

Reimagining Leadership: Exploring Evolving Perceptions of Effectiveness of Leader Humility Among U.S. Army Officers

Brad Owens

Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah

Jacob Brown

University of Illinois, Illinois, United States

Mac Strachen

Washington University, Missouri, United States

Jordan Swain

West Point Military Academy, West Point, New York

Greg Fetzer

University College London, London, England

Abstract

Research on leader humility highlights its positive impact in organizations, leading to positive perceptions of humble leaders. However, extant theorizing overlooks how leaders come to see humility as a viable aspect of leadership, as it seems to counter implicit expectations of leaders. To unpack the organizational emergence of leader humility, we draw from qualitative data of an organization in which the expression of leader humility is counternormative: the U.S. Army. We found that many army officers held a conflicted view of humble leaders as humble leaders are considered interpersonally warm but incompetent. We identified two key mechanisms (role modeling, personal defining moments) through which individuals developed a contextualized view of the usefulness and benefits of expressed humility, even in a competence-emphasizing, agentic, masculine leadership context like the army. We also observed customized views of leader humility, where expressions of humility were tailored to the leader's characteristics to maximize their effectiveness without losing credibility. We contribute to research on leader humility by illustrating the process through which humility comes to be seen as a legitimate leadership approach, and to research on implicit theories of leadership by showing how the contextual reinterpretation of leadership can result in adapted individual leadership schemas.

Keywords

Leadership, Humility, Competence, Perception.