

# Humble pie: Soul food for the best leaders

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When it comes to the best leaders, a slice of humble pie might be just what the CEO ordered, as research from the University of South Australia shows that humility is a critical leadership trait for cultivating cohesive, high performing teams.

It's an interesting finding—especially given that leaders are more commonly aligned with characteristics of confidence, charisma, and influence—but in a post-COVID era where remote work is increasingly likely, understanding the nuances of good leadership is more important than ever.

Evaluating 120 work teams comprising 495 [team members](#), researchers found that leaders who demonstrate humility—through [self-awareness](#), praising others' strengths and contributions, and being open to feedback—can enhance positive team experiences while mitigating negative influences, to create stronger, more productive teams.

Lead researcher, Dr. Chad Chiu from UniSA's Centre for Workplace Excellence, says leader humility is all about understanding [interpersonal relationships](#) and creating positive team norms.

"Most people understand the benefit of working in a 'good' team—the people get along, they communicate well, and they acknowledge each other's skills and contribution—but not all interactions among members are so positive, and good leaders need to be able to navigate these," Dr. Chiu says.

"Many teams actually have 'negative ties,' where people see their peers as hindrances to getting the job done or may even dislike each other. Until now, understanding how leaders can mitigate these negative associations has been unclear.

"Our research shows that one strategy for leaders to simultaneously enhance goodwill and trust while reducing any negative relationships in their teams, is to express their humility.

"Humility is characterized by high self-awareness, showing an appreciation of others, and modeling a culture of learning. In humble

leaders, this is demonstrated through open communications, listening well, praising a job well done, valuing the skills of each team member, and realizing that they as leaders, are not infallible.

"Many of these skills can be taught, but it's also important for [senior managers](#) to initiate a top-down impact on middle managers' humility awareness and adoption."

Curiously, the study showed that increased team performance is affected more by lowering team negativity, than boosting positivity.

"Team performance hinges more on a leader's ability to diminish negativity within the team, than their ability to boost friendship and social connections," Dr. Chiu says.

"This is because teams with fewer negative ties, for example extreme competitiveness or narcissism, are more likely to collaborate, communicate and support each other to complete team tasks. And while most teams usually have fewer negative ties, these act as 'social debts' and cannot be easily counterbalanced by positive relationships.

"Team leaders must understand the true impact of [humility](#) as it can have a huge impact on the wellbeing and productivity of their team. Embrace it and you will thrive."

**More information:** Chia-Yen (Chad) Chiu et al. Shaping positive and negative ties to improve team effectiveness: The roles of leader humility and team helping norms, *Human Relations* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/0018726720968135](https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726720968135)

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