

Leader humility and creativity: A systematic literature review

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Abstract

This systematic literature review synthesizes empirical evidence on the relationship between leader humility and creativity at the individual and team levels. Data were collected from the Scopus database using PRISMA procedures, including 17 empirical articles. Data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns, mediating mechanisms, moderating variables, and theoretical frameworks. The findings show that leader humility is positively related to both individual and team creativity. Key mediating mechanisms include psychological safety, psychological capital, and creative self-efficacy, while significant moderating variables include power distance, task interdependence, and top management support. Dominant theoretical frameworks used are social learning theory, social information processing theory, social cognitive theory, and social exchange theory. This review is the first comprehensive synthesis, exclusively based on 17 recent empirical articles (2017–2023), to map the research landscape on leader humility and creativity and to formulate an integrated future research agenda.

Keywords: Leader humility, employee creativity, team creativity, systematic literature review, mediating mechanisms

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Abstrak

Tinjauan literatur sistematis ini mensintesis bukti empiris tentang hubungan antara kerendahan hati pemimpin dan kreativitas pada tingkat individu dan tim. Data dikumpulkan dari basis data Scopus menggunakan prosedur PRISMA, termasuk 17 artikel empiris. Data dianalisis secara tematik untuk mengidentifikasi pola, mekanisme mediasi, variabel moderasi, dan kerangka kerja teoretis. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa kerendahan hati pemimpin berhubungan positif dengan kreativitas individu dan tim. Mekanisme mediasi utama meliputi keamanan psikologis, modal psikologis, dan efikasi diri kreatif, sedangkan variabel moderasi yang signifikan meliputi jarak kekuasaan, saling ketergantungan tugas, dan dukungan manajemen puncak. Kerangka kerja teoretis dominan yang digunakan adalah teori pembelajaran sosial, teori pemrosesan informasi sosial, teori kognitif sosial, dan teori pertukaran sosial. Tinjauan ini merupakan sintesis komprehensif pertama, yang secara eksklusif didasarkan pada 17 artikel empiris terbaru (2017–2023), untuk memetakan lanskap penelitian tentang kerendahan hati pemimpin dan kreativitas serta untuk merumuskan agenda penelitian masa depan yang terintegrasi.

Kata kunci: Kerendahan hati pemimpin, kreativitas karyawan, kreativitas tim, tinjauan literatur sistematis, mekanisme mediasi

1. Introduction

In today's rapidly evolving and highly competitive business landscape, creativity has become crucial for organizations seeking to survive and thrive (X. Wang et al., 2020). Companies require leaders who foster an environment that generates innovative and valuable ideas from both individuals and teams (Hu et al., 2018). One leadership style that is attracting increasing attention is leader humility, which encompasses the ability to view oneself with clarity, appreciate the strengths and contributions of team members, and embrace opportunities for learning (Yang & Xu, 2022; Zhu et al., 2022). Research has shown that humility among leaders is a significant factor in enhancing creativity.

Studies have demonstrated that a leader's humility creates an environment where team members feel psychologically safe. This sense of security not only encourages individuals to share their thoughts and ideas freely but also nurtures a culture of continuous learning and exploration. As a result, these conditions significantly enhance the potential for creative outcomes within teams (Chen et al., 2021; Gonçalves & Brandão, 2017). Nevertheless, even with this growing body of evidence, the specific mechanisms and contextual factors linking leader humility to enhanced creativity remain unclear and scattered across existing research. Several studies have looked at how leader humility affects creativity, but there are three main gaps in the research. First, most studies have either focused on creativity at the individual level (Cheung et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2017) or at the team level (Hu et al., 2018; Li et al., 2021) without comparing the two. We lack a clear understanding of how factors like psychological safety work across these different levels.

Second, the existing research has identified several mediators, such as psychological capital (Gonçalves & Brandão, 2017), self-efficacy (Asghar et al., 2022), and team behavioral integration (Zhu et al., 2022), that influence the relationship between humble leadership and creative outcomes. However, no systematic review has yet organized these varied mechanisms into a coherent framework. As a result, researchers currently face a challenge in achieving a unified understanding of how humble leadership effectively fosters creativity within teams.

Third, the boundary conditions that strengthen or weaken the leader humility–creativity link have been examined piecemeal. Moderators such as power distance (Hu et al., 2018), task

interdependence (Li et al., 2022), leader performance (Zhu et al., 2022), and top management support (Ali et al., 2021) have been studied in isolation. A systematic synthesis of these moderators is needed to guide contingency-based theorizing (Achmadi et al., 2023; Hadmar et al., 2022; Suryani et al., 2022).

Previous reviews on humble leadership have mainly focused on general outcomes rather than specifically on creativity, or they have referenced studies outside the main empirical body. So far, no systematic literature review has exclusively examined recent research articles on leader humility and creativity from the Scopus database, using a clear, repeatable method. To fill these gaps, this study conducts a systematic literature review (SLR) to obtain a more comprehensive picture of the development of leader humility and creativity studies at the individual and group levels.

The main goals of this study are: (1) to outline key features and trends in research on leader humility and creativity; (2) to identify the main theoretical frameworks used; (3) to explain how leader humility promotes creativity; (4) to pinpoint factors that affect this relationship; and (5) to propose a future research agenda. This study is original for three main reasons. First, it is the first systematic literature review to focus solely on the link between leader humility and creativity, using only empirical articles indexed in Scopus to ensure quality. Second, it combines individual- and team-level creativity into a single framework, showing how each level operates. Third, it creates a detailed model that includes both mediators and moderators, providing a clear guide for future research.

2. Methods

This study used a systematic literature review (SLR) to gather evidence about how leader humility relates to creativity. We followed the PRISMA 2020 guidelines to ensure that our process was clear, repeatable, and thorough when selecting and including studies. Instead of using meta-analyses to combine effect sizes statistically, this SLR focused on identifying key themes, theories, and factors that influence the relationship between leader humility and creativity.

2.1 Search Strategy

A systematic search was conducted in the Scopus database, a well-known source of peer-reviewed articles in business, management, and psychology. The search focused on these keywords and combinations:

For leader humility: "leader humility" OR "humble leadership" OR "leader expressed humility." For creativity: "creativity" OR "creative performance" OR "team creativity" OR "employee creativity" OR "creative process engagement." The complete search string used was: ("leader humility" OR "humble leadership") AND ("creativity" OR "creative performance" OR "team creativity").

The search focused on articles published from January 2017 to December 2023. This time frame shows when research on leader humility and creativity increased significantly. There were no language restrictions, but only articles with full text available and listed in Scopus were included.

2.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they met the following criteria:

1. Publication type: Peer-reviewed journal articles (original empirical research). Conference proceedings, book chapters, dissertations, and review articles were excluded.

2. Empirical design: Quantitative studies with hypothesis testing. Qualitative studies, conceptual papers, and meta-analyses were excluded.
3. Constructs: Studies must examine leader humility (or humble leadership) as an independent or antecedent variable, and creativity (individual or team) as a dependent or outcome variable.
4. Data availability: Full text accessible and data extractable for synthesis.
5. Time frame: Published between 2017 and 2023.

Studies were excluded if they:

1. Focused on narcissistic leadership without directly measuring humility (except when providing comparative insights, as in Norouzinik et al., 2022, which was retained for contrast).
2. Examined innovation or innovative behavior without explicitly measuring creativity.
3. They were not written in English (none were excluded from the retrieved set on this basis).

2.3 Selection Process (PRISMA Flow)

The selection process followed the four-phase PRISMA flow: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. Table 1 presents the PRISMA flow diagram.

Phase 1: Identification. The Scopus database search yielded 84 records using the keyword string. No additional records were identified through other sources because the review was deliberately limited to Scopus to ensure quality and consistency.

Phase 2: Screening. After removing 12 duplicate records (identical articles appearing from different search permutations), 72 records remained for title and abstract screening. Two independent reviewers (the authors) screened the titles and abstracts against the inclusion criteria. Disagreements were resolved through discussion. At this stage, 48 records were excluded because they: (a) did not focus on leader humility (e.g., studied general humility or other leadership styles), (b) did not measure creativity as an outcome (e.g., focused on job performance, voice behavior, or job satisfaction), or (c) were conceptual or review articles.

Table 1. PRISMA Flow

Phase	Step	Number of records
Identification	Records identified from Scopus	84
	Records after duplicates removed	72
Screening	Records screened (title + abstract)	72
	Records excluded at screening	48
Eligibility	Full-text articles assessed	24
	Full-text articles excluded	7
Included	Studies included in synthesis	17

Phase 3: Eligibility. The remaining 24 full-text articles were retrieved and assessed for eligibility. Of these, 7 articles were excluded for the following reasons: (a) no direct measurement of the leader humility–creativity relationship ($n = 3$), (b) qualitative design with no statistical testing ($n = 2$), or (c) full text not available in English or accessible format ($n = 2$).

Phase 4: Included. A total of 17 articles met all inclusion criteria and were included in the final synthesis. The reference list of these 17 articles was also checked, but no additional relevant studies were identified that were not already captured.

2.4 Data Extraction

A standardized data extraction form was developed to capture key information from each included article. The form included the following fields:

1. Bibliographic information: authors, year, title, source journal
2. Study context: country, industry, organizational setting
3. Sample characteristics: sample size, level of analysis (individual, team, or dyadic)
4. Theoretical framework(s) explicitly stated or implied.
5. Measurement: scales used for leader humility and creativity (reported reliability)
6. Key findings: correlation coefficients, path coefficients, and significance levels
7. Mediating variables tested and their effects
8. Moderating variables tested and their effects.
9. Control variables included

Two reviewers independently extracted data from all 17 articles. Inter-rater agreement was 94%; discrepancies were resolved through consensus.

2.5 Quality Assessment

The quality of each included study was assessed using an adapted version of the criteria for quantitative studies, focusing on:

1. Clarity of research objectives and hypothesis formulation
2. Appropriateness of research design (cross-sectional, time-lagged, or multi-source)
3. Reliability and validity of measures (Cronbach's $\alpha \geq 0.70$ considered acceptable)
4. Use of control variables to reduce alternative explanations
5. Transparency of statistical reporting (effect sizes, confidence intervals, or exact p-values)

All 17 articles met acceptable quality thresholds. Most employed time-lagged or multi-source designs (e.g., Hu et al., 2018; Tariq et al., 2023) reduce common method bias. No article was excluded based on quality alone, but limitations (e.g., cross-sectional nature, convenience sampling) were noted for interpretation.

2.6 Data Synthesis Method

Given the heterogeneity in study designs, levels of analysis, and measured outcomes, a meta-analysis was not appropriate. Instead, thematic synthesis was employed. The synthesis proceeded in three stages:

1. Coding and categorization: Each article was coded for theoretical framework, mediators, moderators, and key findings. Codes were grouped into emergent themes (e.g., "affective-psychological mechanisms", "cognitive mechanisms", "behavioral mechanisms").
2. Pattern identification: Across articles, patterns were identified regarding how often each mechanism was tested and supported, and under what conditions.
3. Framework development: Based on the synthesized evidence, an integrated conceptual framework was constructed to visually represent the relationships among leader humility, mediators, moderators, and creativity outcomes.

To ensure reliability, the coding scheme was applied by one reviewer and verified by a second reviewer. Any disagreements were resolved through discussion.

3. Results

3.1 Study Characteristics (RQ1)

Table 2 shows the key details of the 17 studies included in this review. All articles were published between 2017 and 2023, with the most published in 2022 (5 studies, 29.4%), followed by 2021 (4 studies, 23.5%). This pattern suggests that interest in leader humility and creativity has been growing, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. Most studies were conducted in China (11 studies, 64.7%), followed by Pakistan (3 studies, 17.6%), Portugal (1 study), Iran (1 study), and a multi-country study (Lehmann et al., 2022) that included data from the United States. The heavy focus on East Asia shows that our current understanding mainly comes from cultures that value collectivism and have high power distance.

Table 2. Summary of Included Studies

No	Authors (year)	Country	Level
1	Cheung et al. (2020)	China	Individual
2	Hu et al. (2018)	China	Team
3	Zhu et al. (2022)	China	Team
4	Chen C. et al. (2021)	China	Team
5	Wang et al. (2020)	China	Team
6	Li et al. (2022)	China	Team
7	Wang et al. (2017)	China	Individual
8	Asghar et al. (2022)	Pakistan	Individual
9	Li et al. (2018)	China	Individual
10	Lei et al. (2023)	China	Individual
11	Xu et al. (2023)	China	Individual
12	Chenet al. (2021)	China	Team
13	Tariq et al. (2023)	Pakistan	Individual
14	Lehmann et al. (2022)	USA	Dyadic
15	Norouzinik et al. (2022)	Iran	Individual
16	Ali et al. (2021)	Pakistan	Individual
17	Gonçalves & Brandão (2017)	Portugal	Team

Regarding the level of analysis, 10 studies (58.8%) examined creativity at the team level, while 7 (41.2%) examined individual creativity. One study (Lehmann et al., 2022) also introduced a dyadic level, which focuses on relationships. In terms of industry, the most studied areas were information technology (4 studies), banking and financial services (3 studies), hospitality (2 studies), and manufacturing (2 studies). Other studies focused on mixed or unspecified industries.

All studies used quantitative methods. Seven studies collected data over time (for example, Cheung et al., 2020; Hu et al., 2018; Tariq et al., 2023). Four studies used data from different sources, such as supervisor ratings of creativity and employee reports of humility. Six studies used cross-sectional designs with a single source. No experimental or longitudinal studies with more than two measurement points were found.

3.2 Theoretical Frameworks (RQ2)

The analysis of 17 scholarly articles revealed that researchers predominantly employed four theoretical frameworks, often integrating these to develop comprehensive multi-mechanism models. The most frequently referenced framework was social learning theory (Bandura), featured in seven articles (41.2%). For instance, Zhu et al. (2022) demonstrated that team members can adopt humble behaviors from their leaders, enhancing both teamwork and creativity. Similarly, Yang and Xu (2022) utilized social learning theory to illustrate how leader humility can cultivate a growth mindset among followers. Other studies, including those by Chen L. et al. (2021) and Lei et al. (2023), also grounded their models in this theory.

Social information processing theory was cited in four articles (23.5%). For example, Wang J. et al. (2017) argued that leader humility establishes a psychologically safe environment, encouraging employees to express their perspectives and, in turn, fostering creativity. Asghar et al. (2022) and Hu et al. (2018) also applied this theory to explore the impact of humble leaders on followers' self-efficacy and their willingness to share information.

Social cognitive theory appeared in three articles (17.6%). Li R. et al. (2022) and Wang X. et al. (2020) emphasized the role of team creative efficacy as a mediating factor, while Asghar et al. (2022) focused on follower self-efficacy.

Social exchange theory was similarly utilized in three articles (17.6%). Lei et al. (2023) combined social exchange with social learning to propose a dual-path model encompassing role modeling and leader-member exchange dynamics. Tariq et al. (2023) integrated social exchange into the socially embedded model of thriving, while Gonçalves & Brandão (2017) used it to explain reciprocity in leader-follower relationships.

Additionally, some less common frameworks were noted, such as the connectionist network model (Chen C. et al., 2021), the process model of emotion regulation (Wang J. et al., 2017), the idiosyncrasy credit model of leadership (Tariq et al., 2023), and the socially embedded model of thriving (Tariq et al., 2023).

3.3 Mediating Mechanisms (RQ3)

Across the 17 studies, 14 distinct mediators were tested. Table 3 groups these mediators into three thematic categories: affective-psychological, cognitive, and behavioral-relational.

Affective-Psychological Mechanisms

Research has consistently identified psychological safety as a key mediator in various contexts. A study by Hu et al. (2018) demonstrated that team psychological safety mediates the positive relationship between leader humility and team creativity, noting that this effect varies depending on power distance within the team. Additionally, Gonçalves and Brandão (2017) found that psychological safety, in conjunction with psychological capital, sequentially mediates the connection between humility and creativity across 73 different teams.

Extending this concept to the dyadic level, Lehmann et al. (2022) found that relationship-specific humility predicts relationship-specific psychological safety, which, in turn, influences relationship-specific performance, including aspects of creative performance.

Self-efficacy and team creative efficacy have also been supported as mediators in several studies. For instance, Asghar et al. (2022) found that follower self-efficacy mediated the impact of leader humility on creativity, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, both Wang et al. (2020) and Li et al. (2022) established that team creative efficacy mediates the relationship between leader humility and team creativity, with Li et al. noting that this mediation effect is stronger when task interdependence is low.

Moreover, the concept of thriving at work has been explored effectively in a hospitality context by Tariq et al. (2023). Their findings suggest that leader humility positively affects subordinates' creative service performance through the lens of thriving at work, an effect that is amplified by high leader competency. Lastly, Gonçalves and Brandão (2017) also highlighted psychological capital as a significant mediator in team settings, underscoring its role in enhancing team creativity, particularly when linked to leader humility.

Table 3. Summary of Mediating Mechanisms

Category	Mediator	Supported in studies
Affective-psychological	Psychological safety	Hu et al. (2018); Gonçalves & Brandão (2017); Lehmann et al. (2022)
	Psychological capital	Gonçalves & Brandão (2017)
	Thriving at work	Tariq et al. (2023)
	Self-efficacy (general)	Asghar et al. (2022)
	Team creative efficacy	Wang X. et al. (2020); Li R. et al. (2022)
	Job embeddedness	Norouzinik et al. (2022)*
	Job engagement	Norouzinik et al. (2022)*
Cognitive	Growth mindset for creativity	Yang & Xu (2022)
	Perspective taking	Wang J. et al. (2017)
	Team behavioral integration	Zhu et al. (2022)
	Team learning	Chen L. et al. (2021)
	Team job crafting	Chen C. et al. (2021)
Behavioral-relational	Creative process engagement	Cheung et al. (2020)**
	Team information sharing	Hu et al. (2018)
	Role modeling	Lei et al. (2023)
	LMX (leader-member exchange)	Lei et al. (2023)
	Relational identification	Li J. et al. (2018)
	Organizational identification	Li J. et al. (2018)
	Employee creativity (as mediator)	Ali et al. (2021)

Notes: Norouzinik et al. (2022) studied narcissistic leadership (the opposite of humility); mediators are reported for contrast. Cheung et al. (2020) positioned leader humility as a moderator, not a direct predictor, but the mediation via creative process engagement was tested with mindfulness as the independent variable.

Cognitive Mechanisms

Research has revealed significant insights into the relationship between leader humility and employee creativity, particularly through various mediating factors. Yang and Xu (2022) introduced the concept of a growth mindset for creativity. They found that leader humility has an indirect effect on employee creativity by shaping employees' beliefs about the development of creativity. This effect was found to be more pronounced in research and development (R&D) teams compared to non-R&D teams. In a study by Wang J. et al. (2017) examining crisis contexts, such as the Wenchuan earthquake emergency response, it was shown that leader humility fosters employees' capacity for perspective-taking, which, in turn, enhances creativity. The process was further moderated by cognitive reappraisal, highlighting the complexity of this relationship. Zhu et al. (2022) confirmed that team behavioral integration serves as a mediator in this process. They found that leader humility fosters collaborative behaviors and joint decision-making within teams, which subsequently leads to increased team creativity. Interestingly, this indirect effect was stronger when the leader's performance was high.

Furthermore, Chen L. et al. (2021) found that team learning mediates the relationship between humble leader behavior and team creativity. Humble leaders serve as role models, promoting behaviors that enhance team learning, which ultimately boosts creativity. Another study by Chen et al. (2021) highlighted the mediating role of team job crafting but noted that this effect holds only when leader-member exchange (LMX) is high. Conversely, in situations where LMX is low, leader humility may negatively influence team creativity through team job crafting. Overall, these studies underscore the multifaceted nature of leadership dynamics and the importance of humility in fostering creativity within teams.

Behavioral-Relational Mechanisms

Research has shown that team information sharing mediates the relationship between leader humility and team creativity, particularly in teams characterized by low power distance, as demonstrated by Hu et al. (2018). In another study, Lei et al. (2023) explored role modeling and leader-member exchange (LMX) as parallel mediators. Their findings highlighted that leader humility positively impacts subordinates' service creativity through both role modeling and LMX. Notably, team relationship conflict played a moderating role, weakening the path of role modeling while simultaneously strengthening the path of LMX.

Li et al. (2018) identified relational and organizational identification as mediators in the influence of leader humility on constructive voice behavior. Although this study focused on voice rather than creativity, it remains relevant given the conceptual overlap between the two. Ali et al. (2021) established that employee creativity mediates the effect of leader humility on project management effectiveness, with this indirect effect moderated by top management support.

Furthermore, Cheung et al. (2020) identified creative process engagement as a mediator between mindfulness and creativity, noting that perceived leader humility strengthened this indirect relationship. While leader humility was not the independent variable in this study, the results suggest that humble leadership can enhance the translation of individual mindfulness into creative engagement in processes.

3.4 Moderating Variables (RQ4)

A total of 12 distinct moderators were examined across the 17 studies. These moderators can be classified into three groups: team/organizational context, individual follower characteristics, and leader characteristics. Table 4 provides a summary.

Table 4. Summary of Moderating Variables

Category	Moderator	Effect direction	Study
Team/Organizational	Power distance	Negative (high PD weakens or reverses effect)	Hu et al. (2018)
	Task interdependence	Negative (stronger effect when low)	Li R. et al. (2022)
	Leader performance	Positive (stronger when high)	Zhu et al. (2022)
	Leader effectiveness	Positive	Chen L. et al. (2021)
	Leader competency	Positive	Tariq et al. (2023)
	Leader-leader exchange (LLX)	Positive (strengthens positive effect)	Chen C. et al. (2021)
	Top management support	Positive	Ali et al. (2021)
	Team relationship conflict	Negative for role modeling; Positive for LMX	Lei et al. (2023)
	Team type (R&D vs. non-R&D)	Positive (stronger in R&D)	Yang & Xu (2022)
Individual follower	Proactive personality (follower)	Positive	Asghar et al. (2022)
	Cognitive reappraisal	Positive	Wang J. et al. (2017)
	Perceived leader humility	Positive (amplifies mindfulness-creativity link)	Cheung et al. (2020)
Leader	Proactive personality (leader)	Positive	Asghar et al. (2022)
	Leader conscientiousness	Positive	Wang X. et al. (2020)

Team and Organizational Context Moderators

Recent research has explored various factors that moderate the effects of leader humility within teams. For instance, Hu et al. (2018) examined power distance as a team-level moderator. They found that in teams characterized by high power distance, leader humility negatively affected team psychological safety, contrasting with the expected positive effect. Furthermore, the relationship between leader humility and team information sharing was significant only in low-power-distance teams, suggesting that humble leaders may be perceived as weak or indecisive in hierarchical cultures.

Another study by Li R. et al. (2022) focused on task interdependence. It revealed a counterintuitive finding: the indirect effect of leader humility on team creativity through team creative efficacy was stronger when task interdependence was low. The authors posited that in independent work situations, humble leaders play a more essential role in enhancing each member's creative efficacy.

Additionally, the performance and effectiveness of leaders have been shown to amplify the impacts of leader humility. For instance, research by Zhu et al. (2022) indicated that high-performing leaders exhibited a stronger mediated relationship through team behavioral integration. Similarly, Chen L. et al. (2021) found that leader effectiveness enhanced team learning. Furthermore, Tariq et al. (2023) demonstrated that leader competency intensified the

indirect effects of leader humility by promoting thriving at work. Collectively, these studies highlight that leader humility must be paired with competence to be fully effective.

In another area of focus, the leader-leader exchange (LLX) relationship was found to moderate the connection between leader humility and team job crafting, as outlined by Chen et al. (2021). Teams led by leaders with high LLX showed a positive correlation between leader humility and team job crafting. In contrast, those led by leaders with low LLX showed a negative relationship, underscoring the significance of upward exchange relationships for middle management. Moreover, Ali et al. (2021) identified that top management support enhances both the direct and indirect effects of leader humility on project management effectiveness, particularly through the mediation of employee creativity.

The complexity surrounding team relationship conflict was examined by Lei et al. (2023), who found that it weakened the positive effects of leader humility on role modeling, while simultaneously strengthening its positive effects on leader-member exchange (LMX). This finding suggests that conflict does not uniformly have a negative impact. Lastly, Yang and Xu (2022) discovered that team type—whether research and development (R&D) or non-R&D—moderated the indirect effect of leader humility via growth mindset on creativity, with stronger effects observed in R&D teams.

Individual Follower Moderators

In a study conducted by Asghar et al. (2022), the influence of proactive personalities—both in leaders and followers—was examined in depth. The findings revealed that a leader's proactive personality played a crucial role in moderating the relationship between a follower's self-efficacy and their creativity. This suggests that leaders who take initiative and exhibit a forward-thinking mindset can effectively enhance their followers' creative outputs. Furthermore, the research indicated that having a proactive follower also had a positive impact, reinforcing the model's overall effectiveness.

Additionally, Wang J. et al. (2017) explored the concept of cognitive reappraisal, an individual's ability to reinterpret emotional situations in a more positive light. Their research highlighted that employees who possessed strong cognitive reappraisal skills demonstrated a more pronounced positive relationship between leader humility and their ability to take others' perspectives. This underscores the importance of emotional intelligence in the workplace, particularly in fostering collaborative and insightful interactions. Moreover, Cheung et al. (2020) investigated the role of perceived leader humility as a moderating factor. Their findings revealed that the indirect effect of mindfulness on creativity—mediated by engagement in the creative process—was significant only in contexts with high perceived leader humility. This indicates that an environment characterized by humble leadership can amplify the benefits of mindfulness practices for creative endeavors, underscoring the importance of leadership qualities in fostering innovation.

3.5 Additional Findings from Comparative and Unique Studies

In a 2022 study, Norouzinik et al. explored the concept of narcissistic leadership, which stands in stark contrast to humble leadership. Their research revealed that leaders displaying narcissistic traits had a detrimental impact on employees' innovative behavior. This negative influence was mediated by two key factors: job embeddedness and job engagement. The findings indirectly support the idea that humble leadership, characterized by a lack of self-importance and a focus on others, may foster positive outcomes by enhancing these same mechanisms.

In a groundbreaking 2022 study by Lehmann et al., the researchers took a novel approach by dissecting humility variance into two distinct components: general humility at the leader level and relationship-specific (dyadic) humility. They discovered that a significant portion

of humility expressed by leaders is unique to the specific interactions with their followers. Furthermore, this relationship-specific humility was found to correlate positively with psychological safety and performance within those dyads, particularly in creative tasks. This research highlights the importance of examining humility as a dynamic quality shaped by interpersonal relationships, rather than treating it as a stable trait of leadership.

The studies by Wang J. et al. (2017) and Asghar et al. (2022) investigated the role of humble leadership in the face of crises, specifically during natural disasters such as earthquakes and the global COVID-19 pandemic. Their findings demonstrated that humble leaders were particularly effective in fostering creativity among their teams under high-stress conditions. This effect was attributed to leaders' ability to enhance their followers' perspective-taking and self-efficacy, both of which are crucial for navigating challenging circumstances.

Analyzing the existing literature, none of the 17 studies explicitly investigated or identified curvilinear (inverted-U) relationships between leader humility and creativity. Instead, all studies reported linear positive associations, indicating that increased leader humility consistently correlates with heightened creativity. However, this absence of evidence may stem from insufficient testing rather than a true absence of curvilinearity in the relationship.

4. Discussion

4.1 Synthesis of Findings

This systematic literature review consolidates findings from 17 empirical studies that explored the link between leader humility and creativity. The results consistently indicate a positive correlation between leader humility and creativity at both the individual and team levels. Notably, the review uncovers several pathways through which this relationship operates, including affective-psychological, cognitive, and behavioral-relational pathways. It emphasizes that contextual and individual factors play a significant role in this dynamic.

Across all 17 studies reviewed, none reported a negative direct impact of leader humility on creativity, highlighting the robustness of this relationship across diverse settings. These contexts varied widely, encompassing stable technology firms (Hu et al., 2018; Zhu et al., 2022) and challenging situations such as earthquakes (Wang J. et al., 2017) and the COVID-19 pandemic (Asghar et al., 2022). As a result, leader humility emerges as a strong positive predictor of creativity under a wide array of conditions.

Additionally, social learning theory was the most commonly employed framework, utilized in 41.2% of the studies. This suggests that researchers view humble leaders as role models whose behaviors followers observe, copy, and assimilate. This perspective aligns with the nature of humility, which is inherently observable and socially transmitted (Zhu et al., 2022; Yang & Xu, 2022). Furthermore, social information processing theory elucidates how humble leaders can alter their followers' perceptions of the work environment, fostering a psychologically safer atmosphere conducive to creative risk-taking (Hu et al., 2018; Wang J. et al., 2017).

4.2 An Integrated Conceptual Framework

The integrated conceptual framework depicted in Figure 2 organizes the relationships among leader humility, mediating mechanisms, moderating conditions, and creativity outcomes. This framework has three key features. First, it identifies three families of mediators: (a) affective-psychological mediators, which include psychological safety, psychological capital, self-efficacy, and thriving; (b) cognitive mediators, encompassing growth mindset, perspective taking, team learning, and team behavioral integration; and (c) behavioral-relational mediators, such as information sharing, leader-member exchange (LMX), role modeling, and job crafting. It is important to note that these families are not mutually exclusive; research indicates that multiple

mediators can function simultaneously or in a sequence (e.g., Gonçalves & Brandão, 2017; Lei et al., 2023).

Second, the framework categorizes moderators into three levels: (1) team/organizational context, which includes factors like power distance, task interdependence, top management support, and team relationship conflict; (2) individual follower characteristics, such as proactive personality and cognitive reappraisal; and (3) leader characteristics, including leader performance, competency, conscientiousness, and leader-leader exchange.

Finally, the framework recognizes both individual and team creativity as outcomes, recognizing that the mechanisms may vary by level. For instance, team behavioral integration (Zhu et al., 2022) and team learning (Chen L. et al., 2021) are primarily team-level mediators, while individual-level mediators include perspective-taking (Wang J. et al., 2017) and growth mindset (Yang & Xu, 2022).

4.3 Theoretical Implications

This review offers several theoretical contributions to the literature on leadership and creativity. First, the multiplicity of mechanisms challenges single-path models. Prior research often focused on one mediator (e.g., psychological safety). However, the 17 studies reveal at least 14 distinct mediators, suggesting that humble leadership influences creativity through a constellation of processes. For instance, Gonçalves & Brandão (2017) showed sequential mediation via psychological safety and psychological capital. Lei et al. (2023) demonstrated dual parallel mediation via role modeling and LMX. Future theory should therefore adopt multi-mechanism perspectives rather than assuming a single dominant pathway.

Second, the contingency effects highlight the need for boundary-conscious theorizing. Moderators such as power distance (Hu et al., 2018), task interdependence (Li R. et al., 2022), and leader-leader exchange (Chen C. et al., 2021) do not merely amplify or dampen the main effect—they can reverse it. In high-power-distance teams, leader humility was negatively related to psychological safety. In low-LLX situations, leader humility had a negative indirect effect on team creativity via team job crafting. These findings caution against universal prescriptions. Instead, they call for a contingency theory of humble leadership, where the effectiveness of humility depends on the alignment between leader behavior and contextual characteristics.

Third, the distinction between individual and team creativity reveals level-specific mechanisms. At the individual level, mediators such as perspective-taking (Wang J. et al., 2017), growth mindset (Yang & Xu, 2022), and self-efficacy (Asghar et al., 2022) are prominent. At the team level, collective constructs such as team behavioral integration (Zhu et al., 2022), team learning (Chen L. et al., 2021), and team creative efficacy (Wang X. et al., 2020; Li R. et al., 2022) are more relevant. This suggests that leader humility does not simply “trickle down” unchanged; it activates different processes at different levels. A cross-level model that integrates both sets of mechanisms remains an important theoretical goal.

Fourth, the role of leader humility as an amplifier. Cheung et al. (2020) uniquely positioned leader humility as a moderator rather than a direct predictor, strengthening the indirect effect of mindfulness on creativity via creative process engagement. This implies that humble leadership may function as a contextual resource that unlocks the creative potential of other individual characteristics (e.g., mindfulness, proactive personality). Future research should more systematically explore such second-stage moderating roles.

Fifth, the dyadic perspective adds a relational layer. Lehmann et al. (2022) demonstrated that humility has a relationship-specific component. That is, a leader may be humble toward one follower but less humble toward another, and this dyadic humility predicts dyadic psychological safety and performance. This finding challenges the common practice of aggregating follower ratings of leader humility to a team level. It suggests that humility is partly

an emergent property of each leader-follower dyad, and future research should adopt dyadic designs to capture this nuance.

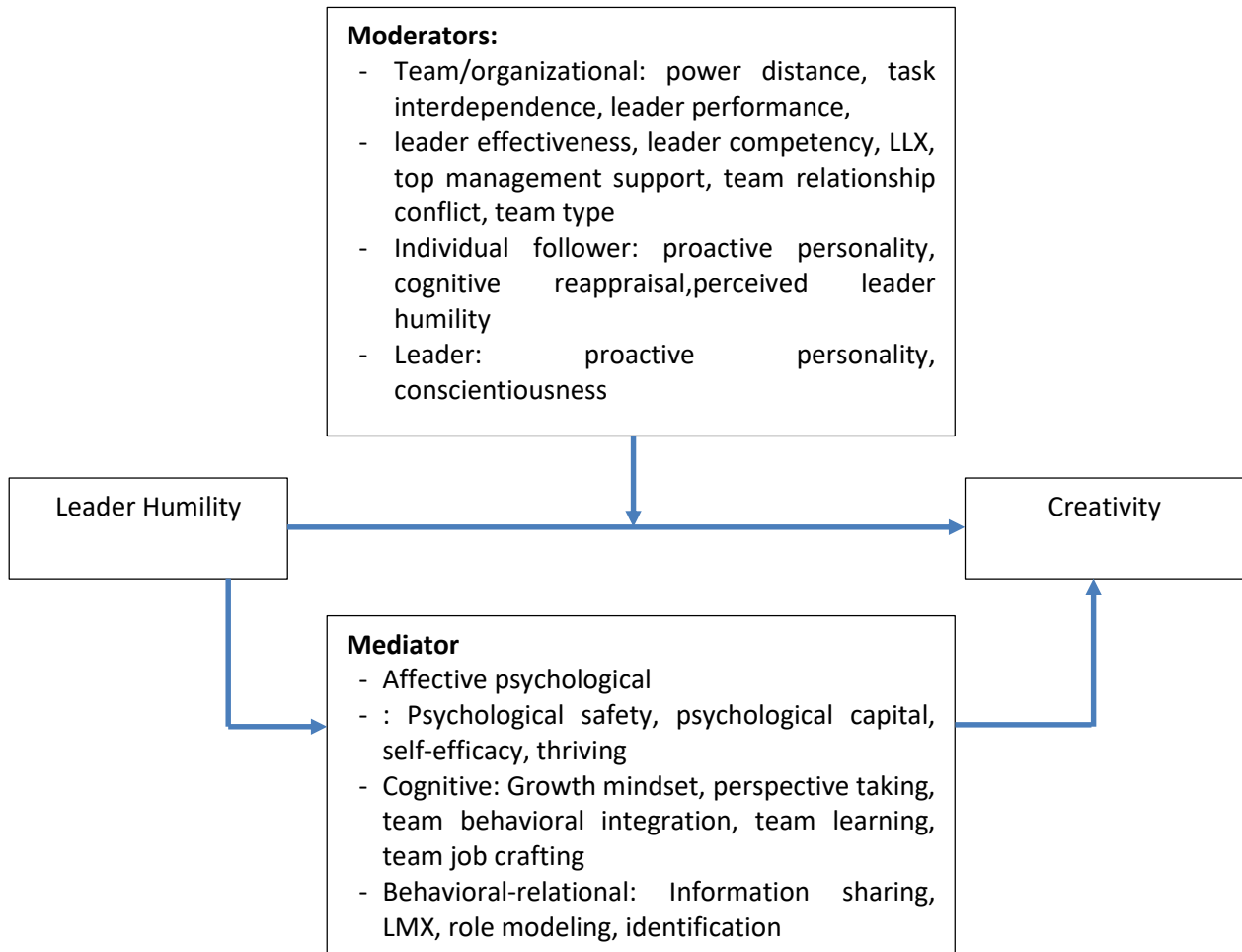


Figure 1. Integrated Conceptual Framework (text description)

4.3 Future Research Agenda

Based on the gaps and limitations identified in this review, the following directions are proposed for future research.

Methodological Enhancements

All 17 studies used correlational designs, including cross-sectional and time-lagged designs. For future research, it is important to use true longitudinal designs with three or more measurement waves. This will help establish the order of events. Experimental studies, such as vignette-based or lab-simulation studies, could demonstrate a cause-and-effect relationship by manipulating leader humility and observing its effects on creativity. While some studies used data from multiple sources, many only relied on self-reports. Future research should include objective

measures of creativity, such as the number of patent applications or expert ratings of creative work. Using supervisor or peer ratings can help reduce bias from relying on a single method.

Most studies have focused on Chinese samples, so researchers should replicate their findings in Western countries (such as the United States and Germany), Latin America, Africa, and other Asian countries (such as Japan and India). These cross-cultural studies can test whether factors like power distance, individualism, and uncertainty avoidance affect the relationship between leader humility and creativity.

Theoretical Extensions

None of the 17 studies explicitly tested for inverted-U relationships. Extremely high levels of leader humility may be perceived as weakness, indecisiveness, or lack of confidence. Future research should include quadratic terms or polynomial regression to examine whether an optimal level of humility exists. While this review focused on positive effects, two studies suggested boundary conditions in which humility becomes less effective or even harmful (Hu et al., 2018; Chen et al., 2021). Researchers should systematically investigate conditions under which humble leadership backfires, such as in highly competitive climates, crises requiring rapid, decisive action, or when followers expect directive leadership.

Most studies examined either the individual or the team level separately. Future research should develop multilevel models where leader humility at the team level influences individual creativity through cross-level mediators (e.g., team psychological safety affecting individual creative self-efficacy) and vice versa. Lehmann et al. (2022) opened a promising avenue by showing that humility has relationship-specific variance. Future studies could use social network analysis to examine how humility spreads within workgroups or how the network centrality of humble leaders affects the diffusion of creativity.

New Mediators and Moderators

Some potential mediators have not yet been tested. Based on current theories, several ideas remain unexplored. These include psychological empowerment, creative role identity, relational energy, psychological availability, and feedback-seeking behavior. Researchers could incorporate these factors into existing models to better explain differences in outcomes.

There are also possible moderators to consider. Future studies could examine how factors such as organizational culture (innovative or bureaucratic), technological changes, and generational differences (e.g., between Generation Z and Baby Boomers) affect outcomes. It would also be useful to investigate how leader humility interacts with other leadership styles, such as transformational leadership and servant leadership.

Underexplored Contexts

Industries such as hospitality (Tariq et al., 2023), banking (Asghar et al., 2022), and IT (Hu et al., 2018) have been widely studied. However, areas such as healthcare (beyond emergency teams), education, non-profit organizations, construction, and heavy manufacturing need more research. Each of these areas has different challenges and factors that affect humble leadership. Two studies examined crises: one during an earthquake (Wang J. et al., 2017) and another during COVID-19 (Asghar et al., 2022). However, we lack studies that compare leadership during crises with leadership in stable times within the same organization. These comparisons could show how effective humble leadership is under stress. None of the 17 studies focused on startups or entrepreneurial ventures, even though creativity is crucial in these settings and leadership may be less formal. Future research could examine whether humble leadership among founders is associated with greater team innovation and business growth.

Finally, beyond observational research, intervention studies are needed. Researchers could partner with organizations to design and implement humble leadership training programs, then evaluate their impact on team creativity using pre-post designs or randomized controlled trials. This would provide actionable evidence for practitioners.

5. Conclusion

This literature review examines 17 studies published between 2017 and 2023 on the relationship between leader humility and creativity. Here are the main findings: First, leader humility is generally linked to increased creativity for both individuals and teams. All studies showed a positive effect: humble leadership leads to better creative outcomes in various settings, including stable business environments and crises, across industries such as technology, hospitality, banking, and manufacturing. Second, the relationship between leader humility and creativity works through three main types of mediating factors: (a) emotional and psychological factors (like psychological safety, self-efficacy, and thriving at work), (b) cognitive factors (like a growth mindset, perspective taking, team learning, and team job crafting), and (c) behavioral and relational factors (like team information sharing and role modeling). These factors can occur together or in sequence. Third, the success of humble leadership depends on various factors. Twelve moderators were identified, including power distance, task interdependence, leader performance, and team relationship conflict. Some of these factors, such as high power distance, can change the positive effects of humility to negative ones. Finally, most studies were conducted in China (64.7%) and often used time-lagged or cross-sectional designs. Research focused more on team-level creativity (58.8%) than on individual creativity. Social learning theory was the main framework used in these studies.

The systematic review highlights that leader humility is an important attribute for enhancing creativity in organizations, but its effectiveness varies based on expression, cultural context, and accompanying competence. A humble leader will not foster creativity if perceived as incompetent or if a risk-averse organizational culture exists. Despite recent progress with 17 studies published from 2017 to 2023, many questions remain about the impact of leader humility on creative outcomes. Future research should focus on understanding the conditions under which humility fosters creativity, providing organizations with effective, evidence-based strategies.

Limitations of the Review

The conclusions of this systematic review must be interpreted in light of several limitations—first, geographical and cultural concentration. Eleven of the 17 studies (64.7%) were conducted in China, a context characterized by high power distance and collectivism. While this provides valuable insights, it limits generalizability to Western, more individualistic cultures. For example, the negative moderating effect of power distance found by Hu et al. (2018) might be less pronounced or even reversed in low-power-distance settings. Future research should replicate these findings in diverse cultural contexts.

Second, predominance of cross-sectional and time-lagged designs. However, several studies used time-lagged data collection (e.g., Cheung et al., 2020; Hu et al., 2018); none employed true longitudinal designs with three or more waves or experimental manipulations. Therefore, causal claims must be treated with caution. Reverse causality (i.e., creative employees eliciting more humble behavior from leaders) cannot be ruled out.

Third, potential common method bias. Many studies relied on self-reported measures of both leader humility and creativity (or mediators), which can inflate correlations due to common method variance. However, studies that used multi-source designs (e.g., Hu et al., 2018; Zhu et al., 2022; Tariq et al., 2023) reported similar effect sizes, somewhat mitigating this concern.

Fourth, limited exploration of curvilinearity. None of the 17 studies explicitly tested for inverted-U relationships. Some theoretical work suggests that extreme humility might be perceived as weakness, but this review found no empirical evidence for such a curvilinear effect. This may be because the range of humility in the sampled studies did not include extremely high levels or because researchers did not test for nonlinearity. Future studies should include quadratic terms to examine this possibility.

Fifth, publication bias. The review only included published journal articles. Studies finding null or negative effects may remain unpublished (the “file drawer” problem). However, given the consistency of positive findings across 17 independent studies from different research teams, publication bias is unlikely to account for the results fully. Sixth, exclusion of qualitative studies. The review deliberately focused on quantitative empirical studies to enable systematic comparison of effect sizes and mechanisms. Qualitative studies could provide richer contextual insights into how and why humble leaders foster creativity, but they were excluded due to the review’s scope.

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