

Linking Humble Leadership and Proactive Behaviors of Frontline Service Employees in the Hospitality Industry: The Influences of Role-Breath Self-Efficacy

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the effect of humble leadership on frontline hospitality employees' proactive behaviors and how role-breath self-efficacy mediates the effect. We collected data from 204 frontline service employees in the hospitality industry, and the results showed a positive relationship between humble leadership and employees' proactive behaviors. In addition, employees' role-breath self-efficacy mediated this positive relationship. The paper concludes with a discussion of the theoretical and practical implications for the hospitality industry.

Keywords : *humble leadership, proactive behaviors, role-breath self-efficacy, frontline service employees*

1. INTRODUCTION

In an economic environment filled with uncertainty, companies need not only employees who have the knowledge and skills to meet basic work requirements, but also employees who demonstrate proactive behavior at work to maintain positive corporate growth [3]. As a service industry directly related to individual customers, the hospitality industry needs frontline service employees to take initiative in order to provide customer satisfaction and thus enhance the competitiveness of the company.

While proactive behavior by employees can bring benefits to a company, in the current environment, many employees are more likely to live in peace than implementing proactive behavior that requires taking risks [24]. Therefore, in this background, the exploration of how to stimulate individual initiative is important. There are many factors that influence employees' proactive behavior, and leaders, as direct commanders and supervisors of their subordinates' actions, have a profound influence on employees' behavior [3]. Many scholars have tried to explain the influence of leadership on employees' proactive behavior and have obtained the conclusion that leadership style has a direct and significant impact on employees' proactive behavior [23][28]. In recent years, a bottom-up leadership style, humble leadership, has been proposed by scholars and is

gaining attention [19]. Researchers generally agree that this leadership style has a profound impact on subordinates, but fewer studies have so far explored its impact on frontline employees' proactive behaviors in the hospitality industry, and the mechanisms of its effects have yet to be explored in depth.

Above all, this research explores the effect of humble leadership on frontline service employees' proactive behavior based on a sample in the hospitality industry in China, and examines the mediating role of employees' role-breath self-efficacy, and the moderating role of employees' promotion regulatory focus.

2. THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

2.1. Humble leadership and employees' proactive behaviors

Humble leadership is the style of leaders to acknowledge their own weaknesses and shortcomings, focus on the strengths and contributions of others, and establish modeling teachability [19]. Proactive behavior refers to a series of behaviors that employees spontaneously perform to improve their roles or work tasks [6]. It has been demonstrated that supervisory leadership is an important factor influencing employees' proactive behavior [3][8][27][28]. Therefore, we argue

that humble leaders have an influential effect on employees' proactive behavior.

First, humble leadership focus on the merits and contributions of others and give support and recognition to their subordinates [17][19]. According to social exchange theory, humble leadership's support and recognition of their subordinates creates a foundation of mutual reciprocity in the organization. Humble leaders reduce the negative emotions of employees by affirming their contributions and merits in the organization through positive messages. When frontline service employees face difficulties and setbacks, humble leadership can affirm and encourage subordinates' abilities and contributions, and subordinates perceive the support from the leaders and the organization. Employees who work in this type of environment, will become adventurous, open to novel things, like to propose new ideas and dare to make suggestions because they perceive support from their leaders [4][25], which means that in such environment, employees are more willing to generate proactive behaviors.

In addition, humble leadership is open to different opinions and willing to admit their own mistakes and limitations, which means that the humble leader is willing to keep an attitude of openness, to learn from others and to listen to their feedbacks and suggestions for continuous self-improvement [14], and therefore humble leadership is tolerant of mistakes and not excessively critical. However, proactive behavior is a risky and uncertain behavior, and humble leadership's tolerance of mistakes can lessen the psychological burden on frontline service employees in the process of conducting proactive behavior, so that they will be brave enough to explore and attempt new innovative opportunities. Therefore, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1: Humble leadership is positively related to employees' proactive behaviors.

2.2. Mediating role of role-breath self-efficacy

Role-breadth self-efficacy reflects employees' perceptions of their capability that whether they can undertake a broader range of tasks that require greater competence and beyond the requirements of the job [20]. Role-breadth self-efficacy promotes employees to accomplish more innovative work tasks by coming up with new ideas, implementing new procedures and so on [2].

The humble leadership recognizes the contributions of subordinates and praises and encourages those who have contributed, which increases their confidence to propose innovative ideas and further enhances the frontline service employees' perception of their ability to perform more demanding assignments [19].

Furthermore, humble leadership's openness to new knowledge, ideas, and suggestions indicates that they are inclusive, open to learning, and receptive to good advice, meaning that employees are less risky to suggest and their suggestions are more likely to be adopted by leaders. This benefits them to further express their ideas [17], and maybe they more likely to facilitate frontline service employees to implement new procedures to achieve more innovation, which also means promoting employees' role breadth self-efficacy.

In addition, humble leadership appreciates and recognizes the merits of employees, shares organizational honor with them, and creates a strong sense of belonging and trust in the organization [1]. Moreover, a humble leadership can appreciate the merits and contributions of subordinates and trust their abilities, which can make employees recognize their own value and satisfy their needs for self-fulfillment. By recognizing employees' contributions to organizational success and enhancing employees' self-efficacy and organizational identity [16], employees have more trust in the organization and are able to maintain a positive work status, thus making frontline service employees more willing to engage in tasks that that have broader coverage, require higher competencies, and exceed job requirements, which further facilitates frontline service employees to generate innovative behaviors and so on. That also means humble leadership positively contributes to employees' role-breadth self-efficacy.

Employees with high role-breadth self-efficacy are more confident that they can accomplish more tasks and therefore the probability of practically performing roles and proactive behaviors at work should be higher. When frontline service employees have high role-breadth self-efficacy, they tend to believe they can control situations, come up with new ideas, and judge the effectiveness of their actions. When employees believe that new ideas can bring benefits to the organization, they are more willing to take the initiative to implement innovative behaviors, which also means a higher possibility of implementing proactive behaviors. In addition, employees with high role-breadth self-efficacy are more confident, resilient, and willing to accept challenges, while they are highly forward-looking in terms of completing their work assignments, so this category of frontline service employees will have the courage to take on more innovative roles and proactive behaviors.

In summary, humble leadership helps employees to develop a high level of role-breadth self-efficacy. Frontline service employees with a high level of role-breadth self-efficacy are more willing to undertake proactive behaviors. Therefore, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 2: The relationship between humble leadership and employees' proactive behaviors is mediated by employees' role-breath self-efficacy.

2.3. Moderating role of employees' promotion regulatory focus

Higgins et al. pointed out that there are two different self-regulatory systems in individuals [10], the promotion focus and the prevention focus. Promotional focus is a mental style that compels individuals to focus on success and achievement, to positively pursue possible rewards, to focus on accomplishing more work rapidly, and to focus on the goal of promotion [5][12].

Individuals with a promotional focus pursue self-fulfillment and are more sensitive to the positive acquisition, so they are more motivated to achieve positive goals. Moreover, Sacramento et al. [22] confirmed that individuals with promotional focus will think work assignments is a chance to accomplish self-fulfillment, so this pressure motivates them to create new ideas and implement new actions, making them believe that they are more capable of performing work assignments beyond required, and thus increasing their creativity.

Although humble leadership is willing to recognize employees' contributions and strengths in the organization and acknowledge their abilities, not all individuals are focused on successes and achievements and are not always willing to actively pursue possible rewards [10]. When frontline service employees have a high promotional focus, they can undertake more stressful work and are more confident in their ability to perform proactive behaviors to achieve self-worth, which means that humble leadership is more conducive to the development of high role-breath self-efficacy. When frontline service employees have a lower promotional focus, employees perceive that they have a low probability to achieve their goals and are reluctant to implement innovative actions, such that the effect of humble leadership on role-breath self-efficacy will be diminished. Therefore, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 3: The effect of humble leadership on employees' promotion regulatory focus is moderated by employees' promotion regulatory focus, such that this relationship is stronger when employees' promotion regulatory focus is high.

All the hypothesized relationships are depicted in Figure 1.

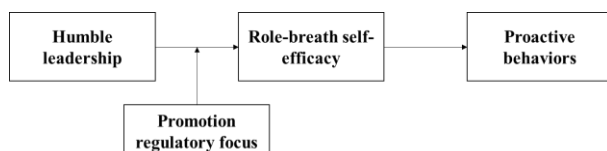


Figure 1 Hypothesized model

3. METHODS

3.1. Sample and Procedures

We collected data from a hotel in northern China. Prior to the data collection, we interviewed a senior manager who confirmed that the proactive behavior of the front-line staff was critical to the hotel's success. Data collection was carried out within two weeks. The questionnaire is divided into five parts, including personal information, humble leadership, employees' role-breath self-efficacy, employees' promotion regulatory focus, and employees' proactive behaviors. On the cover page of the questionnaire, we clarified to the respondents the voluntariness, anonymity and confidentiality of the survey. Finally, we got 205 responses. Then, after removing an invalid questionnaire, we obtained a total of 204 cases for testing and analysis of hypotheses for subsequent research.

Among the 204 cases, 83 are male, accounting for 40.7%; the average age of employees was 28.55 years (SD = 9.30); the average tenure of employees was 5.90 years (SD = 8.46); in terms of education level, 10 people are with a high school education or less degree (4.9%), 29 are with a college degree (14.2%), 153 are with a bachelor degree (75.0%), and 12 are with a master or higher degree (5.9%).

3.2. Measures

All variables were scored using a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). For all variables in the study, we used well-established measures.

Humble leadership: Humble leadership was measured by the scale of Owens, Johnson and Mitchell [18], which contains 9 items in total. Sample items were "This leader shows he or she is open to the ideas of others." and "This leader acknowledges when others have more knowledge and skills than himself or herself." ($\alpha = 0.92$).

Role-breath self-efficacy: For role-breath self-efficacy, we used the seven items of the measure used by Parker (2006; e.g., "Designing new procedures for your work area"). Employees were asked how much confidence they had in performing a range of proactive, interpersonal tasks, such as representing work area in meetings with senior management and visiting people from other departments to suggest doing things differently. Responses ranged from 1 ("not at all confident") to 5 ("very confident"). ($\alpha = 0.89$).

Proactive behaviors: The proactive behaviors measure was adopted from Griffin, Neal, and Parker [6], which contains 3 items. Sample item was "Come up with ideas to improve the way in which your core tasks are done". ($\alpha = 0.83$).

Promotion regulatory focus: Promotion regulatory focus was measured using 9 items originating from Neubert et al. [15]. Sample items were “If I had an opportunity to participate on a high-risk, high-reward project I would definitely take it”, and “At work, I am motivated by my hopes and aspirations”. ($\alpha = 0.85$).

Control variables: In this study, we controlled for the demographic variables of gender, age, education, and organizational tenure.

4. CONCLUSION

4.1. Confirmatory Factor Analyses

Confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) were performed to ensure satisfactory discriminant validity of the measures in this study. The results show that the four-factor model has a better fit index than the one-factor model. These results indicate that our measurements can well distinguish the focal constructs. The detailed results of the confirmatory factor analyses are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Results of Confirmatory Factor Analyses

Model	χ^2	<i>df</i>	RMSEA	CFI	TLI
4-factor model	861.26	344	.09	.85	.84
one-factor model	1604.08	350	.13	.64	.61

Note. N = 204.

4.2. Descriptive Analyses

Table 2 reports the descriptive statistics and correlations of our variables. As expected, humble leadership was significantly correlated with role-breath self-efficacy ($r = .49, p < .01$) and proactive behaviors ($r = .55, p < .01$).

Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations of the Focal Variables

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1.Gender ^a	.59	.49							
2.Age	28.55	9.30	-.35**						
3.Education	2.82	.61	-.02	-.12					
4.Tenure	5.90	8.46	-.31**	.92**	-.05				
5.Humble leadership	3.56	.71	-.10	.19**	-.03	.17*			
6.Promotion regulatory focus	3.58	.54	-.16*	.14*	.00	.13	.49**		
7.Role-breath self-efficacy	3.62	.60	-.26**	.21**	.04	.21**	.49**	.71**	
8.Proactive behaviors	3.86	.59	-.23**	.28**	.04	.25**	.55**	.72	.64**

Note. N = 204. ^a Dummy variable (0 = male, 1 = female).

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed).

4.3. Hypotheses Tests

We tested our hypotheses using the PROCESS, a SPSS package developed by Hayes [9]. The results of these analyses can be seen in tables 3.

As shown in table3, humble leadership has a significant effect on employees’ proactive behaviors ($\beta = .42, p < .01$, see model 3). Therefore, hypothesis 1 was supported.

In hypothesis 2, we expected the mediating role of role-breath self-efficacy in the relationship between

humble leadership and proactive behaviors. As shown in table3, humble leadership is positively related to employee’s role-breath self-efficacy ($\beta = .39, p < .01$, see model 1). In addition, when humble leadership and role-breath self-efficacy were both added into model 4 to predict proactive behaviors, role-breath self-efficacy were significantly related to proactive behaviors ($\beta = .45, p < .01$, see model 4). The bootstrapping analyses (5000 resamples) demonstrated a significant indirect effect of humble leadership on proactive behaviors mediated by role-breath self-efficacy. The bias-corrected 95% confidence interval (CI) of the mediated effect did not

include zero (95% CI [.09, .29]), revealing that hypothesis 2 was supported.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that promotion regulatory focus could amplify the positive effect of humble leadership on role-breath self-efficacy. As can be seen (Table 3, model 2), the interaction term by humble leadership and promotion regulatory focus didn't have a significant effect on role-breath self-efficacy ($\beta = .00$, $p > .05$, see model 2). Therefore, hypothesis 3 didn't get support.

Table 3. Results of Hypothesis Tests

Variable	Role-breath self-efficacy		Proactive behaviors	
	Model1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Gender	-.23**	-.15*	-.16*	-.05
Age	.00	.00	.01	.01
Education	.05	.04	.08	.06
Tenure	.01	.01	-.01	-.01
Humble leadership	.39**	.15**	.42**	.25**
Role-breath self-efficacy				.45**
Promotion regulatory focus		.67**		
Humble leadership x Promotion regulatory focus		.00		
<i>F</i>	16.22	35.22	22.05	33.66
<i>R</i> ²	.29**	.56**	.36**	.51**
Bootstrap results for mediated effect				
	Effect	Boot SE	LL 95% CI	UL 95% CI
Role-breath self-efficacy	.18	.05	.09	.29

Note. *N* = 204. Unstandardized regression coefficients are reported. Bootstrap sample size = 5,000. LL = lower limit; CI = confidence interval; UL = upper limit.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

5. CONCLUSION

The hospitality industry requires a downward shift in responsibility, requiring employees to take the initiative to go beyond the narrow requirements of the task and take the initiative. Particularly in the area of customer service, where the uncertainty caused by highly diverse and

rapidly changing customer needs cannot be resolved by prescribed behaviors alone, proactive employee behavior becomes critical [3].

In this research, we find a significant effect of humble leadership on frontline service employees' proactive behaviors. Further, we identified role-breath self-efficacy as mediator in humble leadership-proactive behaviors relationship. However, the moderating role of employees' promotion regulatory focus didn't get supported by our data. Since such trait has a strong relationship with role-breath self-efficacy and employee's proactive behaviors, it still provides valued research ideas for future studies.

5.1. Theoretical contributions

Our study makes certain contributions to the literature of employee proactivity in the hospitality industry. First, we attempt to examine the relationship between humble leadership and frontline service employees' proactive behaviors. Our findings support a series of studies that have demonstrated a significant association between leadership and a range of proactive behaviors [23][28]. Second, we examined the mediating mechanism behind the effect of humble leadership on frontline service employees' proactive behaviors. We suggest role-breath self-efficacy as a key mechanism through which humble leaders influences frontline service employees' proactive behaviors.

5.2. Practical implications

The hospitality industry generally believes that frontline service employees can make or break a service brand and that their conduct has a substantial impact on the customer's satisfaction with the business. Therefore, hospitality industry needs to be more cautious about managing them. Managers of hospitality industry must manifest characteristic humble behaviors such as: acknowledging their own weaknesses and shortcomings, focusing on the strengths and contributions of others, and establishing modeling teachability. Thus, the hospitality industry should have an emphasis on developing humble leadership skills in managers through a variety of interventions.

5.3. Limitations

Despite the above-mentioned contributions arising from our study, there are some limitations. First, the study was conducted in one organization, which may raise concerns about the generalizability of the findings to other settings. Future studies could be conducted in multiple organizations for better generalization. Another limitation is that our research design prohibits causal statements. We recommend a quasi-experimental design in the future to genuinely verify causality.

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