Leader Grit, Leader Humility, and Employee Outcomes

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ABOUT THE STUDY

In a research collaboration between the Civil Service College’s Institute of Leadership and Organisation Development (ILOD) and PhD candidate, Inchul Cho (Texas A&M University), the relationship between leader humility and grit on employee outcomes was examined.

The findings of the study highlighted the importance of leader humility — leader grit (perseverance and passion for long term goals) was positively associated with employee and team performance, but only when the leader showed humility. Employees with humble leaders were more likely to go above and beyond the call of duty and were less likely to leave the organisation.
WHAT IS GRIT?

Grit, as a personality trait, is defined as “perseverance and passion for long-term goals . . . working strenuously towards challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress”.

(Duckworth et al., 2007, p. 1087)

IMPORTANCE OF LEADER GRIT WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF ORGANISATION

Because the leader is primarily responsible for setting up a shared goal for team members, a leader’s grit would play an important role in determining how a shared goal is set, maintained, and attained, which in turn has an impact on employees.

It is possible that the tendency of leaders toward a goal (grit) will have substantial impact on employees and organisational effectiveness in the context of public sector. In particular, public sector’s goals and objectives tend to be broad, which allow leaders to set a shared, specific, and detailed goal for the team.

It should be noted that leader grit may not always lead to desirable outcomes for employees. That is, due to its nature (a strong desire for achievement and a goal), leader grit may be interpreted as a dominant, negative trait by followers, which may result in negative impacts on follower outcomes.
RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Does leader grit influence employee outcomes and in what direction (i.e., positively or negatively)?

If it does and the supposed influence is negative, then how can this effect be mitigated?

How is leader grit linked to employee outcomes?

THE PURPOSE OF THIS RESEARCH IS TO...

Examine the effect of leader grit on employee outcomes

Examine leader humility as a means of mitigating the potentially negative effect of leader grit on employee outcomes

Examine trust as a means of explaining the relationship between leader grit and employee outcomes
STUDY VARIABLES

Leader behaviour

Leader grit: perseverance and passion for long-term goals such as working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress

Leader humility: willingness to obtain accurate self-knowledge, tendency to keep an open mind and continuously learn and improve, and appreciation of others’ strengths and contributions

Employee outcomes

Extra-role behaviour (a.k.a. organisational citizenship behaviour: OCB): an employee’s voluntary behaviour that is not specified in job description, but can contribute to organisational effectiveness

- OCB toward individual (OCB-I): helping others, assist others with their duties, share personal property with others to help their work
- OCB toward organisation (OCB-O): express loyalty toward the organisation, keep up with developments, defend the organisation
- Voice behaviour: speak up to the supervisor with ideas for new projects, make suggestions for improvement

Team performance: perceived team performance as a whole within team

Turnover intention: the extent to which employees want to leave the organisation

Trust in the leader: an expectancy held by an individual or a group that the word, promise, verbal or written statement of another individual or group can be relied upon
PROCEDURE

- Survey invitations were sent out to a randomised list of public service officers. Study participation was voluntary and data were collected via Survey Monkey (September to October 2015).
- Participants were asked to report humility and grit of their leaders as well as report trust in their leader, extra-role behaviour (OCB-I, OCB-O, and voice behaviour), perceived team performance, and turnover intention.

SAMPLE

- 438 government employees in Singapore
- In a wide variety of job functions such as engineering, accounting, education, healthcare, and administrative support.
INSIGHT 1

**Leader grit is an important trait that can influence employee outcomes.**

- Leader grit was positively associated with OCB-I ($r = .11$), and team performance ($r = .22$).
- Also, leader grit was negatively associated with turnover intention ($r = -.12$).

Leaders who are high in grit seem to influence employees to engage in more extra-role behaviour, team performance, and result in reduced turnover intention.

INSIGHT 2

**Leader humility is an important trait that can influence employee outcomes.**

- Leader humility was positively associated with OCB-I ($r = .14$), OCB-O ($r = .11$), voice behaviour ($r = .10$), and team performance ($r = .30$).
- Also, leader humility was negatively associated with turnover intention ($r = -.13$).

Leaders who are high in humility seem to influence employees to engage in more extra-role behaviour, team performance, and result in reduced turnover intention.

The effect of grit on performance

Gritty leaders would commit to a specific course of action and invest numerous hours over a long period of time. Also, they are able to utilise their capabilities due to long-term goals and are less discouraged by the failures and setbacks. Thus, leader grit influences success and desirable outcomes for employees.

The effect of humility on performance

Consistent with our findings, research has documented that leader humility has positive effects on organisational effectiveness such as employee engagement, team performance, and leader effectiveness. This is because humble leaders tend to be willing to view oneself accurately, to display appreciation of others’ strengths and contributions, and to be open to learn from others.
**INSIGHT 3**

Leader grit has positive effects on extra-role behaviour only if the leader shows humility.

- Leader grit was positively associated with OCB-I when leaders showed a high level of humility. However, such a relationship was not significant when leaders showed a low level of humility.

  Employees are more likely to help other co-workers when leaders exhibit both high levels of grit and humility.

- Leader grit was positively associated with OCB-O when leaders showed a high level of humility. However, such a relationship was not significant, when leaders showed a low level of humility.

  Employees are more likely to express loyal behaviour toward organisations when leaders exhibit both high levels of grit and humility.
Leader grit was positively associated with voice behaviour when leaders showed a high level of humility. However, such a relationship was not significant when leaders showed a low level of humility.

Employees are more likely to suggest ideas and recommendations for improvement when leaders exhibit both high levels of grit and humility.

In sum, leaders should exhibit both high levels of grit and humility in order for employees to go the extra-mile. Without humility, leader grit can result in negative implications (e.g., low loyalty toward organisations, lack of suggestion for improvement).
INSIGHT 4

Leader grit can lead to improved team performance only if the leader shows humility.

Leader grit was positively associated with team performance when leaders showed a high level of humility. However, such a relationship was not significant when leaders showed a low level of humility.

Team performance will be improved, when leaders display both high levels of grit and humility. However, team performance is less likely to be influenced by leader grit when leaders show a low level of humility.

INSIGHT 5

Leader grit can lead to reduced employees’ turnover intention only if the leader shows humility.

Leader grit was negatively associated with turnover intention when leaders showed high levels of humility. However, such a relationship was not significant when leaders showed a low level of humility.

Employees’ turnover intention will be reduced, when leaders display both high levels of grit and humility. However, reduced turnover intention as a result of leader grit is less likely to occur when leaders show a low level of humility.
INSIGHT 6

Trust can explain how leader humility is associated with employee outcomes.

The analysis revealed a significant mediating effect of trust on the relationship between leader humility and the follower outcomes, OCB-I, team performance and turnover intention.

Trust is a key variable that explains why leader humility leads to employee outcomes. Specifically, when a leader shows humility, employees are likely to build trust in a relationship with their leader, which in turn results in helping behaviour, improved team performance, and reduced turnover intention.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Leader grit and humility were important traits that can influence employee behaviours and outcomes in the context of the Singapore public service.

More importantly, the positive effect of leader grit on OCB was determined by leader humility such that employees’ extra-role enactment and team performance were maximised when leaders displayed high levels of humility.

Employees with humble leaders were likely to build trust with their leaders due to their tendency to acknowledge employee contributions, admitting to their own limitations, and being open to learning from their employees. Employees who built trust in a relationship with their leader then were likely to go above and beyond the call of their duty, engage in performance within the context of team, and want to stay in the organisation.
RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Consideration of both grit and humility in the context of leader selection and promotion

Although organisations usually put emphasis on leaders’ work-oriented tendency or task performance (e.g., grit) rather than person-oriented tendency or contextual performance (e.g., humility), it should be noted that the leaders should possess not only a high level of grit, but also a high level of humility. According to these findings a high level of grit may actually lead to worse outcomes than a low level of grit when leaders are low in humility. Without considering a balanced combination of leader grit and humility, it may result in unwanted, undesirable, or unwelcomed outcomes.

2. The use of systematic training programs on leader humility

Humility can be potentially developed through life changes or role transitions given the notion that humility is a malleable attribute that is subject to development or deterioration. Thus, gritty leaders may proactively choose to develop the trait of humility via training and practice, leading them to self-regulate their highly goal-oriented tendency. Therefore, considering the use of systematic training programs on leader humility would be worthwhile.

3. Development of organisational cultures through leader humility

It is expected that humble behaviours of managers and leaders have a large impact on shaping an organisational culture. Given a humble person’s tendency to have interpersonal interactions with a strong motive for learning through others, humble leaders who become known for modelling teachability are likely to foster a learning culture where both gritty leaders and employees are more focused on development. As a result, it can allow gritty leaders and employees to grow together in a positive learning environment, which can eventually help an organisation be successful.
Some examples of humble behaviour are...

- seeking feedback and input from others
- admitting when you don’t know how to do something
- acknowledging when others have knowledge and skills
- taking notice of others’ strengths
- showing appreciation for the unique contributions of others
- complimenting others on their strengths
- being open to the ideas of others
- being willing to learn from others
RECOMMENDED BOOK

Title: Leading with Humility
Authors: Rob Nielsen, Jennifer A. Marrone and Holly S. Ferraro
Publisher: Taylor & Francis (ebook)

ACADEMIC ARTICLES


Sense shines with a double luster when it is set in humility. An able yet humble man is a jewel worth a kingdom.

-William Penn