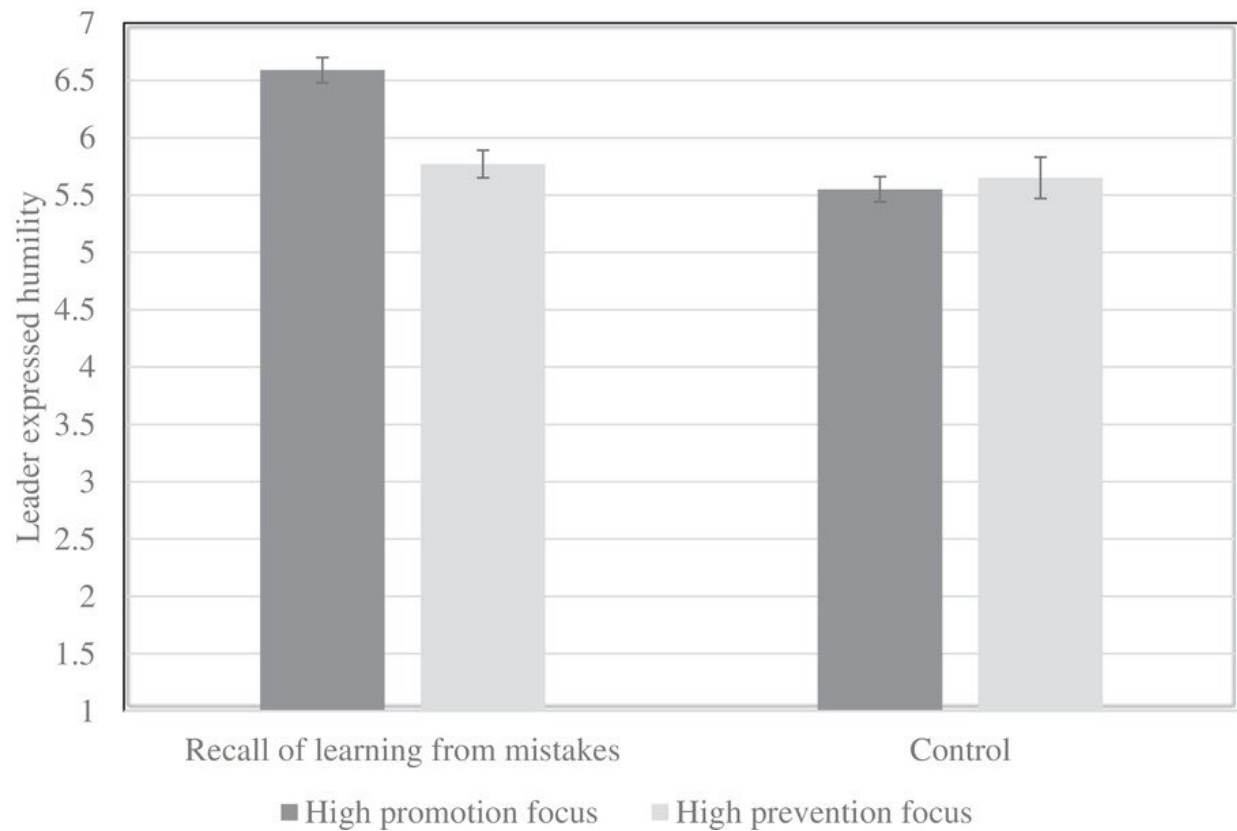


Study finds learning from errors leads to humility in leaders

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The moderating effect of leader promotion focus on the relationship between leader learning from mistakes and leader expressed humility (error bars are standard errors). Credit: *Personnel Psychology* (2022). DOI: 10.1111/peps.12570

While some leaders may believe they should appear flawless to their

teams, a new study finds there are benefits for those who reflect on and learn from their mistakes.

In four related studies, researchers found that when [leaders](#) took time to reflect on what they learned from their errors, they showed more [humility](#), a quality known to make managers more effective.

In addition, this research found that under some circumstances, teams performed better when their leaders learned from missteps.

"Everyone makes [mistakes](#)—even the best leaders inevitably do—but leaders are often expected to act dominant, confident, and be the people fixing mistakes rather than making them. And that attitude may actually make them less effective," said Jasmine Hu, lead author of the study and professor of management at The Ohio State University's Fisher College of Business.

"Understanding your own blind spots and vulnerabilities can help make you a better manager and leader."

The study was published online recently in the journal *Personnel Psychology*.

Humble leaders are those who acknowledge their own limitations and mistakes, appreciate others' strengths and contributions, and are open to new insights and feedback, Hu said.

Research shows that, when they have a humble leader, team members are more likely share their knowledge and voice their concerns, and increase their improvement-oriented behaviors.

Hu and her colleagues found that one key for leaders is not only to admit mistakes, but to reflect on them and learn how to do better.

In one of the four studies, the researchers recruited 454 managers who worked in a wide variety of industries, including finance, retail, manufacturing and [health care](#), to participate in the online research.

Some of the participants were asked to write about and reflect on a [mistake](#) they made with their subordinates and what they learned. Others wrote about a mistake where they felt there was nothing to learn.

The managers were then presented with a workplace scenario and asked to write about how they would behave in that situation.

Trained graduate students who were not involved in the study rated the managers' responses for how much humility they showed. For example, they rated how much each manager acknowledged that others had more knowledge and skill than himself or herself.

Results showed that managers who reflected on a past mistake where they learned a lesson showed more humility than those who thought about a mistake without learning.

"The goal should be to learn from mistakes, not just focus on what went wrong," Hu said.

Another key for maximizing the benefits of learning from mistakes is to approach the learning from a promotion focus, rather than a prevention focus.

With a promotion focus, a leader is oriented toward improvement and growth and seeing how mistakes can point toward better ways to achieve goals, Hu said. A prevention focus sees learning from mistakes as a short-term way to correct failures and avoid punishment.

Hu and her colleagues found the importance of a promotion focus in

several of their studies, including one involving 210 [college students](#) who worked together in teams of three to six people to help a small business.

Findings showed that a heightened promotion focus strengthened the relationship between leaders' learning from mistakes and how much they expressed humility to their team members. That relationship was not as strong when leaders had a prevention focus.

The importance of a promotion focus became even more apparent in a real-life study of 85 non-physician managers from medical schools and hospitals in the Midwest.

In the study, the managers took twice daily surveys for 10 consecutive workdays that examined how they learned from mistakes and expressed humility, and how they viewed their teams' improvement-oriented behavior and overall performance.

Findings showed that [managers](#) who learned from their mistakes and took a promotion focus—meaning they used the learning to improve and grow as leaders—were more likely to show humility. Most importantly, they also rated their teams as showing greater improvement-related behaviors and better performance.

"When leaders take what they learn from mistakes to improve and reach goals, that is what seems to be most valuable", Hu said.

"That builds humility, and teams respond to that. It makes [team members](#) look for ways they can improve."

Overall, the results suggest the need for a shift in how organizations, and society itself, views the meaning of leadership, she said.

"We often see leaders who are afraid of even admitting they make

mistakes, because they are worried it goes against the historic image of leadership," according to Hu.

"But what we found is that reflecting on and learning from your mistakes can make you a more effective manager and leader. That's what the mindset should be."

More information: Jia (Jasmine) Hu et al, When leaders heed the lessons of mistakes: Linking leaders' recall of learning from mistakes to expressed humility, *Personnel Psychology* (2022). [DOI: 10.1111/peps.12570](https://doi.org/10.1111/peps.12570)

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