking, or motivated reasoning influence ratings of leader behavior (Hansbrough et al., 2015) and may also affect motivation and performance. Under such conditions, regression coefficients cannot be interpreted as causal effects; prior work shows that endogeneity can even reverse effect signs (Antonakis et al., 2014; Hill et al., 2021).

A second problem is that virtually none of the studies observes humble behavior directly. Instead, researchers rely on follower evaluations of "expressed humility," a practice that conflates perceptions with actions (Banks et al., 2023; Fischer et al., 2023) and magnifies valence-based halo (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023) and construct redundancy (Banks et al., 2018). Retrospective ratings blend what the leader did with attributions about intent, execution quality and ultimate impact; positive scores may reflect nothing more than fondness for the boss (cf. Alvesson & Einola, 2019; Yammarino et al., 2020). Recent work on authentic, ethical, and servant leadership shows that such positively valenced ratings are driven by non-behavioral cues—prior success, value congruence—creating "causal illusions" even when leaders behave identically (Eva et al., 2025; Fischer et al., 2024).

Inspection of the field's most widely used measurement instrument, the nine-item Owens et al. (2013) scale, reinforces the concern. Based on the analysis presented in Table 2, the measure consists entirely of non-counterfactual items (Fischer, 2023). Counterfactual items specify an observable behavioral contrast, that is, what the leader did relative to a

Table 2
Analysis of Owens et al. (2013) Expressed Leader Humility Scale.

Item prefix 'This person (or leader)…'	Does item map onto the content domain of new leader-humility behavior definition?	Item depth analysis (Bagozzi & Edwards, 1998)	Nature of item conflation (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023)*	Does item meet criteria for good psychometric items?
Actively seeks feedback even if it is critical.	No	*Component-level*; leader seeks out critical feedback *Facet-level*; taps general fairness attributions *Global level*; triggers general follower attitudes toward leader	Behavior-execution Behavior-effect	**No – non-counterfactual item. Double-barrelled formulation** – mixes description of feedback-seeking behavior with the underlying intention to learn from *critical* feedback. **Interpretive formulation** – follower must infer what the leader perceives as "critical" and judge the social significance of seeking such feedback. **Figurative item** – relies on the rater speculating about intended meaning.
Admits it when they don't know how to do something.	No	*Component-level*; showing awareness of shortcomings *Facet-level*; taps honesty and modesty attributions *Global level*; triggers general follower attitudes toward leader	Behavior-execution Behavior-effect	**No – non-counterfactual item. Interpretive formulation** – follower must infer what the leader does *not* know and evaluate the social significance of revealing that ignorance. **Figurative item** – rater has to guess at the deeper meaning behind the admission.
Acknowledges when others have more knowledge and skills than him- or herself.	No	*Component-level*; showing awareness of shortcomings *Facet-level*; taps honesty and modesty attributions *Global level*; triggers general follower attitudes toward leader	Behavior-execution Behavior-effect	**No – non-counterfactual item. Interpretive formulation** – follower must infer the skills/knowledge gap and its public display. **Figurative item** – demands speculation about intended meaning.
Takes notice of others' strengths.	No	*Component-level*; Identities follower	Behavior-execution Behavior-effect	**No – non-counterfactual item. Interpretive**

(*continued on next page*)

Table 2 (*continued*)

Item prefix 'This person (or leader)…'	Does item map onto the content domain of new leader-humility behavior definition?	Item depth analysis (Bagozzi & Edwards, 1998)	Nature of item conflation (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023)*	Does item meet criteria for good psychometric items?
		strengths *Facet-level*; taps altruism and equity attributions *Global level*; triggers general follower attitudes toward leader		**formulation** – follower must infer what counts as a "strength" and judge the intent (e.g., ingratiation) and its social significance. **Figurative item** – ambiguous meaning. **Non-behavioral formulation** – shifts from observable acts to leader character/ competence or effectiveness.
Often compliments others on their strengths.	No	*Component-level*; Compliments followers *Facet-level*; taps altruism and equity attributions *Global level*; triggers general follower attitudes toward leader	Behavior-execution Behavior-effect	**No – non-counterfactual item. Interpretive formulation** – follower must infer what the leader calls a "strength" and judge possible ingratiation. **Figurative item** – fuzzy qualifier "often." **Non-behavioral formulation** – blends behavior leader character/ competence or effectiveness.
Shows appreciation for the unique contributions of others.	No	*Component-level*; Compliments followers *Facet-level*; taps altruism and equity attributions *Global level*; triggers general follower attitudes toward leader	Behavior-execution Behavior-effect	**No – non-counterfactual item. Interpretive formulation** – follower must infer what counts as a "unique contribution" and evaluate ingratiation. **Figurative item** – unclear meaning of "unique." **Non-behavioral formulation** – conflates behavior with leader character/ competence or effectiveness.
Is willing to learn from others.	No	*Component-level*; Leader trait openness *Facet-level*; taps motivational attributions *Global level*; triggers general follower attitudes toward leader	Behavior-intention	**No – non-counterfactual item. Double-barrelled formulation** – merges learning behavior and intention to learn. **Non-behavioral formulation** – equates behavior with trait openness, competence, effectiveness.
Is open to the ideas of others.	No	*Component-level*; Leader trait openness *Facet-level*; taps motivational attributions *Global level*; triggers general follower attitudes toward leader	Behavior-intention	**No – non-counterfactual item. Double-barrelled formulation** – merges learning behavior and intention to learn. **Non-behavioral formulation** – equates behavior with trait openness, competence, effectiveness.
Is open to the advice of others.	No	*Component-level*; Leader trait openness *Facet-level*; taps motivational attributions *Global level*; triggers general follower attitudes toward leader	Behavior-intention	**No – non-counterfactual item. Double-barrelled formulation** – merges learning behavior and intention to learn. **Non-behavioral formulation** – equates behavior with trait openness, competence, effectiveness.

Note: *Behavior-intention conflation occurs when an item conflates leader behavior with evaluations of their underlying intentions; Behavior-execution conflation occurs when an item conflates leader behavior with quality of execution; Behavior-effect conflation occurs when an item conflates leader behavior with its behavioral consequences (see Fischer & Sitkin, 2023).

plausible alternative, allowing responses to map directly onto variations in behavior. By contrast, non-counterfactual items do not specify what alternative action the leader might have taken; instead, they require followers to infer unobservable motives, intentions, or character traits (e.g., "*willing to learn from others*") and to apply their own personal standards when making evaluative judgments (e.g., "*shows appreciation for unique contributions*"). Furthermore, many of the items trigger global follower attitudes toward the leader (Bagozzi & Edwards, 1998), inviting broader liking and respect appraisals (Lemoine et al., 2019). Unsurprisingly, the scale correlates strongly with other sunshine constructs: meta-analyses report associations of 0.68–0.80 with transformational, authentic, ethical, and empowering leadership (see Alvesson & Einola, 2019; Chandler et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2020).

The same issues prevail in the other less-commonly adopted measures of Oc et al. (2015) and Ou et al. (2014). Based on our analysis, none of the items across these three measures include behavioral counterfactuals—instead relying on a combination double-barreled,

interpretative and non-behavioral formulations (Fischer, 2023). More recently, Chintakananda et al. (2024) developed a new leader humility scale based on an expanded conceptualization of leader-expressed humility, with nine dimensions: (1) having an accurate view of self, (2) recognizing follower strengths and achievements, (3) modeling teachability and being correctable, (4) leading by example, (5) showing modesty, (6) working together for the collective good, (7) empathy and approachability, (8) showing mutual respect and fairness, and (9) mentoring and coaching. Although the scale attempts to include behaviorally counterfactual items (e.g., *"My leader seeks input from others"*), ratings are still influenced by non-behavioral cues about the leader's performance and effectiveness, thus, retaining an evaluative component. Furthermore, this significantly extended conceptualization exacerbates issues of construct validity and conceptual redundancy.

A noteworthy recent development is Ou et al. (2024), who used publicly available conference call transcripts to operationalize CEO humility through four behavioral indicators. These indicators capture aspects of deference and the relative distribution of speaking time between the CEO and other executives. Although this approach offers a more behaviorally grounded proxy without relying on follower evaluations, it remains an indirect measure and does not fully isolate humility signaling as defined in the present review.

Experimental work on humble leadership remains sparse relative to the overall corpus. Our coding identified 42 experimental manipulations across the 274 studies reviewed (approximately 15%). Across these studies (see Table 3), several patterns raise concerns about construct validity, internal validity, and ecological realism. First, there is heavy reliance on vignette-based designs. Approximately 88% of experimental studies used hypothetical scenarios to present humble leadership (Bharanitharan et al., 2021; Cho et al., 2021; Swain & Korenman, 2018; Zapata & Hayes-Jones, 2019). Vignette-based designs are common in the experimental literature and can help isolate specific informational cues under controlled conditions. However, their inferential value depends on realism. Low-immersion "paper-people" descriptions that simply attribute traits or broad behaviors to a leader offer limited insight into leadership processes (Lonati et al., 2018). Although useful for isolating variables, such designs offer limited realism and rarely involve consequential outcomes such as incentives, votes, or performance-based payoffs. Richer video or interactional vignettes can provide stronger tests of how observable behaviors are interpreted and are most informative when complemented by consequential or behaviorally grounded designs.

Second, among the studies that attempted to manipulate humble leadership through actor portrayals, written biographies, or video stimuli, several design limitations complicate causal interpretation. A common problem is the use of unbalanced comparisons, where humble leadership is contrasted with explicitly negative leader portrayals (e.g., arrogant, abusive, or self-serving) without a proper "baseline". As Mullen and Monin (2016) note, such "donut" designs make it difficult to determine whether positive outcomes arise from the presence of humble leadership or simply from the absence of negative behaviors. Or, in the words of Lonati et al. (2018), without a baseline it is difficult to ascertain whether an observed effect is due to cure or poison (for a comprehensive overview of the problems with misspecified control conditions see Stark et al., 2026). In addition, Owens and Hekman (2016, Study 1) embed humility cues within a leader description that also conveyed warmth and competence, making it difficult to separate humility from more general positivity and competence signals. Likewise, Wang et al. (2024), in a field experiment with real supervisors, operationalized humility through significant-relationship primes. Although innovative, the manipulation likely activated broader relational mechanisms and were not present in a neutral control, leaving open whether downstream effects reflected humility specifically or relational warmth more generally. Often enough laboratory and vignette studies even engage in both, construct conflation and opposite treatment level control contrasts. Van Tongeren et al. (2024), for example, compared "humble and competent" leaders with "arrogant and incompetent" leaders, making the low-humility condition not only inherently negative but also conflated with incompetence.

That said, some studies tried to introduce fairer comparisons. Zapata and Hayes-Jones (2019), for instance, contrasted low versus high leader-expressed humility and measured communal and agentic inferences, offering insight into perceived tradeoffs but not isolating humility from broader evaluative differences. Swain and Korenman (2018) compared neutral officer evaluations with humble-behavior evaluations and included a positively valenced "narcissistic leader" condition, helping rule out simple language positivity effects, even though outcomes remained perception based. Zettna et al. (2025) used a transactional-leadership vignette as a neutral comparator designed to preserve competence cues without overlapping with humility. Liu et al. (2025) held competence constant and showed that time pressure altered interpretations of humility, shifting perceptions from comprehensiveness to indecisiveness. Qin et al. (2020) used a recall paradigm that varied humility and self-serving attributions, offering insight into attributional processes (though introducing memory biases and lacking behavioral outcomes). Oc et al. (2020) manipulated humility alongside authenticity, showing that relational benefits hinge on perceived genuineness, although the comparison still resembled an unbalanced design.

A broader issue is that nearly all experiments draw on Owens et al.'s (2013) three-dimensional conceptualization, which the present review argues is overly broad. Manipulations therefore typically include leaders who display appreciation, solicit feedback, and praise subordinates, behaviors that are not unique to humility and may reflect agreeableness, servant leadership, or interpersonal justice. This overlap makes it difficult to determine whether observed effects are driven by humility itself or by correlated leader behaviors. For example, in Hu et al. (2024), humility was operationalized through storytelling about past mistakes, which may signal vulnerability or authenticity rather than credit redirection. Very few studies have used consequential, incentive-aligned designs, although Wang et al. (2024) and Oc et al. (2020) represent notable attempts to embed humility in real organizational contexts or link it to performance outcomes.

In sum, the experimental literature on humble leadership has generated intriguing findings but remains constrained by construct overlap, limited ecological validity, and weak causal clarity. Future work should develop more focused manipulations aligned with a narrower behavioral definition, such as public credit-redirection acts following competence signals, employ consequential designs, and implement stronger comparison conditions to isolate the informational value of humility signaling. Until then, theoretical progress and practical recommendations remain tentative.

Implications for a reset

The conceptual sprawl and methodological fragility documented in the preceding review help explain why humble leadership shows very large correlations with other "positive" leadership styles yet provides limited credible evidence about distinct causal mechanisms. Because prevailing definitions and measures blend behavior, inference, and general leader favorability, reported effects may reflect evaluative halo rather than the impact of specific humility-related actions. This dynamic not only inflates associations with desirable outcomes but also helps explain tensions in the literature, such as findings that humility enhances warmth yet sometimes undermines perceptions of competence or has context-dependent performance effects. The current literature relies heavily on perceptual data, is vulnerable to multiple forms of endogeneity, and contains very limited direct behavioral evidence. As a result, it remains difficult to determine when humility is beneficial, when it is neutral, and when it may backfire. Unless the construct is stripped back to its behavioral core and those acts are measured independently from follower evaluations used as predictors, the literature will continue to

Table 3
Studies that directly manipulate (or behaviorally script) leader humility cues.

	Study ID	Sample/Context	Design	Humility Manipulated?	Comparison Condition(s)	Consequential?
1	Bharanitharan et al. (2021), S2 and pilot study collapsed	208 undergraduate students, Lab / online dictator-style allocation	W	Y	2 (impression management: high versus neutral) × 2 (leader humility: high vs neutral)	None
2	Cho et al. (2021), S1	128 undergraduate students, US. Exposed to humble vs neutral leader description to test felt trust pathway.	W	Y	2 (humility: high vs low) x 2 (autonomy: high vs low)	$ / Perf.
3	Cojuharenco and Karelaia (2020), S3	329 participants, mTurk	W	Y (reputation for humility)	2 (questions vs. conclusions) × 2 (good vs. poor reputation)	None
4	Cojuharenco and Karelaia (2020), S4	353 participants, mTurk	W	Y (humble inquiry through asking questions)	3 (questions vs. conclusions vs. not-knowing) × 2 (high vs. low credentials)	None
5	Cojuharenco and Karelaia (2020), S5	502 participants, mTurk	W	Y (humble inquiry through asking questions)	2 (questions vs. conclusions) × 2 (credentials: high vs. low) × 2 (reputation: good vs. poor)	None
6	D'Errico (2019), Main study)	44 adults, Real political speeches linguistically coded for humble vs nonhumble style; participant ratings of speakers.	W	Y (stimuli selected/ edited by tone).	2 (humble stance of the politician: present vs not) x 4 (emotional display of the politician: calmness, joy, anger, sadness) More agentic / assertive speech.	Ind (no participant stakes; but real politicians).
7	D'Errico (2019), Pilot study)	118 participants. Real political speeches linguistically coded for humble vs nonhumble style; participant ratings of speakers.	W	Y (stimuli selected/ edited by tone).	2 (humble stance of the politician: present vs not) x 4 (emotional display of the politician: calmness, joy, anger, sadness) More agentic / assertive speech.	Ind (no participant stakes; but real politicians).
8	Duan et al. (2024), S2	434 managers, online platform Credamo. Focus on voice expressed by humble employees	W	Y	2 (voicer humility: low vs. high) × 2 (familiarity: low vs. high)	None
9	Hu et al. (2024), S1, sample A	Sample A (149 managers), Prolific. Test if recall of learning from mistakes increase humility	Sim	N	Recall of learning from own mistake vs control (neutral) condition	None
10	Hu et al. (2024), S1, sample B	Sample B (301 managers), Prolific. Test if recall of learning from mistakes increase humility	Sim	N	Recall of learning from own mistake vs control (neutral) condition	None
11	Hu et al. (2024), S2	505 managers, Prolific	Sim	N	2 (recall of learning from own mistakes vs. control) × 2 (promotion focus vs. prevention focus)	None
12	Hu et al. (2024), S3	210 students in 63 teams	Sim	N	2 (recall of learning from own mistakes vs. control) x 2 (promotion focus vs. prevention focus)	None
13	Liborius and Kiewitz (2022)	131 participants	W	Y	High vs low humility descriptions.	None
14	Liu, Mao, Li, & Yue (2024), S1	293 particpant, online platform Credamo	W	Y (scripted humble behavior through conversation coding)	2 (humility: humble vs non-humble) x 2 (time pressure: high vs low),	None
15	Oc et al. (2020), S2	320 participants, online platform ClearVoice Reserch	Rec	Y	High vs low leader humility condition (recall a situation, Owens 3 dimensions)	None
16	Oc et al. (2020), S4	207 participants, online platform ClearVoice Reserch	W/follow up for authenticity manunipation	Y	2 (humility: high vs low) x 2 (authenticity: authentic vs inauthentic leader),	None
17	Owens and Hekman (2016), S1	89 undergraduate students in 31 teams. Live confederate leading ad-hoc groups on tower/puzzle task; cash bonus tied to performance.	L / Sim	Y (behavioral scripts of humility) vs control.	Humble vs non-humble leader condition.	$ / Perf.
18	Petrenko et al. (2019). (videometric IPO sim)	122 CEOs and 881 firm-year observations. CEO video pitches coded for humble communication; investor allocation decisions in market simulation.	Vd / Sim	Y (stimuli vary in humble rhetoric).	Nonhumble CEO clips.	$ / Beh (investment).
19	Qin et al. (2020), S2	161 participants	Rec	Y	2 (leader humility: humble vs. neutral) x 2 (self-serving attribution: high vs. low)	None.
20	Qu et al. (2023), S1	175 participants	W	Y	High vs low humility descriptions.	None
21	Rego et al. (2019), S1	Sample 1 & 2, 326 students	W	Y	Humbler leader vs transactional (neutral) leader.	None
22	Swain (2018), S1	320 participants, mTurk,	W	Y	Humbler vs non-humble leader.	None
23	Swain (2018), S2	317 participants, mTurk,	W	Y	Humbler vs non-humble leader.	None
24	Swain (2018), S3	147 participants, identify who is responsible for an accident	L	Y	Humbler vs non-humble leader.	Perf.
25	Swain and Korenman (2018), S2	352 Amry officers, using edited Army officer evaluation reports	W	Y	Humble behavior vs neutral behavior	None.

(*continued on next page*)

Table 3 (*continued*)

	Study ID	Sample/Context	Design	Humility Manipulated?	Comparison Condition(s)	Consequential?
26	Swain & Korenman, 2018S3	152 Amry officers, using edited Army officer evaluation reports	W	Y	(male vs female) × 2 (humble behavior vs positive narcissism)	None
27	Van Tongeren et al. (2024), S1	864 participants, US sample, mTurk Community & online samples evaluate leaders varying in humility × competence cues across short vignettes/vids.	W	Y	2 (leader humility: low vs. high) x 2 (leader competence: low vs. high) x 2 (leader gender: male vs. female) between-participant design.	None.
28	Van Tongeren et al. (2024), S2	847 participants, mTurk	W	Y	2 (humility: low vs. high) x 2 (competence: low vs. high) x 2 (organization type: for-profit vs. non- profit humanitarian aid)	None.
29	Van Tongeren et al. (2024), S3	892 participants, mTurk	W	Y	2 (humility: low vs. high) x 2 (competence: low vs. high) x 2 (organizational focus: domestic vs. international)	None.
30	Van Tongeren et al. (2024), S4	411 participants, Could Research	W	Y, more directly using the word 'humble'	2 (humility: humble vs. arrogant) x 2 (competence: low vs. high)	None.
31	Van Tongeren et al. (2024), S5	467 participants, Could Research	W	Y, more directly using the word 'humble'	2 (humble vs. likable) x 2 (competent vs. incompetent) between-participant design.	None.
32	Wang et al., 2024, FldExp	194 dyds, 10 daily survey. Practicing leaders given significant-other activation intervention to elicit humility; repeated daily reports & subordinate ratings.	FldExp	Ind (intervention increases expressed humility; not direct humble vs control script to followers).	Control (no activation). Within person randomized design	Ind (real workplace; no direct $).
33	Wang, Ou, and Song (2022), S2	233 participants	W	Y	2 (humility: humble vs non-humble) X 2 (work context conditions: competitive vs control)	None.
34	Zapata and Hayes-Jones (2019), S1 (5-study prog.; collapsed)	326 undergraduate students.	W/CM/Sim	Y	2 (humility: high vs low) x 2 (leader sex: male vs female)	$ / Perf (extra course credit)
35	Zapata and Hayes-Jones (2019), S2	318 undergraduate students, A series of anagram team task	W/CM/Sim	Y	2 (humility: high vs low) x 2 (leader sex: male vs female)	$ / Perf (extra course credit)
36	Zapata and Hayes-Jones (2019), S3	219 undergraduate students, modified news interview article of a CEO	W/CM/Sim	Y	2 (humility: high vs low) x 2 (leader sex)	$ / Perf (extra course credit)
37	Zapata and Hayes-Jones (2019), S4	168 undergraduate students, modified interview of a successful awarding wining manager	W/CM/Sim	Y	2 (humility: high vs low) x 2 (leader sex)	$ / Perf (extra course credit)
38	Zapata and Hayes-Jones (2019), S5	289 undergraduate students, an interview about a recent acquisition with the CEO of a technology firm.	W/CM/Sim	Y	2 (humility: high vs low) x 2 (leader sex) x 2 (context: success vs failure)	$ / Perf (extra course credit)
39	Zettna et al. (2025), S1	162 undergraduate students in 50 teams. Student project teams imagine humble vs transactional leader; assess *expected* team silence.	W (team discussion)	Y	Humble vs Transactional (neutral) control.	None.
40	Zheng et al. (2023)	81 particpant, online platform Credamo	W	Y	High vs low humility descriptions.	None
41	Zhang et al. (2022), S1	120 MBA students	W	Y	High vs low leader moral humility descriptions.	None
42	Zhu et al. (2019), S2	104 participants	W	Y	Humble vs non-humble descriptions.	None

Note: **Design codes:** W = written vignette; Vd = video vignette; L = live in-person confederate; CM = computer-mediated interactive lab; Sim = interactive simulation/game (incl. Hiring, negotiation, puzzles); Rec = recall/prime; FldExp = field experiment in organizations. **Consequential?** $ = real monetary stakes; Perf = graded or performance-contingent outcome; Beh = participants' real behavioral allocations/selections; None = no tangible stakes (judgment only); Ind = indirect/organizational stakes not personally experienced. **Humility Manipulated?** Y = directly manipulated humble vs comparison leadership cue; Ind = manipulation targeted something else that *changed* leader humility (mediator); N = no humility manipulation (measured only).

relabel existing virtues rather than identify distinct mechanisms.

Three concrete moves can help break this impasse. First, scholars should adopt a clear behavioral definition. Traits such as modesty or Honesty–Humility, or intentions such as a willingness to redirect credit, should be treated as antecedent propensities rather than proxies for the construct itself. This distinction also clarifies where moderators such as culture and gender enter the model. Second, research should move beyond exclusive reliance on halo-prone surveys toward designs that capture both leader behavior and evaluations of that behavior while addressing endogeneity. Importantly, well-designed questionnaires still have a role when follower evaluations of humble behavior are modeled as outcomes, or when ratings are appropriately instrumented following emerging methodological guidance. Third, once the core effects of leader humble behavior have been established using tightly controlled and incentive-compatible laboratory tasks, researchers can turn to richer, ecologically grounded questions concerning when, where, and in what rhetorical form leaders choose to signal humility in everyday organizational life.

Laboratory experiments are especially valuable because they allow researchers to isolate the causal effects of specific humility signals under controlled conditions while minimizing many of the endogeneity problems that characterize perceptual survey research. At the same time, laboratory paradigms often involve lower-stakes interactions and leaders without established reputational standing, limiting their ability

to capture the broader organizational and status dynamics surrounding humility signaling in real-world settings. Addressing these broader questions will therefore require methodological tools that extend beyond laboratory experiments. For example, fine-grained coding schemes can be developed to analyze naturally occurring communication such as boardroom transcripts, town-hall meetings, and analyst calls, alongside automated dictionaries that detect credit-redirection language, pronoun shifts, or status-minimizing references (Van Quaquebeke et al., 2025).

A conceptual reset is worthwhile because humility speaks to enduring puzzles in leadership theory while offering potential conceptual distinctiveness. Current definitions of leader-expressed humility acknowledge dispositional perspectives. Owens et al. (2013), for example, refer to an "overriding tendency to think humbly," yet they do not fully integrate trait evidence. A recent meta-analysis covering 116 multinational samples shows that trait Honesty–Humility predicts leader effectiveness above and beyond the Big Five (Javalagi et al., 2024). Treating humility as a disposition that sometimes, but not always, manifests in observable humble behavior can clarify how intrapersonal humility translates into intentions, public signals, and follower inferences (Carton, 2022; Fischer & Sitkin, 2023).

Interestingly, when humble behavior is coded from objective signals rather than follower ratings, it does not consistently appear beneficial. For instance, D'Errico (2019) found that male politicians using a humble communication style were perceived as less proactive and less charismatic. Such findings suggest that humility may clash with implicit leadership theories that associate authority with confidence and decisiveness (Hollander & Offermann, 1990). By separating trait and behavioral levels, researchers can test when a humble signal is interpreted as weakness, when it is ignored, and when it enhances trust. A behavioral definition therefore shifts the research question from whether humility is universally beneficial to identifying the conditions under which acts of credit redirection (i.e. leader humility signaling) help or hinder leaders.

In summary, our critical review shows that the field has stretched the word humility to encompass self-insight, appreciation, teachability, and a range of favorable impressions, thereby producing tautology and halo. Our objective in the following section is to advance a definition that excludes these prior dimensions (Owens et al., 2013). Each reflects a different psychological domain: self–other agreement (Atwater et al., 1998; Lee & Carpenter, 2018), consideration behavior (Avolio & Bass, 1995; Fleishman, 1957; Judge et al., 2004), and openness to experience (Ashton et al., 2004; Costa & McCrae, 1992), none of which is uniquely indicative of humility. A leader may be self-aware yet emphasize personal achievements, show individualized consideration while claiming credit, or embrace new ideas without relinquishing status. Treating these traits or evaluations as components of humility introduces conceptual sprawl and requires raters to infer motives and execution quality, thereby inviting halo bias (Hansbrough et al., 2015). A behavioral reset grounded in costly signaling, enriched by trait antecedents and tested with designs that make status cues and sacrifices explicit, can transform humble leadership from an appealing metaphor into a cumulative scientific program.

Section 2: Conceptual reset

The problems documented in the preceding critique converge on a single point: empirical studies of humble leadership have left the word "humility" untethered from its everyday meaning and have misaligned theory, measurement, and method. To chart a more coherent course we return to the term's linguistic root. Humility derives from the Latin *humilitas*, itself grounded in *humus*, meaning earth, and connoting a deliberate lowering of one's public standing. In ordinary English the humble person is someone who could justifiably claim credit yet refrains from doing so. Building on that everyday usage and on construct definition guidelines set out by MacKenzie (2003), we define leader humility signaling as:

"Voluntary, public acts through which a leader who has accrued warranted credit, via demonstrated competence, status, or achievement, shifts that credit away from themself."

This notion of warranted credit closely aligns with idiosyncrasy credit theory (Hollander, 1958; Hollander & Julian, 1970), which conceptualizes leadership as a social exchange process in which individuals accumulate positive impressions through demonstrated competence and conformity to group expectations. These accumulated credits grant leaders latitude to deviate from norms without sanction and effectively provide permission to lead. In our framework, such accumulated credit constitutes the underlying resource that makes humility signaling both possible and meaningful. Credit shifting may involve directing recognition toward specific others or the collective, or attributing one's success to circumstances, luck, or other external factors.

Anchoring humility in observable acts allows integration with signaling theory (Connelly et al., 2011; Spence, 1973). In economic and biological traditions, signals differ from mere communication because they are informative only when they are costly or constrained, meaning not all actors can produce them credibly. More recent work on leadership signaling reinforces that credible signals must involve (1) an unobservable underlying quality, (2) an observable behavioral signal, and (3) costs that are meaningfully linked to that quality (Schimmelpfennig et al., 2026). Humility signaling fits this logic because the act of shifting credit exposes the leader to potential reputational or status costs and therefore conveys information about underlying qualities that are otherwise difficult to observe. As we examine more carefully below, three elements are critical to this definition.

First, the acts are voluntary and public; they involve observable speech or behavior rather than latent dispositions or unobservable intentions. This behavioral focus does not imply that humility is reducible solely to observable acts, nor that internal dispositions and follower perceptions are unimportant. Humility can be meaningfully conceptualized at multiple levels, including traits, psychological states, and social evaluations. Our use of a signaling perspective is intended to isolate the behavioral manifestation through which humility becomes visible and interpretable in leadership contexts, rather than to redefine the construct as purely behavioral. In this sense, humility signaling captures one analytically distinct dimension of humble leadership, namely what leaders do in public when they could plausibly claim recognition. As discussed in the future research section, follower perceptions remain a critical outcome and should be studied directly when appropriately modeled, for instance as dependent variables rather than assumed indicators of behavior. Distinguishing these levels allows the field to examine how dispositions, behaviors, and perceptions interact without collapsing them into a single construct.

Importantly, this emphasis on observable acts also addresses a core limitation in existing leadership research. When signals are operationalized through follower perceptions, the measurement of the signal becomes conflated with its reception and interpretation. Recent work therefore recommends that, where possible, researchers directly capture specific and observable behaviors emitted by the signaler rather than relying solely on receiver evaluations (Schimmelpfennig et al., 2026). In the present context, focusing on concrete acts of credit shifting allows humility signaling to be operationalized independently from follower inferences, reducing conceptual ambiguity and aligning measurement more closely with signaling theory.

Second, leader humility signaling follows credible credit-accruing cues, such as performance records, awards, status recognition, or other externally verifiable indicators that would allow the leader to legitimately claim personal recognition. From an idiosyncrasy credit perspective, these cues reflect the accumulation of positively disposed impressions held by others, which grant leaders latitude to deviate from expected self-promotional behavior. In this sense, accrued credit functions as a social reserve that can be strategically expended through acts such as credit shifting. When such credit is absent or insufficient, similar

self-effacing behavior may still occur, but it is unlikely to function as a credible humility signal because it does not entail relinquishing recognition or relational benefits that could plausibly have been claimed. In line with costly signaling logic (Connelly et al., 2011; Spence, 1973), observers are therefore more likely to interpret these acts as cheap talk, uncertainty, low confidence, or impression management rather than humility. By contrast, when humility signaling follows clear competence cues, the same acts can be interpreted as costly and therefore credible, reinforcing perceptions of trustworthiness and legitimacy because the leader forgoes recognition that could have been personally advantageous.

Third, the act of humility signaling entails reputational exposure or opportunity cost. By shifting credit away from themself, the leader relinquishes recognition or status reinforcement that could otherwise have been claimed. When followers can plausibly attribute success to the leader, voluntarily redirecting that credit functions as a separating action that communicates confidence in one's underlying competence or secure standing. In this sense, humility signaling reduces uncertainty about leader quality rather than functioning as purely expressive communication. This logic is further clarified by idiosyncrasy credit theory, which suggests that leaders accumulate credits through prior competence and conformity and can subsequently spend these credits by deviating from normative expectations (Hollander, 1958). Credit shifting can be understood as one such deviation: rather than claiming recognition, the leader forgoes it. Importantly, this act is only costly and therefore informative when the leader possesses sufficient accumulated credit to claim recognition in the first place. Without such credit, there is nothing to expend, and the same behavior loses its signaling value.

Building on economic models of leadership under informational asymmetry (Hermalin, 1998), this shifting of credit becomes strategically meaningful because leaders typically have incentives to claim personal recognition for collective outcomes. From a signaling perspective, the cost of humility signaling can be understood as a combination of production costs and potential penalty costs (Connelly et al., 2025). Production costs arise from the need to enact the behavior credibly and publicly while foregoing recognition that could have been appropriated. Penalty costs may arise when observers interpret credit shifting as contrived, insincere, or indicative of weakness, particularly when competence cues are ambiguous. Thus, while the primary cost takes the form of foregone recognition, reputational risks may also emerge depending on context.

In summary, humility signaling becomes interpretable as a distinct leader behavior only when credit is both warranted and publicly attributable; without these conditions, credit shifting does not entail a meaningful opportunity cost and therefore lacks signaling value. Moreover, we anticipate that humility signaling is most coherent in contexts of interdependent production, where outcomes are jointly generated and individual contributions are difficult to disentangle. In such settings, leaders help solve coordination problems and credit allocation becomes ambiguous, making the voluntary diffusion of recognition particularly informative (Bastardoz & Van Vugt, 2019). In highly individual or lone performer contexts, by contrast, the signaling logic is weaker because there is less plausible credit to forgo.

Importantly, credit shifting is an informationally rich act that can support multiple inferences. Observers may interpret a leader who gives credit as fair, socially perceptive in recognizing causal contributors, or strategically cooperative in the sense of relational investment. In line with gift exchange logic (Akerlof, 1982; Fehr et al., 2009), public allocation of symbolic rewards can strengthen reciprocity and voluntary effort. Humility, however, constitutes a distinct attribution that arises when observers perceive voluntary self-effacement in the presence of clearly available personal credit. In other words, humility is inferred not simply because the leader behaves kindly, but because the leader refrains from claiming recognition that could credibly have been appropriated.

The usefulness of this attribution lies in the expectations it creates. Leaders perceived as humble may be seen as less likely to monopolize future rewards, more receptive to others' input, and less driven by ego-protective motives. For followers, these expectations may reduce status threat and increase willingness to cooperate and contribute because they anticipate that their efforts will be acknowledged. For leaders, humility attributions can strengthen voluntary, motivated followership, particularly when competence is already established. Importantly, these benefits are contingent rather than universal and depend on the perceived credibility of the underlying signal.

Different types of leaders may also sort into credit-shifting behavior for different reasons. Secure, high-performing leaders may do so because they possess a surplus of accumulated credit and can afford to expend it without jeopardizing their standing. Leaders with limited credit face tighter constraints, as premature deviation risks depleting their standing before it is established. Other leaders may avoid claiming credit to minimize scrutiny, while strategically impression-managing leaders may selectively diffuse recognition to cultivate goodwill. Observers' interpretations will depend on the informational context, including the visibility of the leader's contribution and the perceived magnitude and opportunity cost of the act. Finally, cultural and institutional contexts are likely to shape inference patterns. In environments where hierarchical distance is strong, humility signals may be unexpected and therefore particularly diagnostic, whereas in more egalitarian contexts they may be normative and less informative. These contingencies underscore that humility is not a universal attribution but one that emerges when self-effacement is interpreted against a backdrop of credible authority and available recognition.

Section 3: Future research directions

Following conceptual clarification, the next step is to examine, under conditions that permit causal inference, whether the public credit-redirection behaviors defined above meaningfully shape how followers evaluate leaders and respond. This constitutes an initial step toward understanding downstream consequences for individual, group, and organizational outcomes that have previously been associated with humble leadership (Chandler et al., 2023). The experimental paradigm outlined here is intended as an illustrative example rather than a prescriptive research design. Its purpose is to demonstrate how the causal logic implied by a signaling perspective could be operationalized under controlled conditions, while recognizing that laboratory approaches should complement, rather than replace, longitudinal and field-based research that can capture the temporal and contextual dynamics of humility signaling.

With this aim, we position experimental paradigms as one useful component of the broader research agenda. A 3×3 credit-by-humility between subjects laboratory design provides a clear starting point: accrued warranted credit is manipulated exogenously, the humility cue consists of a short scripted statement that redirects credit, and follower decisions such as bonus allocations or leader-retention votes carry real or consequential incentives. Replicating or extending this protocol with student teams, remote workers, and executive cohorts can help establish baseline effect sizes and identify immediate boundary conditions, while serving primarily as proof-of-concept demonstrations of the theory's testable implications.

One illustrative paradigm could proceed as follows. Participants are gathered to complete an effort-based task (Antonakis et al., 2022). Before the task, they are assigned to a leader who explains the instructions. Leader accrued credit is manipulated through public disclosure, for example high versus low prior performance, or through withholding of pre-task scores. The leader then delivers one of three standardized statements concerning their role in the task: humility, involving explicit credit redirection; hubris, involving explicit credit claiming; or a baseline attribution condition in which no explicit credit claim or redirection is made (cf. Stark et al., 2026). In a preliminary study, the manipulation would be validated to ensure it evokes

perceptions of humility signaling. In the main study, follower effort would be measured objectively, for instance, measuring completion and error rates on the task allocated by the leader (cf. Antonakis et al., 2022). Participants could additionally vote on whether to retain the leader for a subsequent task or decide how much of their earnings to allocate to a charity endorsed by the leader, providing consequential behavioral outcomes.

A further refinement concerns identification of the causal effects of humility signaling when leaders have discretion over whether to claim or redirect credit. In many real settings, signaling choices are endogenous to leader characteristics and performance, complicating causal inference. One promising approach is to introduce randomized variation in message delivery through a noisy encouragement or implementation mechanism. For example, leaders could indicate their preferred communication (which would then be categorized as credit claiming, neutral, or credit redirection), while the actual message delivered is randomly implemented with known probability. Such designs allow estimation of intention-to-treat effects of humility signaling on follower behavior and, where appropriate, local average treatment effects using the randomized encouragement as an instrument (Sajons, 2020). This approach preserves behavioral realism while enabling clean causal interpretation of how credit redirection influences cooperation and leader endorsement. We present the above as an illustrative template intended to clarify identification logic and to encourage future work that combines realistic leader discretion with strong identification strategies.

Once such experimental paradigms are established, future work can examine boundary conditions. For instance, does the nature of the accrued credit matter, such as objective performance versus prior reputational achievements? Does humility signaling carry greater weight when it follows success in the focal task compared with success in a broader or unrelated domain? Do the effects vary when competence was shown once versus many times over? Isolating these distinctions would clarify when and why humility signaling influences follower responses and refine theoretical predictions about its scope. This approach builds on emerging experimental research that isolates leader signals under incentive-compatible conditions. For example, Alzahawi and Flynn (2025) used scripted leader statements paired with consequential tasks to examine how expressed uncertainty shapes perceptions of competence and influence, finding that uncertainty cues unaccompanied by prior accomplishments are more likely to be interpreted as weakness. Adapting similar methodological rigor while focusing specifically on credit redirection enables direct tests of when humility signals are effective, ineffective, or counterproductive.

From this starting point, the reconceptualization outlined here supports a broader research agenda organized around three themes: (1) signal features, (2) signal interpretation, and (3) methodological advancement.

Theme 1: Signal features

Firstly, future research could advance current understanding by examining how the effectiveness of leader humility signaling varies as accrued credit accumulates over time and across the leadership career span. As depicted in Fig. 2, leaders who have accrued limited credit face an important tension: signaling humility prematurely may increase the risk of being perceived as incompetent, insecure, or lacking ambition because observers have little evidence of competence that would make humility signals costly and therefore credible. Conversely, postponing humility signaling may delay opportunities to build relational capital and follower endorsement. From the perspective of tournament theory, leadership emergence often involves early status competitions that reward assertive displays of competence more than modest or self-effacing behavior (Connelly et al., 2014). Consistent with signaling theory, humility signals such as credit redirection acquire informational value only once observers can link them to prior competence cues (Connelly et al., 2011; Spence, 1973). When such cues are absent or have not settled into a consistent impression, observers may interpret humility as weakness, indecision, or strategic ingratiation rather than as deliberate self-lowering. Evidence on related signals supports this logic. Alzahawi and Flynn (2025), for instance, report negative reactions to expressed uncertainty during early leader–follower interactions, while speculating that these effects may attenuate as relationships mature. This pattern aligns with the proposition that humility signaling may shift from a liability to an asset as leaders accumulate warranted credit and reputation.

An additional question concerns the calibration or intensity of humility signals relative to accrued credit. Signaling theory implies that leaders with stronger competence or status cues may be able to engage in more pronounced or visible acts of credit redirection without undermining perceived capability, whereas equally strong signals from low-credit leaders may be interpreted as vulnerability or insecurity. Fig. 2 illustrates this dynamic by distinguishing between two forms of humility signaling: credit-giving signals, in which leaders redirect recognition following success, and responsibility-taking signals, in which leaders assume blame following failure. While both forms may reflect underlying humility, they may operate differently across the

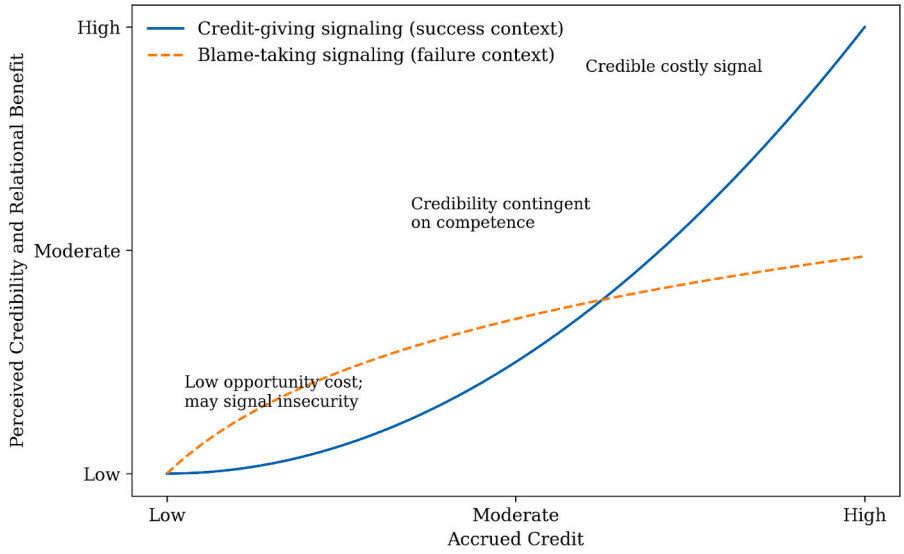

Fig. 2. Credibility and Impact of Humility Signaling as a Function of Accrued Credit.

credit trajectory. Credit-giving signals are likely to become more effective as accrued credit increases, whereas responsibility-taking signals may function as particularly costly signals that reveal humility under adverse conditions, potentially accelerating the accumulation of idiosyncratic credit when interpreted as credible. Examining how the strength, frequency, and type of humility signals interact with earned credit would therefore help clarify when humility is interpreted as confidence versus weakness.

This temporal perspective opens several avenues for research on how humility signals are interpreted across career transitions. Studies could examine how humility signaling interacts with evolving competence cues such as performance records, promotions, or visible achievements to identify inflection points at which humility shifts from a career liability to a strategic asset. It is also plausible that leaders strategically suppress humility signals during early status competitions to enhance their prospects in leadership tournaments. Individuals who possess strong dispositional humility may find such suppression psychologically difficult, creating tension between impression management and authenticity. Alternatively, humility signaling may emerge only after success or status has been secured (Weidman et al., 2018), suggesting that humble behavior may be situationally and strategically expressed rather than consistently trait driven. Situational strength theory offers one explanation for this pattern by suggesting that strong situations characterized by clear normative expectations constrain trait expression (Meyer et al., 2010). In contexts where humility signaling is strongly expected, such as visible team successes or collective crises, leaders may converge in credit-redirection behavior regardless of dispositional humility. By contrast, weaker or more ambiguous situations may allow greater variation in whether leaders choose to claim or redirect credit. Trait activation theory similarly suggests that some contexts make humility-relevant dispositions more behaviorally relevant and effective (Tett et al., 2021). Situations involving shared success, visible interdependence, learning, or responsibility for failure may activate dispositional humility by increasing the value of self-effacement and credit redirection as leadership signals. Together, these perspectives help explain why humility signaling may not reflect a stable behavioral tendency across contexts, but instead emerge selectively depending on the interaction between dispositional tendencies and situational demands. This interpretation also resonates with the argument that attributes supporting leader emergence may differ from those associated with leader effectiveness (Antonakis et al., 2011). From this perspective, humility signaling may operate like a metaphorical "epigenetic switch," becoming adaptive only once reputational standing is established.

Beyond the features of timing and intensity, the consistency of humility signaling may also shape how signals are interpreted. Evidence indicates that stable signaling patterns enhance perceptions of trustworthiness and reliability (Falk & Zimmermann, 2017). Leaders who alternate unpredictably between humility and self-promotion may generate confusion or ambivalent attributions regarding authenticity (Drover et al., 2018). Future research could examine follower reactions to consistent versus inconsistent signaling trajectories, including whether sustained humility signals foster stronger trust than intermittent displays that follow periods of assertiveness. Drawing on emerging research, inconsistent signaling patterns may also evoke follower ambivalence (Suurd Ralph & Barling, 2023), suggesting that variability in humility displays could carry relational costs.

Finally, leader characteristics are likely to moderate how humility signals unfold over time. Leaders with higher cognitive ability may more effectively calibrate humility signals to coincide with competence cues, whereas leaders high in dispositional humility may find it difficult to strategically delay expressions of humility during competitive stages, potentially sacrificing short-term status gains. Examining how personality traits interact with timing, type, and signal consistency would provide insight into when humility signaling is perceived as authentic, strategic, or ineffective.

These dynamics also highlight the importance of signal clarity and observability. Ambiguous or weakly expressed signals may fail to communicate the intended message or may be interpreted as uncertainty (Drover et al., 2018; Wang, Xu, et al., 2022). Evidence from linguistic and multimodal research suggests that subtle cues such as attribution patterns or inclusive language can shape how humility is perceived (D'Errico et al., 2019), underscoring the importance of examining signal clarity. Signal timing further shapes interpretation. Acts of humility are most likely to be interpreted as informative when the sequence linking prior credit and subsequent redirection is visible. Poorly timed or diffuse humility signals risk being overlooked or misunderstood. Drover et al. (2018), for example, show that targeted and well-timed signals, such as explicitly crediting the team immediately after a visible success, are more likely to convey the intended message than repeated or unfocused attempts at self-effacement.

Theme 2: Interpretation of humility signals: context, actor, and observer effects

The interpretation of humility signals by receivers plays a central role in determining their consequences (Connelly et al., 2011, 2025). Signals are not evaluated in isolation but are filtered through contextual cues, sender characteristics, and receiver cognitions, which shape inferences about credibility, intent, and underlying qualities (Connelly et al., 2025). From a signaling perspective, observers may infer not only humility but also competence calibration, prosocial intent, or strategic impression management. Understanding these attributional pathways is therefore essential for specifying when humility signals generate, for instance, trust versus skepticism.

Contextual factors such as cultural norms and organizational climates are likely to shape how humility signals are decoded. Signaling theory highlights that signal effectiveness depends on normative expectations within the environment (Connelly et al., 2025). Collectivist cultures that emphasize group cohesion and harmony may be more receptive to humility displays (Morris et al., 2005), whereas individualistic contexts that value assertiveness and self-promotion may interpret the same behaviors less favorably, particularly when competence cues are weak or ambiguous (Morris et al., 2005; Van Tongeren et al., 2024). Congruence between leader behavior and follower expectations also matters. Misalignment can reduce signal effectiveness or trigger backlash (Wilms et al., 2025). Consequently, identical acts of credit redirection may carry different meanings across contexts. In collectivist environments, humility may be expected and therefore less distinctive, whereas in individualistic environments it may stand out more sharply, amplifying both its benefits and its risks (Dickson et al., 2003). Similar dynamics likely operate within organizations. In competitive climates, humility may be more diagnostic and therefore more consequential, whereas in collaborative climates it may be normative and thus less informative (D'Errico, 2019; D'Errico et al., 2022). Future research could examine these contingencies using designs that vary both signaling behavior and contextual frames.

Sender characteristics also shape signal interpretation. Age may function as a proxy for accumulated status, influencing how humility is perceived. Younger leaders who downplay credit may be interpreted as inexperienced or uncertain, whereas older leaders may be viewed as secure in their standing, making the same behavior appear credible and maturity signaling. Comparable asymmetries have been documented for gender. Modesty norms and self-promotion penalties create a double bind for women, who must balance competence displays with expectations of warmth (Exley & Kessler, 2022; Moss-Racusin & Rudman, 2010). Excessive humility may reinforce stereotypes of low agency, while assertiveness may trigger backlash (Heilman, 2012). These dynamics suggest that humility signals may yield different reputational returns depending on gender, particularly early in careers when status is still forming (Heilman & Okimoto, 2007; Leslie et al., 2017). Examining age and gender as moderators in experimental paradigms would help clarify when humility enhances versus undermines leader legitimacy.

Receiver characteristics represent another important boundary condition. Because humility signals depend on observers recognizing the legitimacy of earned credit (Van Quaquebeke et al., 2011), followers who doubt that credit is warranted, for instance individuals high in cynicism, may interpret credit redirection as impression management rather than genuine self-lowering (Ferris et al., 2007). Such differences highlight that signal effectiveness is partly a function of receiver beliefs and prior attitudes toward the leader.

The signaling environment also shapes interpretation. Recent developments in signaling theory emphasize reaction costs, or unintended consequences that arise when signals directed at one audience are misinterpreted by another (Connelly et al., 2025). Credit redirection is informative only when observers recognize the underlying competence cues. To informed insiders, a leader who deflects credit may signal humility and security, whereas to less informed audiences the same behavior may appear unnecessary or indicative of low confidence. This challenge is particularly salient when leaders address multiple audiences simultaneously, such as internal teams and external stakeholders. Leaders may therefore need to calibrate humility displays to account for differences in audience knowledge and expectations. Future research could examine how leaders adapt signaling strategies across audiences and whether such adaptation enhances or undermines credibility over time.

In summary, situating humility signal interpretation within contemporary signaling theory highlights the multilayered processes through which followers decode leader behavior. By incorporating contextual influences, sender attributes, receiver dispositions, and information asymmetries, future research can more precisely specify when humility signals function as credible indicators of leader qualities and when they fail to convey the intended meaning.

Theme 3: Methodological advances: beyond self-report to behavioral traces

Advancing leader humility research requires moving beyond reliance on surveys and toward objective, behavioral, and context-sensitive methodologies that capture the strategic and observable nature of humility as a social signal (Fischer et al., 2020, 2023). Within signaling theory, a signal is informative only to the extent that it is observable, entails some cost or constraint, and can be interpreted by relevant audiences (Connelly et al., 2011, 2025). Studying humility as a signal therefore requires capturing both its observable form and the contextual conditions that shape its credibility and interpretation.

In the previous section, we outlined two controlled experimental paradigms that manipulate credit conditions in leader communication. Here, we extend this logic by highlighting three complementary methodological approaches: linguistic and multimodal analysis, computational modeling, and quasi-experimental designs. Together, these approaches illustrate how experimental insights can be examined and scaled in naturalistic settings. One promising direction involves the linguistic and multimodal analysis of humility cues. D'Errico et al., 2019; D'Errico et al., 2022) show that linguistic and paralinguistic markers, such as inclusive pronouns, reduced self-aggrandizing language, and specific emotional displays, can convey humility in ways that interact with audience expectations and gender norms. Their multimodal work incorporating facial expression, vocal tone, and body language underscores the embodied nature of humility signaling and provides a foundation for systematic behavioral coding.

In organizational settings, analysis of leader communication such as CEO letters, earnings calls, or internal messages offers a scalable means of tracking humility signaling across time and audiences. Researchers can examine attribution patterns, credit allocation language, or pronoun shifts as indicators of credit redirection. These signals can be linked to competence cues such as performance achievements or external recognition, allowing humility to be operationalized in line with the behavioral definition proposed here. For example, a leader who highlights organizational success and subsequently attributes that success to team members conveys a different signal than a leader who simply minimizes personal contribution without clear evidence of prior credit. Such observational insights can also inform experimental manipulations, mirroring approaches used in research on charismatic communication (Antonakis et al., 2022; Wilms et al., 2025).

At the same time, advances in machine learning and natural language processing (NLP) provide powerful tools for extending this work (Wenzel & Van Quaquebeke, 2018). Compared with traditional linguistic markers, modern computational models can capture higher-level semantic and contextual features, enabling more accurate detection of humility signals across large corpora. By training algorithms on annotated text, audio, or video data that identify credit-redirection behaviors, researchers can develop scalable measures of humility signaling and examine its temporal dynamics across leaders, contexts, and platforms (e.g., Wang et al., 2024). Building on similar approaches used to study charismatic leadership communication (e.g., Jensen et al., 2023), such models could simultaneously track competence indicators and humility signals, allowing researchers to test whether humility following competence cues is interpreted differently from humility expressed in isolation.

Whereas linguistic marker approaches rely on predefined feature sets that capture specific cues of humility, modern NLP models can learn higher-order semantic representations from text, allowing researchers to detect patterns of credit allocation and self-effacement that may not be captured by theory-driven dictionaries alone. These linguistic and computational approaches also enable quasi-experimental research in naturalistic contexts. Time-series or event-based designs can examine how humility signals change around exogenous events such as crises or major organizational milestones, and whether leaders with established credit who redirect recognition subsequently experience shifts in trust or legitimacy. Such approaches complement controlled experiments by capturing humility signaling in real-world settings and testing its ecological validity.

In parallel, experimental methods can be refined to better capture the strategic trade-offs inherent in humility signaling. Incentive-compatible paradigms, such as economic games or consequential decision tasks, can simulate situations in which leaders must, for instance, decide whether to claim credit, share credit, or accept blame. These designs allow systematic manipulation of factors such as audience composition, perceived competence, and signaling costs, enabling researchers to test how leaders calibrate humility displays under varying conditions. They also provide opportunities to examine moderators identified in prior research, including gender, status, and power, in shaping both signaling behavior and receiver interpretations (D'Errico, 2019; D'Errico et al., 2022; Heilman et al., 2024).

Importantly, coding-based and laboratory approaches should not be treated as interchangeable. Archival and observational approaches typically capture senior leaders operating in public, high-stakes environments where competence cues, accumulated status, and reputational incentives are already salient. Consequently, the same humility signal may carry different informational value across contexts. For instance, public credit redirection by a highly successful CEO during an analyst call may be interpreted differently from similar language expressed by a lower-status leader in a laboratory interaction. Rather than assuming direct comparability, future research should treat these approaches as complementary forms of triangulation: laboratory experiments can identify whether humility signals causally influence follower responses, whereas coding-based approaches can examine how such signals emerge, evolve, and function in consequential organizational settings. Once the behavioral core of humility is clearly specified, these approaches together can support a cumulative agenda on the timing, rhetoric, and boundary conditions of humility signaling in organizational life.

A further step for the field is the development of new follower-rated measures of leader humility that are consistent with a signaling perspective and meet contemporary standards for behavioral validity.

Existing scales (e.g., Owens et al., 2013) conflate observable behavior with subjective evaluations or inferred motives (see Table 2) and therefore lack clear behavioral counterfactuals. As Fischer (2023) argues, valid behavioral measurement requires that item responses map unambiguously onto variation in the presence, frequency, or magnitude of observable actions rather than raters' interpretations of intent, character, or social desirability. As noted earlier, most current questionnaire measures of humble leadership do not meet this criterion.

Recent work on behavioral humility assessment similarly highlights the importance of distinguishing dispositional humility from its behavioral expression and of grounding assessment in observable interaction patterns rather than broad global evaluations (Van Tongeren et al., 2024). At the same time, many proposed behavioral indicators still rely on evaluative or virtue-laden judgments (e.g., empathy, openness, respectful interaction), making it difficult to isolate humility from adjacent positive constructs. Consistent with Fischer's (2023) framework on behavioral counterfactuals, we therefore argue that future measures should prioritize narrowly specified, observable acts of credit redirection that can vary independently from raters' broader evaluations of leader morality, warmth, or effectiveness. To move forward, new measures, particularly those used as manipulation checks or perceptual outcomes in experimental or field research, should (1) avoid mixing behavioral descriptions with judgments about intent or moral worth, (2) be phrased in concrete and observable terms, and (3) incorporate counterfactual framing so that higher or lower scores clearly reflect differences in enacted behavior rather than subjective evaluation. Importantly, consistent with recent methodological guidance (Sajons, 2020), follower ratings of leader humility should not be modeled as independent variables unless appropriately instrumented. Instead, they are most appropriately used as dependent variables capturing signal reception, or as part of instrumental-variable frameworks that separate perceived behavior from its causes. One approach is to use straightforward behavioral statements that capture observable acts of credit redirection, such as:

- "When recognized for an accomplishment, my leader redirected the credit away from themself."
- "When aknowledged for their contribution, my leader redirected recognition to others."
- "When publically praised, my leader redirected credit that they could have personally accepted."

Alternatively, semantic differentials could be employed to capture the same behaviors with greater variation and less evaluative inference. For instance:

- "When recognized for an accomplishment, my leader… shifted attention away from themself ⟶ kept the focus on themself."
- "In public settings, my leader… deflected recognition ⟶ claimed personal recognition."
- "When things went wrong, my leader… redirected blame toward others ⟶ accepted personal responsibility for the outcome." (reversed)

Both approaches illustrate how humility can be measured as a concrete, observable signal that varies in frequency or intensity, while remaining firmly anchored in our definition of credit redirection. Importantly, the items proposed above are intended to capture the behavioral component of humility signaling, namely observable acts of credit redirection. They are not meant to constitute a standalone scale of humility signaling itself. Under our theoretical model, humility signaling arises only when such behaviors occur in the presence of accrued warranted credit. Consequently, empirical tests should assess credit conditions separately, either through experimental manipulation (e.g., prior performance information) or independent indicators (e.g., objective achievements, status cues). Analytically, humility signaling is therefore best modeled as a conditional or interactive construct, in which credit-redirection behaviors acquire signaling value only when paired with accrued credit. This approach avoids creating a double-barreled measure while preserving alignment between theory and operationalization.

Finally, caution is necessary when choosing dispositional humility measures to explore potential antecedents of leader humility signaling. In particular, the HEXACO Honesty-Humility dimension (Ashton & Lee, 2007) is frequently used as a proxy for humble leadership, yet it captures a broader moral character factor encompassing sincerity, fairness, greed-avoidance, and modesty. As noted in McElroy-Heltzel et al.'s (2019) critical review, Honesty-Humility lacks specificity and fails to capture humility as an interpersonal signal. Where dispositional tendencies are relevant, scales that narrowly assess humility offer better fidelity.

Conclusion

Humble leadership has travelled far as a construct, but our critical audit shows it has done so without secure conceptual or methodological footing. By disentangling trait dispositions, follower evaluations, and the public acts that the term humility actually denotes, we demonstrate that the field's dominant definition incorporates constructs already owned elsewhere, inviting halo effects and endogeneity. Most empirical evidence therefore tells us how much followers enjoy leaders who are labeled humble, not what happens when leaders engage in observable credit redirection.

Our review highlights three steps for advancing research on humble leadership. First, scholars should adopt a behavioral definition that conceptualizes humility as observable acts of credit redirection rather than as a bundle of traits, motives, and evaluations. Second, future work should prioritize designs that allow causal inference, including experimental paradigms, instrumental variable approaches, and behavioral coding strategies that separate leader actions from follower perceptions. Third, humility should be examined as a dynamic signal whose interpretation depends on a leaders' accrued warranted credit, the timing and features of the signal itself (i.e., clarity, consistency, intensity and observability), and the audience context instead of assuming it is uniformly beneficial. Pursuing these directions will help shift the field from broad perceptual associations toward a more precise and cumulative understanding of when and why leader humility signaling shapes perceptions, attributions, and outcomes.

In this way, anchoring humility in observable, costly acts of credit redirection reconnects the construct with its behavioral core and provides a clearer foundation for cumulative theory and evidence. By specifying when self effacement signals virtue and when it risks backfiring, future research can move beyond broad claims about humble leadership toward a more precise account of how and why humility operates in leadership contexts.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Allan Lee: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Joanne Lyubovnikova:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. **Niels Van Quaquebeke:** Writing – review & editing. **Amy Wei Tian:** Resources, Methodology, Data curation. **Inmaculada Adarves-Yorno:** Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Coded studies

Primary study	N	Sample	Humility Method	Humility Rater	Humility Measure	Humility Definition	Level
Abbas & Wu (2019)	548	1	1	1	1	1	Individual
Abbas & Wu (2021)	359	4	1	1	1	1	Individual
Abbas, Wu, & Amin (2021)	1010	1	1	1	1	1	Individual
Abdelaliem et al. (2025)	385	1	1	1	1	Multiple	Individual
Afshan, Kashif, Khanum, Khuhro, & Akram (2021)	200	1	2	1	1	1	Individual
Al Hawamdeh (2022)	260	1	1	1	1	1,3	Individual
Al Wali Muthuveloo & Teoh (2022)	173	1	1	1	1	1	Individual
Al-Abrrow et al. (2021)	400	1	1	1	1	Multiple	Individual
Ali, Li, Durrani, Shah, & Khuram (2021)	329	1	2	1	1	1	Individual
Ali, Li, Haider, et al. (2021)	337	1	2	1	1	1	Individual
Ali, Li, Khan, Shah, & Ullah (2021)	337	1	1	1	1	1	Individual
Ali, Zhang, Shah, Khan, & Shah (2020)	337	1	1	1	1	1	Individual
Ali, Zhang, Zhang, et al. (2021)	332	1	5	7	1	Multiple	Individual
Asghar et al. (2022)	405	1	1	1	1	1	Dyad
Ashford et al. (2018)	65 CEOs/422 TMTs	1	1	1	9	1	Organization
Bahadur & Ali (2023)	294	1	2	1	1	1	Individual
Basford, Offermann, & Behrend (2014)	511	2	1	1	1	2	Individual
Bharanitharan, Chen, Bahmannia, & Lowe (2019)	257 followers/57 leaders	1	2	1	1	1	Dyad
Bharanitharan et al. (2021) - Study 1	204	1	2	1	1	1	Dyad
Bharanitharan et al. (2021) - Study 2	208	3	3	1	1	1	Individual
Bhatia & Bhatia (2020)	251	1	2	1	1	1	Individual
Bin, Sok, Sok, & Mao (2021)	273	1	1	1	1	1	Individual
Cao, Zhao, Lv, & Wei (2022)	661	1	1	1	6	3	Individual
Carnevale, Huang, & Paterson (2019)	233	1	2	1	1	1	Dyad
Carroll & Patterson (2014)	466	1	1	1	4	8	Individual
Chan et al. (2024)	610	1	1	2	1	1	Individual
Chaudhary, Karwasara, Gupta, Marino, & Batra (2025)	225	1	1	1	1	1	Organization
Chen (2016)	534	1	2	1	1	3	Dyad
Chen (2018)	534	1	1	1	1	1	Dyad
Chen, Feng, Liu, & Yao (2021)	59	1	2	1	1	1	Team
Chen, Jiang, Wang, Zhang, & Bao (2024)	438	1	2	1	1	7	Dyad
Chen, Liang, Feng, & Zhang (2021)	465	1	2	1	1	1	Dyad
Chen, Liu, Wang, & Hu (2021)	77	1	2	1	1	1,2	Team
Chen, Liu, Zhang, & Qian (2018)	286	1	1	1	9	1,2	Dyad
Chen, Zhang, Zhang, & Gao (2021)	237	1	1	1	1	2	Dyad
Chen, Zheng, & Wu (2024)	261	1	2	1	1	1	Dyad
Cheng, Wang, Fang, Kayani, & Biasutti (2023)	579	1	1	1	1	1	Individual
Cheung, Huang, Chang, & Wei (2020) - Study 2	282	1	2	1	1	1	Dyad
Chiu and Hung (2022)	250	1	1	1,3	9	1	Dyad
Chiu, Balkundi, Owens, & Tesluk (2022) - Study 1	70	1	2	1	1	1	Team
Chiu, Balkundi, Owens, & Tesluk (2022) - Study 2	50	1	2	1	1	1	Team
Chiu, Owens, & Tesluk (2016)	62	1	2	1	1	1	Team
Cho et al. (2021) - Study 1	269	3	3	1	1	1,5	Individual
Cho et al. (2021) - Study 2	233	1	2	1	1	1,5	Dyad
Cojuharenco and Karelaia (2020) - Study 3	281	1	3	1	1	1	Individual
Cojuharenco and Karelaia (2020) -Study 4	310	2	3	1	1	1	Individual
Cojuharenco and Karelaia (2020) -Study 5	502	2	3	1	1	1	Individual
Cortes-Mejia, Cortes, & Herrmann (2022)	120	1	2	1,3	1	1,3	Organization
Darren, Lowe, Bahmannia, Cui, & Chen (2022)	273	1	2	1	1	1	Dyad
Dean (2016) - Pilot Study	24	1	1	1	4	8	Individual
Dean (2016) -Study 1	104	1	1	1	4	8	Individual
Deng et al. (2019)	194	1	2	1	1	Multiple	Dyad
D'Errico (2019) -Pilot Study	44	1	3	1	9	8	Individual

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(*continued*)

Primary study	N	Sample	Humility Method	Humility Rater	Humility Measure	Humility Definition	Level
D'Errico (2019) -Study 1	118	1	3	1	9	8	Individual
Diao, Song, Wang, & Zhong (2019)	52	1	2	1	1	2	Team
Ding & Chu (2020)	260	1	2	1	1	1	Individual
Ding, Yu, Chu, Li, & Amin (2020)	260	1	2	1	1	1	Individual
Duan et al. (2024) -Study 1	188	1	2	3	1	1	Dyad
Duan et al. (2024) -Study 2	434	2	3	3	9	1	Individual
El-Gazar et al. (2022)	316	1	1	1	1	1	Individual
Elhadidy, Gao, & Elnokrashy (2024)	456	1	1	1	1	1	Individual
Ghassemi, Isfahani, Abbaspour, & Farhanghi (2015)	95	1	1	1	9	5	Individual
Gonçalves & Brandão (2017)	73	1	1	3	1	1,5	Team
Haar, Roche, & Brougham (2019) - Study 2	249	1	1	1	5	2	Individual
Haar, Roche, & Brougham (2019) -Study 3	122	1	1	1	5	2	Individual
Hale & Fields (2007)	157	1	1	1	4	5	Individual
Hao (2021)	230	1	2	1	4	1	Individual
Hassan, Nasim, Shah, Ishaque & Fiza (2023)	315	1	1	1	1	1	Individual
He, Zhang, & Guo (2023)	217	1	2	1	1	1	Individual
Hong (2020)	85		4	4	9	1,3	Organization
Hu, Erdogan, Jiang, Bauer, & Liu (2018)	72	1	2	1	1	1	Team
Hu et al. (2024) - Study 1a	155	2	3	1	1	1	Individual
Hu et al., 2024- Study 1b	149	1	3	1	1	1	Individual
Hu et al., 2024 - Study 2	505	2	3	1	1	1	Individual
Hu et al., 2024 - Study 3	63	3	3	1	1	1	Team
Hu et al., 2024 - Study 4	85	1	3	1	1	1	Individual
Huang, Zhang, Cui, & Peng (2024)	292	1	2	1	1	1	Individual
Huynh, Johnson, & Wehe (2020)	184	3	1	1	8	5	Individual
Jeung & Yoon (2016)	294	1	1	1	1	1	Individual
Jeung & Yoon (2018)	306	1	1	1	1	1,2	Individual
Jia, Feng, Deng, Lin, & Ning (2024) - Study 1	221	1	2	1	1	1	Individual
Jia, Feng, Deng, Lin, & Ning (2024) - Study 2	230	1	2	1	1	1	Individual
Jia, Zheng, & Jiao (2025)	172	1	2	1	1	7	Individual
Jiang, Liu, Jia (2019)	354	1	1	1	1	1,2	Individual
Jiang, Qu, Lei & Zhou (2024)	228	1	2	1	1	1	Individual
Kang, Li, & Hua (2022)	213	1	2	1	1	1	Individual
Kim, Gopalan, & Beutell (2023) -Japan	392	1	2	1	1	1	Individual
Kim, Gopalan, & Beutell (2023) - US	132	1	2	1	1	1	Individual
Krumrei-Mancuso & Rowatt (2023) -Study 1	101	1	1	3	9	8	Individual
Krumrei-Mancuso & Rowatt (2023) - Study 2	215	1	1	1	9	8	Dyad
Lei, Peng, & Guo (2023)	348	1	1	1	1	1	Individual
Li, Dong, Wu, Brown, & Sun (2022)	71	1	2	1	1	1	Team
Li, Li, Fu, & Ullah (2019)	222	1	1	1	1	1	Dyad
Li, Liang, & Zhang (2016)	249	1	2	1	1	1,2	Individual
Li, Wei, Chen, & Yan (2020)	171	1	1	1	1	1	Team
Li, Xue, & Liu (2021)	237	1	1	1	1	1	Dyad
Li, Zhang, Xia, & Liu (2019)	89	1	2	1	1	1,3	Team
Li, Liang, Zhang, & Wang (2018)	325	1	2	1	1	1,2	Individual
Liao, Shaw & Chen (2023)	175	1	2	1	1	1	Dyad
Liborius and Kiewitz (2022)- Study 1	110–196	1	2	1	1	1	Individual
Liborius and Kiewitz (2022)- Study 2	131	1	3	1	1	1	Individual
Liborius, Kiewitz, & Faber (2025)	210	1	1	1	1	1	Dyad
Lin et al. (2019)	152	1	2	1	2	1,2,3	Dyad
Lin, Tse, Shao, & Duan (2024) -Study 1	216	1	2	1	1	1	Dyad
Lin, Tse, Shao, & Duan (2024) -Study 2	210	1	2	1	1	1	Individual
Liu & Liu (2019)	345	1	1	1	1	1	Individual
Liu (2016)	244	1	1	1	1	1	Individual
Liu, Jameel Ahmed, et al. (2024)	350	1	1	1	6	1	Dyad
Liu, Cheng, Zhou, Zhu, & Zhang (2024)	175	1	5	1	1	3	Individual/ Organization
Liu et al. (2022)	70	1	2	1	1	1	Team
Liu, Mao, & Chen (2017)	90	1	1	1	1	1	Team
Liu, Mao, Li, & Yue (2024) - Study 1	293	2	3	1	1	1	Individual
Liu, Mao, Li, & Yue (2024) - Study 2	218	1	2	1	1	1	Individual
Lu & Li (2024)	625	1	2	1	1	1	Individual
Lu, Chen, & Song (2018)	384	1	1	1	1	1	Individual

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Primary study	N	Sample	Humility Method	Humility Rater	Humility Measure	Humility Definition	Level
Luu (2020)	317	1	2	1	1	Multiple	Team
Luu (2021)	483	1	2	1	2	Multiple	Team
Luu (2021)	674	1	2	1	2	1	Dyad
Ma, Ganegoda, et al. (2020) - Pilot study	148	1	2	1	2	1	Dyad
Ma, Ganegoda, et al. (2020) -Main study	220		2	1	2	1	Dyad
Ma, Wu, et al. (2020) - Study 1	449	1	2	1	2	1	Dyad
Ma, Wu, et al. (2020) - Study 2	50	1	2	1	2	1	Team
Mallén et al. (2019)	568	1	1	1	3	1	Individual
Mao, Chiu, Owens, Brown, & Liao (2019)	256	1	2	1	1	1	Dyad
Miao et al. (2020)	352	1	1	1	1	1	Individual
Monzani, Seijts, & Crossan (2021)	188	1	1	1	6		Dyad
Moore (2019)	215	1	1	1	9	8	Individual
Mrayyan and Al-Rjoub (2024)	240	1	1	1	1	7	Individual
Naeem Mian, Malik & Hussain (2023)	214	1	1	1	1	7	Individual
Naseer et al. (2020)	286	1	2	1	1	1	Individual
Nguyen, Teo, Halvorsen, & Staples (2020)	252	1	2	1	1	1	Individual
Norouzinik, Rahimnia, Maharati, & Eslami (2022)	455	1	1	1	1	1	Individual
Oc et al., 2015- Study 1	25	1	1	7	Interview coding	5,6	Individual
Oc et al., 2020 -Study 1	258	1	2	3	1	Multiple	Dyad
Oc et al., 2020 -Study 2	320	2	3	1	6	1	Individual
Oc et al., 2020 -Study 4	270	2	3	1	6	1	Individual
Othman, Abdelaliem, Mahran, & Ali (2025)	454	1	1	1	1	7	Individual
Otto et al. (2021) - Study 2	238	1	1	3	3	2	Individual
Ou, Seo, Choi, & Hom (2017)	43TMT/313 CEOs/502MMs	1	2	1	6	1,3	Team/Organization
Ou et al. (2014)	328TMT/51CEOs/645MMs	1	2	2	6	3	Team/Organization
Ou, Waldman, Peterson (2018)	105	1	2	1	1	Multiple	Organization
Owens and Hekman (2016) - Study 1	89	3	3	1	1	1	Team
Owens and Hekman (2016) - Study 2	192	3	2	1	1	1	Team
Owens et al. (2013) - Study 1, 5 samples	1298	1	2	1	1	1	Individual
Owens et al. (2013) - Study 2	144	3	2	1	1	1	Dyad
Owens et al. (2015)	230		2	1	1	1	Dyad
Owens, Yam, Bednar, Mao, & Hart (2019) - Study 1	295	1	2	1	1	1	Dyad
Owens, Yam, Bednar, Mao, & Hart (2019) - Study 2	250	3	2	1	1	1	Individual
Oyer (2015)	137	1	1	1	1	Multiple	Individual
Peng, Tian, Zhou, & Wu (2022)	467	1	2	1	1	1	Individual
Peng, Wang, Schaubroeck, & Gao (2020)	128	1	2	1	1	2	Team
Petrenko et al. (2019)	185	1	3	Third person	5	Multiple	Organization
Qian et al. (2018)	248	1	1	1	1	1	Dyad
Qian, Liu, & Chen (2022)	241	1	1	1	1	2	Dyad
Qian, Zhang, & Jiang (2020)	66	1	2	1	1	1	Team
Qin et al. (2020) - Study 1	275	1	2	1	1	1	Individual
Qin et al. (2020) - Study 2	161	1	3	1	1	1	Individual
Qin, Liu, Brown, Zheng, Owens (2021)	433	1	2	3	1,3	1	Dyad
Qiuyun et al. (2020)	186	1	2	1	1	1	Individual
Qu et al. (2023) - Study 1	175	1	3	1	1	1	Individual
Qu et al. (2023) – Study 2	212	1	2	1	1	1	Individual
Qu et al. (2023) - Study 3	20	1	2	1	1	1	Team
Qu, Zhu, & Goddard (2024)	537	1	1	1	1	1	Individual
Rego et al. (2019) - Study 2	70	1	1	1	1	1	Team
Rego et al. (2019) - Study 3	53	1	2	1	1	1	Team
Rego, Cunha, & Giustiniano (2022)	516	1	1	1	9	1	Dyad
Rego et al. (2018)	96 (307 followers/ 96supervisors/656 peers)	1	1	1	9	1,2	Individual
Rego et al. (2021)	85	1	1	3	1	1	Team
Rego et al. (2017)	82	1	1	3	1	1	Team
Rego et al. (2019) - Study 1	97	1	3	1	9	1	team
Remy & Sané (2024)	80	1	1	1	1	1	Individual
Ren, Xu, Zhou, Liu (2020)	400	1	1	3	2,6	1	Individual
Ryan Kirkland et al. (2021)	317	1	1	1	5		Individual
Shaw & Mao (2023)	553	1	1	3	1	1,3	Dyad
Shaw, Li, & Guo (2025)	569	1	2	3	1	1	Individual
Sheikh (2022)	147	1	2	1	1	1	Team

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Primary study	N	Sample	Humility Method	Humility Rater	Humility Measure	Humility Definition	Level
Shen, Wu, Xu, Wang, & Cai (2025)	303	1	2	1	1	1	Individual
Silard, Miao, Owens (2024)	247	1	1	1	1	1	Individual
Sok et al., 2021) -Study 2	307	1	1	1	1	1	Individual
Son & Lee (2023)	158	1	1	1	1	1	Individual
Song, Wang, & He (2025)	46	1	2	1	1,2	1	Team
Sousa & Van Dierendonck (2016) - Study 1	61	3	1	1	3	5	Team
Sousa & Van Dierendonck (2016) - Study 2	72	3	1	1	3	5	Team
Sousa & Van Dierendonck (2017)	236	1	1	1	3	1	Individual
Strobl, Niedermair, Matzler, & Mussner (2019)	142	1	1	3	1	8	Individual
Sun et al. (2023)	212	1	1	CEO	6	1,2,3	Organization
Swain and Korenman (2018) – Study 1	143	1	1	3	1	1	Individual
Swain and Korenman (2018) – Study 2	352	1	3	3	1	1	Individual
Swain and Korenman (2018) – Study 3	152	1	3	3	1	1	Individual
Swain (2018)-Study 1	320	2	3	1	1	Multiple	Individual
Swain (2018) -Study 2	317	2	3	1	1	Multiple	Individual
Swain (2018) -Study 3	147	1	3	1	1	Multiple	Individual
Tariq & Ambali (2013)	300	1	1	1	9	2	Individual
Tu & Huang (2022)	837	1	1	1	1	1	Individual
Tuan (2020)	618	1	2	1	1	Multiple	Dyad
Tuan et al. (2021)	894	1	2	1	2	1	Dyad
Tufail, Gul, & Ali (2024)	418	1	2	1	1	8	Individual
Tuwey & Ngeno (2019)	390/130	1	1	1, CEO	1	3	Individual/ Organization
Upadhyay & Singh (2024)	386	1	2	1	1	1	Individual
van Dierendonck and Nuijten, 2011- Study 1	668	1	1	1	9	2	Individual
van Dierendonck and Nuijten, 2011- Study 2	263	1	1	1	9	2	Individual
Van Tongeren et al. (2024) - Study 1	864	2	3	1	9	8	Individual
Van Tongeren et al., 2024- Study 2	807	2	3	1	9	8	Individual
Van Tongeren et al. (2024) - Study 3	823	2	3	1	9	8	Individual
Van Tongeren et al., 2024- Study 4	375	2	3	1	9	8	Individual
Van Tongeren et al. (2024) - Study 5	433	2	3	1	9	8	Individual
Verdorfer (2016) - Study 1	104	1	1	1,2	1	1	Individual
Verdorfer (2016) - Study 2	223	1	1	1	1	1	Dyad
Verdorfer (2019)	439	1	1	1	2		Individual
Walters & Diab (2016)	140	1	1	1	1	1	Individual
Wang & Zhou (2021)	176	1	2	1	1	1	Dyad
Wang, Dust, & Wang (2021)	496	1	1	1	1	1	Dyad
Wang et al. (2024)	194	1	3	1	1	1	Individual
Wang, Li, & Yin (2020)	104	1	2	1	1	1	Team
Wang, Liu, Wen, & Xiao (2022) -Study 1	330	1	2	1	1	1,2	Individual
Wang, Liu, Wen, & Xiao (2022) -Study 2	209	1	2	1	1	1,2	Individual
Wang, Liu, & Zhu (2018)	165	1	2	1	1	1	Dyad
Wang, Liu, & Zhu (2018)	106	1	2	1	1	1	Team
Wang, Luo, Zhang, & Guo (2019)	273	1	2	1	1	1	Dyad
Wang, Ou, and Song (2022) – Study 1	461	1	2	1	6	1,3	Dyad
Wang, Ou, and Song (2022) - Study 2	298	1	3	1	1	1,3	Individual
Wang, Owens, Li, & Shi (2018) - Study 1	211	1	2	1	1	1	Dyad
Wang, Owens, Li, & Shi (2018) - Study 2	201	1	2	1	1	1	Dyad
Wang, Saher, Hao, Ali, & Amin (2024)	328	1	1	1	1	1	Dyad
Wang, Zhang, & Jia (2017)	451	1	1	3	1	Multiple	Dyad
Wang, Zhang, & Jia (2020)	382	1	1	1	1	1,3	Individual
Waqas, Yahya, Ahmed, & Muñoz (2023)	430	1	1	1	1	1,3	Organization
Waseem, Iqbal, & Khan (2025)	317	1	2	1	9	1	Team/ Organization
Wu & Shen (2024)	181	2	2	1	1	1	Individual
Wu & Zhou (2023)	136	1	2	1	1	1	Dyad
Wu, Zhang, Jin, & Hu (2025)	297	1	2	1	1	1	Individual
Wu, Zhang, Wang, Zhou, & Hang (2024)	436	1	2	1	1	1	Individual
Xu, Mao, & Zhang (2022)	210	1	2	1	1	1	Individual
Xue, Ahmad, Han, & Lho (2024)	409	1	2	1	1		Individual
Yang, Bao, & Zhang (2024)	332	1	2	1	9	1	Individual

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Primary study	N	Sample	Humility Method	Humility Rater	Humility Measure	Humility Definition	Level
Yang, Zhang, & Chen (2019)	278	1	2	1,3	1	1	Dyad
Yang, Zhou, et al. (2019)	377		1	1	1	1	Individual
Yang, Zhou, Wang, Lin, & Luo (2019)	281	1	2	1	1	1	Dyad
Yao & Liu (2023)	70	1	2	1	1	1,3	Team
Yao, Liu, & He (2021)	85	1	2	1	1	1	Team
Ye, Tung, Li, & Zhu (2020)	76	1	1	1	1	1	Team
Yuan, Zhang, & Tu (2018)	113		1	3	1	1	Dyad
Zapata and Hayes-Jones (2019) -Study 1	326	2	3	1	1	1	Individual
Zapata and Hayes-Jones (2019) -Study 2	318	3	3	1	1	1,3	Individual
Zapata and Hayes-Jones (2019) -Study 3	219	3	3	1	1	1,3	Individual
Zapata and Hayes-Jones (2019) -Study 4	168	3	3	1	1	1,3	Individual
Zapata and Hayes-Jones (2019) -Study 5	289	3	3	1	1	1,3	Individual
Zettna et al. (2025) - Study 1	50	3	3	1	9	1,2	Individual
Zettna et al. (2025) - Study 2	41	1	1	1	1	1,2	Team
Zettna et al. (2025) - Study 3	202	1	1	1	1	1,2	Team
Zettna et al. (2025) - Study 4	35	1	1	1	1	1,2	Team
Zettna et al. (2025) - Study 5	104	1	1	1	3	1,2	Team
Zhang & Chi (2025)	384	1	1	1	1	1	Individual
Zhang & Song (2020)	67	1	2	1	1	1	Team
Zhang, Javaid, Liao, Choi & Kim (2024)	301	1	2	1	1	1	Dyad
Zhang et al. (2022) - Study 1	120	4	3	1	9	1	Individual
Zhang et al. (2022) - Study 2	258	1	2	1	1	1	Individual
Zhang & Liu (2019)	190	1	2	1	1	1	Dyad
Zhang, Ou, Tsui, & Wang (2017) - Study 1	63 CEOs/328 TMTs/645 MMs	1	2	1	1	Multiple	Individual/ Organization
Zhang, Ou, Tsui, & Wang (2017) - Study 2	143CEOs/190 TMTs	1	1	3	1	Multiple	Dyad
Zhang, Waldman, Han, & Li (2015) - Study 1	478	1	2	1	1	1	Individual
Zheng & Ahmed (2024)	276	1	2	1	1	1	Dyad
Zheng et al. (2023) - Study 1	81	2	3	1	1	1	Individual
Zheng et al. (2023) - Study 2	82	2	1	1	1	1	Team
Zhong, Zhang, Li, & Zhang (2019)	228	1	1	1	1	1	Individual
Zhong, Zhang, Xiao, & Wen (2023)	315	1	2	1	1	1	Dyad
Zhou & Chen (2024)	152	1	1	1	1	1	Dyad
Zhou & Li (2018)	157	1	2	1	6	Multiple	Dyad
Zhou & Wu (2018)	169	1	1	1	1	Multiple	Dyad
Zhou, Wu, Liang, Jia, Wang, Chen, & Lu (2021)	598	1	1	1	1	1,3	Individual
Zhu et al. (2019) -Study 1	434	1	1	1	1	1	Individual
Zhu et al. (2019) - Study 2	104	1	3	1	9	1	Individual
Zorlu, Baytok, Avan, & İnci (2021)	356	1	1	1	4	8	Individual
Zou & Chen (2022)	238	1	2	1	1	1	Dyad

Note: N = sample size; **Sample:** 1 = Working professionals; 2 = Panel data; 3 = Students (undergraduate and graduate); 4 = MBA. **Humility Method:** 1 = Survey-Cross Sectional, 2, Survey-Time Lagged, 3 = Manipulation, 4 = Archival, 5 = Mixed Methods. **Humility Rater:** 1 = Follower-Report, 2 = Peer/Team-Report, 3 = Leader-Report, 4 = Leader's Leader-Report, 5 = External. **Humility Measures:** 1 = Expressed Humility Scale (EHS; Owens et al., 2013), or adapted to assess a leader (Owens et al., 2015), or original Owens (2009); 2 = Owens and Hekman (2016); 3 = Humility Subdimension of The Servant Leadership Survey (SLS; van Dierendonck and Nuijten, 2011) Or German Version of SLS (Verdorfer & Peus, 2014), or the Spanish version (Rodríguez-Carvajal et al., 2014); 4 = Humility Subdimension Of The Servant Leadership Assessment Instrument (SLAI; Dennis & Bocarnea, 2005; Dennis and Bocarnea, 2007); 5 = **Humility Measure:** Humility Only Items Of The Honesty-Humility Subdimension Of The HEXACO Or HEXACO-PI-R (Ashton & Lee, 2008), or Honesty-Humility Subdimension Of The HEXACO Or HEXACO-PI-R (Ashton & Lee, 2009); 6 = Ou et al. (2014); 7 = Oc et al. (2015); 8 = Global Humility subscale of the Relational Humility Scale (Davis et al., 2011); 9 = Alternative Measure Or Original Scale. **Humility Definitions:** 1 = Owens et al. (2013), and related, e.g., Owens, 2009, Owens and Hekman, 2012), Owens and Hekman (2012, 2016), Owens et al. (2019); 2 = Morris et al. (2005); 3= Ou et al. (2014); 4 = Davis et al. (2010); 5 = as Servant leadership[dimensions, e.g., Nuijten's (2011)-Servant Leadership Survey (SLS), van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011)-The servant leadership survey, Fields et al. (2000); 6 = Oc et al. (2015); 7 = Citing review articles such as Kelemen et al. (2023) and/or Chandler et al. (2023); 8 = =Alternative Or Original Definition; Multiple = multiple definitions have been mentioned (e.g., Owens et al., 2013; Tangney, 2000; Morris et al., 2005; Crossan et al., 2014; Rego et al., 2019).

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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