THE INFLUENCE OF HUMBLE LEADERSHIP ON EMPLOYEES' PROACTIVE BEHAVIOR—THE ROLE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL EMPOWERMENT AND CONSCIENTIOUSNESS

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Abstract

Based on the perspective of psychological empowerment, this paper explores the influence mechanism and boundary conditions of humble leadership on employees' proactive behavior. The results show that humble leadership positively affects employees' proactive behavior. Psychological empowerment mediates partly between humble leadership and employee's proactive behavior. On the other hand, the conscientiousness of employees regulates the relationship between psychological empowerment and employees' proactive behavior. The higher the employee's conscientiousness is, the weaker the positive relationship between psychological empowerment and employee's proactive behavior is. The result provides a new theoretical perspective for further understanding the relationship of humble leadership and employees' proactive behavior.

Keywords: Humble leadership, Proactive behavior, Psychological empowerment, Conscientiousness

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Research Background

In the information technology era, the employees are required not only knowledge and skills, but also proactive which is an important ability to help the organization identify and solve problems in a timely manner. Only in this way can the organization keep alert and vigorous, and respond calmly to the fast-changing market. In addition, due to the flattening of the organization, the management range of the organization will be improved and the management atmosphere will be broader accordingly, which requires employees to be more self-disciplined and to development more proactive in work than ever before. In other words, the proactive behavior of the employee has become one of the important factors influencing organizational success. Whether the organization can survive and develop in the increasingly competitive environment depends on the employees' proactive behavior.

In the researches related to employees' behavior, the factor of leadership has been widely concerned by scholars due to the resources and powers leaders have in organizations which ensure their sufficient influence over employees (Zhang, Liu & Liao, 2011). As a new field of leadership, humble leadership has attracted more and more attention of researchers in recent years. Many scholars and entrepreneurs believe that the humility of leaders is particularly critical and significant in such a rapidly changing environment, but its effectiveness has not yet been fully demonstrated theoretically and tested empirically

(Qu, He & Mei, 2013). Therefore, this study tries to make empirical research on humble leadership and employees' proactive behavior, so as to provide theoretical reference for improving employees' proactive behaviors in the organizations and providing operational management suggestions for the organizations to improve performance.

Literature Review

1. Proactive behavior

In 2001, Frese & Fay formally defined the concept of individual proactive behavior: a spontaneous work behavior that leads employees to persevere and overcome difficulties and forge ahead to achieve organizational and personal goals. (Frese & Fay 2001) proposed three key elements of proactive behavior, including self-starting, proactive and persistence. Self-starting refers to the employee's proactive to complete a task or thing without explicit instructions from the organization. Proactive means that employees have long-term considerations about the future of organizations and prepare ahead of time. Persistence means that employees are committed to achieving organizational goals insistently.

In recent years, with the flattening of organizational structure, complicating of job tasks, as well as the fiercely of external competition, the overall operation circumstance of organizations becomes more and more uncertain, so organizations must increase their flexibility and innovation to adapt to this kind of uncertainty. Organizations require employees

to spontaneously raising questions and focus on solutions to the problems, and to promote the innovation capabilities of organizations and solve problems in the complex environment creatively (Wei & Pan, 2012).

2. Humble Leadership

In 2012, Owens and Hekman first put forward the concept of "humble leadership", which means "leading from the ground" or "bottom-up leadership". Humble leaders show the characteristics of viewing himself objectively, appreciating others actively and accepting new information openly. To sum up, humble leadership includes three dimensions: confession to their own limitations, shortcomings and mistakes; second, affirmation of employees' strengths and contributions; and third, modest learning (Owens, Johnson & Mitchell, 2013).

Through the analysis of the literature, it is found that the influence of humble leadership on employees is mainly reflected in the following four aspects: (1) humble leadership influences the subordinates' performance (Owens, Johnson & Mitchell, 2013); (2) humble leadership influences the work behaviors of employees, including work input, creativity, and voice behavior (Yao, 2016; Wang, 2017); (3) humble leadership influences the job characteristics of employees, such as enhancing psychological empowerment, psychological security, self-efficacy and so on (Lei et al., 2015; Wang, 2017), (4) humble leadership influences employees' emotions and attitudes, such as satisfaction, loyalty, organizational identification and so on (Nielsen, Marrone & Slay, 2010; Luo, Hua &

Zhong, 2015). Based on these reviews, we perceived that humble leadership will affect employees' job involvement, creativity and other work behaviors. However, there are few researches on whether humble leadership will affect employees' proactive behaviors.

3. Psychological Empowerment

In the study of antecedent variables of psychological empowerment, numerous studies have shown that leader behavior is the most important factor affecting the psychological empowerment of subordinates. Transformational leadership, charismatic leadership, leader support, leader-member exchange can significantly improve subordinates' levels of psychological empowerment (Avolio et al., 2004; Aryee, 2006; Li, Tian & Shi 2006). In terms of the research on the outcome variables of psychological empowerment, Spreitzer (1995), Janssen (2005) shows that the level of psychological empowerment was positively correlated with individual innovations. However, Wu, Liu & Wu (2009), based on the Chinese cultural background, indicated that psychological empowerment plays a partial mediating role in the relationship between transformational leadership and job performance organizational citizenship behaviors of employees. As a whole, the researches on the outcome variables of psychological empowerment mainly includes work performance, innovation, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, turnover intention.

4. Conscientiousness

Conscientiousness refers to a kind of individual differences which reflected in the

following aspects: the tendency of individuals to control impulses in accordance with the requirements of social norms, the orientation of tasks and goals, thinking before acting, delaying gratification, compliance with norms and disciplines and so on. (Wang, Chu & Dai, 2011). McCrae & Costa (1985) finds that individuals with high conscientiousness have high level of self-efficacy, responsibility, perseverance and planning and they are neat, organized and pursue excellence. While individuals with low conscientiousness have low level of self-efficacy and they are chaos, careless and unreliable, lack of pursuit of goals. Winter (1991) also finds that the power motivation of highly conscientious individuals is generally manifested as pro-social and pro-organizational behaviors, while that of low-conscientious individuals is generally manifested as impulsive or aggressive behaviors. In a word, conscientiousness represents an individual's responsible attitude towards work or task which can be seen as a guarantee for a healthy and long-term career development.

Research Hypothesis:

1. The Relation Between Humble Leadership and Employees' Proactive behavior.

Self-determination theory holds that self-determination is an ability as well as a need of an individual. People naturally have a tendency of self-determination which guides people to develop various kinds of activities that are interesting and helpful for personal development, thus help achieving the harmony between human and social environment. First, humble leadership provides ample space for employees to arrange their ways and contents of work. Highly autonomous creates an organizational atmosphere in which employees can freely control their time, contents and manners of work, and then enhance their self-efficacy and alertness, which is conducive to promoting employees' proactive behaviors (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006). Secondly, humble leaders show respect for the subordinates and their (subordinates') contributions to work. While there are researches have shown that the vision climate has a motivational effect on individual behavior (Song & Chen, 2017). At the same time, they admit their own shortcomings and learn from subordinates modestly. These humble behaviors of leaders construct a good organization atmosphere of friendly respect, fully empowered and interactive learning, so that employees can be aware of their self-recognition and self-esteem from the leaders. Meanwhile, the attitude of a humble leader who is tolerant of employees' mistakes can also help employees to ease their fear of failure. An atmosphere of respect and tolerance will encourage employees to work boldly and even creatively. Based on above analysis, this paper proposes the following hypothesis:

H1: humble leadership is positively related to employee proactive behavior.

2. The Intermediary Role of Psychological Empowerment

First of all, the empowerment of humble leaders gives autonomy, enhances the sense of control and task autonomous space of

subordinates. Besides, the employees can hold the balance about deciding when to start actions and adjust action plans, usually, in what methods and ways to work, how much effort should be taken and so on, so that employees can feel more autonomous. Humble leaders take to find the strengths of their subordinates and then learn from the strengths, express appreciation for them. Thus, subordinates can improve the level of self-efficacy via objective evaluations and recognition from leaders. Humble leaders encourage their subordinates to try so that employees are more likely to engage in work what they are truly interested in and skilled in under this relaxed environment, So employees will perceived more meaning of work by means of fit between work and values. Humble leaders are willing to put down their frame, learn from subordinates with an open mind and encourage subordinates to participate in management. All these manners will make employees feel that they can deeply influence organizational strategy, management and performance in their work. Therefore, they can perceive more influence.

Second, self-determination theory holds that the satisfaction of the individual's basic psychological needs will stimulate the individual's intrinsic motivation and thus promote proactive behaviors, and psychological empowerment is an important antecedent variable of individual's basic psychological needs. High self-efficacy in psychological empowerment and the recognition of the fit between one's own values and work goals can meet one's competency needs. A high level of self-determination will satisfy one's autonomous needs. While a person will achieve a high psychological security and a sense of belonging if they are gained comprehensive recognition from leaders on work value, importance, abilities and autonomy which in turn satisfy their needs of relationships.

In addition, many studies have shown that psychological empowerment is an intermediary variable between leadership style and employee behavior. Mei (2012) finds that psychological empowerment mediates the relationship between shared leadership and employee innovation. Liu (2011) finds that psychological empowerment is an intermediary variable between self-leadership and employee innovation. Zhu, Huang & Zeng (2014) find that psychological empowerment mediates the relationship between distributed leadership and employee proactive behavior. Liu & Zou (2013) find that psychological empowerment of employees is an intermediary variable of transformational leadership and employee creativity. In existing researches of leadership, such as shared leadership, self-leadership, distributed leadership and transformational leadership, the core elements of these constructs (honesty, trust in subordinates, empower to subordinates, highlight the advantages and achievements of subordinates and so on) are all typical "humility" behaviors. The researches of dependent variables include not only employee proactive behaviors but also innovative behaviors, creativity and organizational citizenship behaviors which closely related to employee proactive behaviors. Therefore, it can be inferred that psychological empowerment

plays a mediating role in the relationship between humble leadership and proactive behaviors of employees.

H2: Humble leadership is positively related to employees' sense of psychological empowerment.

H3: Psychological empowerment is positively related to proactive behavior.

H4: A sense of psychological empower-ment mediates the relationship between humble leadership and proactive behavior.

3. The Regulatory Role of Conscientiousness

Many studies have found that highly conscientious workers are less affected by external conditions, while those with low conscientiousness have the opposite effect (Kamdar & Van Dyne, 2007). Individuals with high conscientiousness are perseverant, organized, responsible, and have a high sense of self-efficacy and pursuit of excellence. They not only have the motivation or enthusiasm to work hard, but also deal with difficulties and setbacks encountered at work in a positive way. So highly conscientious employees show more persistence without flagging and try best to carry out what they want to do to the end (Greenbaum, Mawritz & Eissa, 2012). Hereby it is speculated that individuals with low conscientiousness are more dependent on the support of leadership when they want to take more proactive. That is to say, leadership empowerment and employees' perception of empowerment will have a greater impact on individual proactive behavior. On the contrary, individuals with high conscientiousness will be less affected by external conditions.

Therefore, leadership empowerment and the perception of leadership empowerment will have less impact on them. Individuals like them will show more proactive behaviors, no matter they feel empowered or not. Therefore, this paper proposes the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 5: Conscientious plays a moderating role in the relationship between psychological empowerment and proactive behavior.
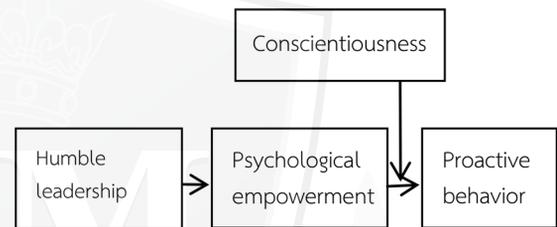

Figure 1 Theoretical model of the relationship between humble leadership and proactive behavior

Research Design
1. Study Samples

In this study, I adopted survey approach to investigate more than 20 enterprises in the province where the researcher was located. In order to avoid homologous error and the subjectivity of performance self-evaluation, the questionnaire is divided into 2 types: leadership questionnaire and employee questionnaire. The leadership questionnaire is filled out by the leader for evaluation of employee' performance, and the employee questionnaire is filled out by the employee. Through the leadership questionnaires, the dependent variable data, i.e., the data of employees' proactive behaviors,

are mainly collected, which can reflect the proactive behaviors of employees more authentically than the self-assessment of employees. I collect data of independent variables through employee questionnaires, i.e., humility leadership data, which can reflect the leaders' humility more authentically than leaders' self-assessment. In addition, the mediating variable (psychological empowerment of employees) and moderator (conscientiousness of employees) are put into the employee questionnaires and filled out by employees themselves. In order to improve the quality of the questionnaires and reduce the deviation of the respondents' understanding of the questions, the researchers contacted the subjects before issuing the questionnaires, prepared the list of interviewees' information and coded the list to ensure the one-to-one matching between the leadership questionnaires and the employee questionnaires. Then, the staff will guide the completion of questionnaires on site and collect them on the spot. In this survey, 426 sets of questionnaires were issued, 425 sets were completed, 41 sets of invalid questionnaires were eliminated, and 384 sets were finally valid, and the validity rate is 90.3%.

2. Scale Selection

In order to ensure the reliability and validity of the constructs in the questionnaire, all mature measurement scales were chosen. Humble leadership behaviors were measured by the scale of Owens, Johnson & Mitchell (2013) with nine items and scored by the Likert 5-point scoring method. Proactive behaviors of employees were measured by the scale with 7 items developed by Frese et al. (1997) and scored by the Likert-5 scoring method. Psychological empowerment was measured by psychological empowerment scale created by Spreitzer (1995), which was revised based on the Chinese context by Li, Tian & Shi (2006). This scale consisted of 12 items which were scored by Likert5 point rating method. Based on previous leadership studies, control variables including gender, age, education level, and the co-work tenure with direct superiors were selected.

Data Analysis and Results
1. Correlation Analysis of Variables

The means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients of the variables are shown in Table 1. Table 1 indicates that humble leadership is significantly and positively correlated with employees' proactive behavior (r = 0.239, P < 0.01) and with psychological empowerment (r = 0.421, P < 0.01). And there is a significant positive correlation between psychological empowerment and proactive behavior (r = 0.276, P < 0.01). These results preliminarily support the hypothesis of this study.

Table 1 Description of statistics and correlation analysis

Variable	Means	SD	Var1	Var2	Var3	Var4	Var5	Var6	Var7	Var8
1. Gender	1.62	0.487								
2. Age	2.08	0.98	0.074							
3. Education Background	2.42	0.827	-.179**	-.376**						
4. Duration with the current superior	2.92	1.233	0.07	.565**	-.143**					
5. Humble Leadership	4.2633	0.68342	0.058	-0.087	-0.08	0.017				
6. Psychological Empowerment	3.7081	0.673	0.071	.181**	-.192**	.241**	.421**			
7. Proactive behavior	3.7719	0.81189	.235**	.221**	-.124*	.270**	.239**	.276**		
8. Conscientiousness	4.0765	0.59901	0.088	.319**	-.151**	.292**	.276**	.562**	.265**	

Note: The correlations of **at level 0.01 (double endings) and *at grade 0.05 (double endings) are significant.

Var1: Gender, Var2: Age, Var3: Education Background, Var4: Co-work tenure (duration) with the current superior, Var5: Humble Leadership, Var6: Psychological Empowerment, Var7: Proactive behavior, Var8: Conscientiousness

2. Hypothesis Testing

According to the paired data received by the leadership questionnaire and the employee questionnaire, this study used the method of hierarchical regression analysis to perform linear regression analysis using SPSS23.0. The results of the regression are shown in Table 2.

(1) The Principal Effect

H1 suggests that humble leadership has a positive effect on employees' proactive behavior. In order to verify this hypothesis, the proactive behavior of employees was regarded as the dependent variable, and the control variables (gender, age, educational background, duration of working with current superiors) were added successively to the regression equation. According to Model 4, humble leadership was significantly and positively correlated with employees' proactive behavior (r = 0.235, p < 0.01), so hypothesis H1 is verified.

(2) Mediation Effect

In order to verify the mediation effect of psychological empowerment between humble leadership and employees' proactive behavior, the four steps verifying mediation effect proposed by Baron & Kenny (1986) was adopted in this study. According to Model 2 in Table 2, the positive correlation between humble leadership and psychological empowerment was significant (β = 0.416, p < 0.01). Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was supported. In Model 5, psychological empowerment is significantly and positively correlated with the employees' proactive behaviors (β = 0.209, P < 0.01). Thus,

Hypothesis 3 is verified. When psychological empowerment was introduced on the basis of Model 4, it was found that the influence of humble leadership on employees' proactive behavior was weakened in Model 6 (The value of β decreased from 0.235 to 0.129, $p < 0.05$).

That is to say, psychological empowerment played a partial role in mediating the relationship between humble leader and employees' proactive behavior. Therefore, Hypothesis 4 is supported.

Table 2 Hierarchical regression results

Variable	Psychological Empowerment		Proactive behavior					
	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7	M8
Controlled Variable								
Age	-.003	.081	.078	.125*	.078	.115	.059	.055
Gender	.028	.011	.210**	.200**	.204**	.199**	.201**	.200**
Education Background	-.157**	-.102*	-.027	.004	.006	.017	.002	-.017
Duration with the current superior	.218**	.173**	.208**	.182**	.162**	.160**	.157**	.165**
Independent Variable								
Humble Leadership		.416**		.235**		.129*		
Intervening Variable								
Psychological Empowerment					.209**	.181**	.161**	.153**
Regulate Variable								
Conscientiousness							.092	.046
Interactive								
Psychological								-.129*
R^2	.084**	.252**	.126**	.180**	.166**	.192**	.171**	.185**
ΔR^2	.084**	.168**	.126**	.053**	.040**	.026**	.045**	.014*
F	8.699**	25.459**	13.677**	16.553**	15.060**	14.941**	13.006**	12.231**
ΔF	8.699**	84.805**	13.677**	24.648**	18.123**	12.128**	10.320**	6.451*

Note: correlations of **at level 0.01 (double endings) and *at grade 0.05 (double endings) are significant. M 1-8 represents 8 different regression models.

(3) Moderation Effect

The proactive behavior was taken as dependent variable, and then the control variables (gender, age, education, working time with supervisors), the term of interaction between psychological empowerment and conscientiousness were introduced in turn. Model 8 in table 2 shows that the regression coefficient of the interaction between psychological empowerment and conscientiousness is significant, and conscientiousness negatively moderates the influence of psychological empowerment on proactive behavior (β = -0.129, $p < 0.05$). Hypothesis 5 is supported. After adding interaction of psychological empowerment and conscientiousness to regression, R^2 increased from 0.171 before interaction to 0.185 after interaction. It shows that for high conscientious employees, the relationship between psychological empowerment and employees' proactive behavior is weakened.

Conclusion and Discussion

The results show that humble leadership has a significant positive effect on proactive behavior of employees, and psychological empowerment plays a partial mediating role in it. Conscientiousness plays a moderating effect in the relation between psychological empowerment and employees' proactive behavior. Based on the results above, this paper puts forward some suggestions for organizations on management practice.

First of all, the results show that the humble leadership has a significant positive impact on the proactive behavior, so in the management of the organization, employees' proactive behaviors can be promoted by improving management style. The reasons that humble leadership can influence the proactive of employees are stated as follows: on the one hand, as a bottom-up leader, the humble leadership gives more work autonomy to employees and provides sufficient space for employees. The highly autonomous situation creates a kind of organizational climate that allows employees to freely arrange the time, content and ways of their work, thus enhancing their sense of self-efficacy and sensitivity, and promoting employees' proactive behaviors (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006). On the other hand, with the advent of the intelligent age, the information gap is quickly filled up by the high-speed and omnidirectional network connection. The situation of information inequality in the past between leaders and employees has been fundamentally changed. In particular, leaders in an organization do not necessarily have more information about their jobs than their employees, and even in a broader field, they don't necessarily know more in many aspects than employees do. Therefore, the humility and the proactive of the leaders to learn from the employees are not only an attitude but also the need of the current reality. The humility of the leadership can make the employees feel sincere and equal of treatment, and thus they will gain more positive and active proactive. Therefore, leaders at all levels of the organization should

remain open-minded and treat everyone equally and amicably. They should take the proactive to listen to the employee's advice. Also, they should encourage employees on a regular basis and often reflect on their own thinking of work or behavior.

Secondly, the research found that psychological empowerment is significantly positively correlated with proactive behaviors. Therefore, more attention should be paid to employees' psychological empowerment in organizational management. Thomas & Velthouse (1990) believe that psychological empowerment is an internal and continuous driving force in the work of employees, which enables them to affirm and recognize their own work from the heart and promote continuous improvement of employees. In order to promote the proactive of employees, the leaders of the organization should focus on enhancing the psychological empowerment of employees. Specifically, such as creating a good atmosphere of participation and a loose degree of superior control to promote the staff's sense of psychological empowerment can also increase their understanding of the significance and importance of the work. The psychological empowerment of employees can also be improved by giving employees a chance to fully exert their subjective proactive and to arrange and carry out the work autonomously. Besides, enhancing their confidence is also a good way to meet this goal.

Finally, it is found that conscientiousness plays a regulatory role in psychological empowerment

and proactive behavior. Therefore, the management of staff recruitment and training should be emphasized in the management of the organization.

Some scholars have shown that "conscientiousness" is the most effective predictor among the five factors of personality, which can most effectively predict different types of work and different performance standards (Gregory & John, 2000). It's a personality variable which is common in Eastern and Western cultures, that is most relevant to job performance (Marcus, Lee & Ashton, 2007).

The managers of the organization should pay attention to the identification of the personality traits of the candidates in the recruitment process. In addition, they should regard the high degree of conscientiousness as an important indicator to decide whether candidates are employed or not. At the same time, more attention should be paid to the training efforts on the staff in an organization. Leaders should strive to cultivate employees' career spirits, improve their working ability, and enhance their sense of responsibility and self-discipline. On the other hand, in the interaction between psychological empowerment and conscientiousness, the influence of psychological empowerment on employee's proactive behavior will be weakened with the improvement of conscientiousness. Therefore, organizations can effectively reduce the reliance of employees on leadership empowerment by selecting employees with high due diligence and strengthening the cultivation of conscientiousness in their work to make the

management of the organization more concise and efficient.

Conclusion

The mechanism of humble leadership influencing employees' proactive behavior was discussed in this study. The classical scale was used to ensure the reliability and validity of the constructs in the questionnaires, and the paired data was used to avoid the homologous deviation. But there are still some shortcomings due to the limitations of many conditions. First, the research on the influence mechanism of humble leadership on psychological empowerment and proactive behavior is only a preliminary exploration, and many problems need to be further studied. For instance, the impact of humble leadership on employee's proactive behaviors apply at different stages of development in different organizations or not, or only suitable for some specific stages of organization, it still needs to be explored by researchers in the future. Second, this study does not have a fine division of staff groups. In fact, different groups of people have different impact from empowerment. In future, we can introduce the theory of trait activation when we are doing research, and consider more personal characteristics, leadership characteristics, team characteristics and organizational characteristics. On the basis of multi-society exchange, the theoretical research should be more in line with the practical complexity of organizational management so as to guide management practice effectively.

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