Be humble to succeed in the workplace, says study

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While a dominant personality can help you climb the corporate ladder, new research shows there is also a "humble route" to career advancement.

"Conventional wisdom is that you've got to be Machiavellian and self-promote and bully to rise to the top, but humility is also a catalyst for leadership success," said David Hekman, associate professor of organizational leadership and information analytics in the Leeds School of Business.

Hekman co-authored the [study](#), published in January 2024 in the journal *Human Resource Management.*

That's good news for leaders who naturally shy away from [self-promotion](#) and praise the strengths of others—and aren't afraid to admit their own shortcomings. This path to promotion hinges on status and involves cultivating a network of loyal followers in the workplace.

Informal career mentoring is a humble leader's most important tool in gaining organizational power, Hekman said.

"That gives them status in the organization because passing on skills, tips and tricks builds up a lot of social capital," he said. "And so they build this network of people who end up being an army of very talented, very motivated, trusting people, which is unbeatable."

Superiors recognize this elevated status, he added, which leads to promotions.

The benefits of humble leadership

Humble leaders are able to view themselves accurately, admit mistakes, recognize others' strengths and contributions, and model teachability, which means engaging in a "public, messy growth process," according to the study, which was led by Elsa T. Chan of the University of Sussex Business School in Brighton, United Kingdom, and co-authored by Hekman and Maw Der Foo of the Nanyang Business School at Nanyang

Technological University in Singapore.

"Humility in leadership benefits teams, individuals and entire organizations," Hekman said. "People experience more psychological freedom, authenticity, [job satisfaction](#), improved team performance and motivation. And humility spreads, too—it's contagious."

The researchers surveyed 610 leaders across 18 industries and 21 job functions who participated in a leader development program. Leader humility was reported by the focal leaders' peers, leader mentoring behavior was reported by their direct reports, leader status was reported by their immediate bosses, and leader promotability was reported by their superiors.

"Results generally confirmed that leader humility predicted leader mentoring behavior, which in turn predicted leader status, and ultimately higher leader promotability ratings," according to the paper.

While leaders who exhibit humility are an asset to their teams and organizations, it's risky for them to publicly admit mistakes.

"Admitting mistakes when vying for a promotion among five rivals might seem like presenting oneself as an easy target," Hekman said. But this scenario highlights the significance of cultivating a supportive network through mentorship, he added.

"Choosing a path of dominance is fraught with risk. A single error can leave you vulnerable to competitors eager to usurp your position. In contrast, adopting humility surrounds you with individuals who respect and support you," he said. "Mistakes are more readily forgiven, paving a slower yet more resilient path to leadership."

Takeaways for companies and organizations

Narcissistic leaders can be great leaders, Hekman said, but humble leaders are more likely to be effective in their roles because they show less variability in their performance and emotional expressions.

Here are four ways companies and organizations can encourage humble leadership, according to the researchers:

- Reward humility in performance evaluations.
- Recognize and promote informal mentoring, which is stronger and generally more effective than formal mentorship programs, Hekman said.
- Encourage humility and mentoring in leadership, helping the entire organization adapt and evolve into a "learning organization."
- Institute leadership training programs that emphasize humility, highlighting how these traits can contribute to career success and organizational growth.

More information: Elsa T. Chan et al, An examination of whether and how leader humility enhances leader personal career success, *Human Resource Management* (2024). DOI: 10.1002/hrm.22208

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