**THE HUMBLE AND THE HUMBLED: A GROUNDED THEORY
OF HUMILITY IN ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP**

Jan Austin, MS, MPA

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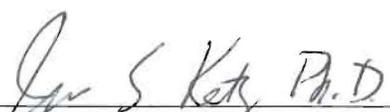Organizational Development and Transformation

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The Dissertation of Jan Austin
Is approved and is acceptable in quality and form:

_____
Irv S. Katz, Ph.D.
Chancellor

_____
Inula Martinkat, Ph.D.
Academic Dean

_____
Bernadette Howlett, Ph.D.
Committee Member

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the humble leaders I have been privileged

to know and who have taught me the power of leading quietly from behind.

Abstract of Dissertation Presented to
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By

Jan Austin, MS, MPA

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Chair: Irv Katz, PhD
Major Department: Organizational Behavior and Transformation

Despite the clarion call over the past decade for greater humility in organizational

leaders, little is known about the construct as a leadership trait. And, while scholars have

engaged an energetic debate over how to define humility in an organizational context,

there is scant evidence for how humble leaders enact humility, what enables it, and what

outcomes humility promotes. The present study draws on various literatures to define the

construct of humility, compare humility with related and contrasting constructs, and

examine its characteristics in organizational leaders. The study examines findings from a

sample of 14 leaders representing multiple levels of leadership across a broad spectrum

of private and public sector organizations in the United State and Canada, as well as a

sample of 17 employees reporting to a leader who participated in the study. Specifically,

the research study assimilates findings and insights from a series of 14 in-depth

interviews into a model representing the attributes, actions, antecedents (enablers), and

outcomes of humility in leaders and organizations. The study proposes a grounded theory

that explains how leaders enact humility in their leadership roles. Further, the study

provides insights that validate and elaborate on the findings of other humility research

scholars. The richness of the lived experience of leaders as revealed through in-depth

interviews tells a story about how humility is expressed in leaders. The study includes

discussion of limitations as well as recommendations for future research and practice.

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Introduction and Background for the Study

A plethora of corporate meltdowns and resulting crises in financial markets not

witnessed since the early 20th century's Great Depression have prompted increased

attention on the values and behaviors of organizational leaders. It has been suggested that

corporate executives' unbridled ego, hubris, sense of entitlement, and self-importance

played a key role in highly publicized corporate scandals of the past decade (Knottnerus,

Ulsperger, Cummins, and Osteen, 2006). Understandably, it seems that the widespread

fascination with larger-than-life celebrity CEOs prominently displayed during the 1990s

has given way to anger, frustration, and feelings of betrayal (The Economist 2002).

Morris, Brotheridge, and Urbanski (2005) argue, "The romanticized notion of celebrity

CEOs that has been lionized in the popular business press has its place in the leadership

pantheon, but, like any other approach to leadership, has limitations in application" (p.

1323). Sankar (2003) suggests that the leadership crisis in many organizations stems from

a crisis of character in leaders. Similarly, arrogance and narcissism have been cited as

reasons leaders make poor decisions (Chatterjee and Hambrick, 2007), and that leaders or

their organizations fail (Collins, 2001a; Vera and Rodriguez-Lopez, 2004). Calling for a

culture of moral leadership, Gini (2004) characterizes Enron's "immoral and illegal

pursuit of self-destruction" (p. 11) as follows: "It's about narcissistic illusions of

invincibility. It's about feeling smugly superior to those who don't take chances. And,

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every time you get away with one, it's about the arrogant certainty of one's infallibility" (p. 11).

Indeed, the importance of qualities such as *humility, integrity, and honesty* to organizational health became more salient in the aftermath of the above-mentioned corporate scandals and the widespread failure of trust (Vera and Rodriguez-Lopez, 2004). The above notwithstanding, the workplace has fundamentally changed in a number of important respects. Two universally recognized factors are rapid change and uncertainty. In acknowledgment of these changes, Weick (2001) argues that 21st century leaders must "allow more migration of decisions to those with the expertise to handle them, and less convergence of decisions on people entitled by rank to make them" (p. 106). Similarly, globalization, increased complexity, and the growing importance of knowledge work have created a need for less hierarchical, more collaborative organizations as responsibility and initiative have become more widely distributed (Ancona, Malone, Orlikowski, and Senge, 2007). Further, because of the dynamic, multifaceted nature of modern jobs, supporting performance improvement involves less management of performance than facilitation of performance (Das, 2003, as cited in Gruman and Saks, 2011). In substantial agreement, Bucher (2007) asserts that the desired outputs of knowledge-based economies (i.e., creativity and personal initiative) are less amenable to control by supervisors. In particular, workplace changes such as decentralization, larger spans of control, lack of direct experience, and increasing numbers of knowledge workers make it harder to manage the performance of others. Organizational learning scholar Edgar Schein (2009) suggests that the combined forces of technological complexity, the evolution of information technology, globalization, and global warming have created an

urgent need for leaders to adopt a helping role and be willing to accept help from their employees.

Additionally, researchers have cited deepening employee disengagement in organizations (e.g., Buckingham, 1999; Richman, 2006). It is estimated that roughly half of all American workers are not fully engaged or are disengaged at work, leading to what has been described as an *engagement gap* that is costing U.S. businesses hundreds of billions of dollars in lost productivity per year (Bates, 2004; Johnson, 2004; Rath and Conchie, 2009). Similarly, a Global Workforce Survey conducted in 2005 by the Towers Perrin consultancy firm found that only 14 percent of all employees worldwide are highly engaged in their jobs (Seijts and Crim, 2006). Watson Wyatt found that about 44 percent of workers say that top management lacks honesty and integrity (King, 2004). Kahn (1990), who coined the term *employee engagement,* argues that disengaged individuals withdraw and defend themselves physically, cognitively, or emotionally during role performances.

In her seminal work, *The Working Life* (2000), Joanne Ciulla offers some perspective on this dilemma with her observation that work entered an era of "mean streets and broken promises" (p. xvi) in the 1990s when legions of loyal, longtime employees of some of America's most respected corporations lost their jobs. She adds, "Massive layoffs signaled the end of the social compact between employers and employees that said if you do your job well, you can keep it" (p. xvi). In the face of these paradigm- altering circumstances employees woke up to the realization that they were, after all, commodities that could be replaced with computers or outsourced to another country. Ciulla continues, "When the social compact was broken, so too was the urbane

façade of management that had been carefully crafted by social scientists and consultants over the past century" (p. xvi). We might conclude from Ciulla's remarks that if there ever had been a sense of benevolent protection that defined organizational life and fueled its members' loyalties, it was upended with the dissolution of the traditional employment contract. No longer would employees base their commitments on the employer's promise of long-term employment and career advancement.

In spite of the disheartening extent of employee *disengagement,* it is widely accepted that employee *engagement* is a key factor impacting overall organizational effectiveness. This is underscored by The Gallup Organization's State of the American Workplace Report (2010). Gallup's findings show a critical link between employee engagement at the business/work unit level and a number of major performance outcomes, including turnover, absenteeism, safety, productivity, customer satisfaction, safety incidents, and profitability.

Observing the connection between employee engagement and performance management, Pfeffer (2007) suggests that job dissatisfaction is pervasive in workplaces in America and elsewhere. He argues that job dissatisfaction is accompanied by distrust and disengagement and that these problems are getting worse, heralding a number of negative consequences for employers as well as employees. He suggests that job satisfaction and job attitudes are highly predictive of a number of dimensions of organizational performance.

Finally, the fact that many Baby Boomers and their older Traditionalist generation counterparts are postponing retirement due to the collapse of financial markets in 2008 has created a collision of sorts, given the influx of Generation Y workers into the

workplace. This means that there are now four distinct generational groups, each with distinct perspectives about the workplace, employed in many of today's organizations (Eisner, 2005). Observing the challenges of a multi-generational workforce and the accompanying workplace transformation, Tulgan (2004) suggests that the 21st century workplace is one in which traditional career paths and management techniques, long-term employment and cookie cutter approaches to employee relations are disappearing. Tulgan argues that mangers have to shed traditional authority, rules, and red tape, and engage employees in one-on-one negotiation and coaching to realize organizational goals. Thus, old forms of command and control top-down management must be supplanted by leadership approaches that emphasize other skills such as emotional intelligence, adaptive work, and positive relationships with followers (Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee, 2002).

It is quite clear from recent history and a number of scholars' conclusions about the factors impinging on contemporary organizations that leadership—and leadership approaches—are at a critical juncture. Traditional command and control approaches based on organizational paradigms originating in the Industrial Era must yield to new approaches that respect—and effectively leverage—today's organizational realities.

With the above as a backdrop, it is not surprising that there has been a clarion call by leadership scholars during the past decade for more bottom-up, humble approaches in leaders (e.g., Morris, et al., 2005; Vera and Rodriguez-Lopez, 2004). In a similar vein, Ciulla and Forsythe (2010) note that in response to the increasing public concern for the morality of leaders in today's organizations, management and organizational behavior scholars have intensified their analysis of ethical leadership.

While it has been suggested that humility may be a sign of personal weakness in a leader (Exline and Geyer, 2004), it has also been suggested that humility represents a leader's intrinsic desire to serve and has significant utility in the organization (Collins, 2001a, 2001b; Vera and Rodriguez, 2004). Morris, et al. (2005) argue, "Given its potential importance in generating organizational and leader effectiveness, humility may offer a new lens through which to view and understand the leadership process" (p.1325). It is with these perspectives that the problem underlying the present study is described below.

Statement of the Problem

Despite a call for greater humility in leaders over the past decade and promising research that has attempted to define and measure humility as a leadership construct (e.g., Exline and Geyer, 2004; Owens, 2007; Owens and Heckman, 2012; Tangney, 2000; Vera and Rodriguez-Lopez, 2004), research in this important domain is still nascent. Much of the literature on humility is conceptual and speculative. There has been little qualitative or quantitative research validating theorists' perspectives (Owens and Heckman, 2012). Specifically, very little is known about humble leader attributes or the way humility is enacted by leaders in organizations. Still less is known about what enables humility and if or how it might be developed in leaders. Owens and Heckman argue that it is simply not known what humble leadership looks like, what behaviors it involves, and what personal and situational factors determine the effectiveness of these behaviors. They also argue that little is known about how humble leader behaviors might influence important work processes and outcomes. The construct of leader humility, therefore, is in need of further elaboration and clarification. In particular, how humility is embodied and enacted in

organizational leaders, as well as what enables it, needs to be better described. This author concurs with Owens and Heckman's argument that a lack of clarity will likely impede further research inquiry as well as potential practitioner application. It is this gap that represents the focus of the current study.

A personal Perspective on the Problem

As an organizational development consultant and leadership coach, the author has witnessed first-hand the suffering wrought by those who might be characterized as non-humble leaders as well as the deep personal gratification and professional growth that people experience as followers of those who might be characterized as humble leaders. She has been privileged to work with many humble leaders in her nearly fifteen years as a practitioner in the organizational development field. They don't—and they never will—seek the limelight or claim the podium to revel in their stories of triumph. They eschew public adulation, preferring instead to shine the light on those around them. These are the leaders who lead quietly from behind. But lead they do, with both conviction and compassion, never leaving casualties in their wake. It is the author's fervent belief that organizations are desperately in need of new models for developing leadership talent that are responsive to contemporary organizational realities. It is hoped that the contribution from the present study will not only add to the scholarly literature on humility, but also inform practitioners in the field whose aim is to support organizational leadership effectiveness. The author feels a deep calling to add to the accumulating knowledge about what may represent one of the most important leadership imperatives of our time.

Purpose and Scope of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine findings from a selected sample of leaders representing multiple levels of leadership across a broad spectrum of private and public sector organizations in the United State and Canada, as well as a selected sample of employees reporting to a leader who also participated in the study. Specifically, the research study aimed to assimilate findings and insights from a series of 14 in-depth interviews into a model representing the attributes, actions, antecedents (enablers), and outcomes of humility in leaders and organizations. This study proposes a grounded theory that explains how humility is enacted by leaders in their leadership roles.

Research Questions

The central research question explored in this study was complex and highly contextual in nature, addressing a phenomenon that is ideally suited to a qualitative approach. The central question asked was: *What explains humility in organizational leaders?* The related questions, which allowed the central question to be more fully explored, were:

1. What are the attributes of humility in leaders?
2. How is humility enacted by leaders?
3. What enables humility in leaders?
4. What are the individual and organizational outcomes that humility promotes?

Significance of the Study

There is a widely acknowledged need for new leadership approaches that respond to contemporary organizational realities and restore the organizational stakeholder confidence that unraveled in the wake of corporate meltdowns during the past decade.

With a workplace fundamentally shifted, the top-down command and control approaches that dominated the Industrial Era workplace for most of the 20th century have been rendered irrelevant in the Knowledge Era workplace of the 21st century. The outcry from many quarters following a spate of corporate scandals that left legions of disenfranchised workers and pillaged retirement portfolios behind has been a call for more humility in organizational leaders. As noted earlier, the study of humility is still in its infancy. Little is known about what enables it, how it is enacted, and what outcomes it promotes in leaders and organizations.

This study's significance resides in its contribution to the still preliminary but growing body of knowledge about humility in leaders and organizations. Specifically, the present study validates and extends the findings of other researchers who have attempted to define the construct of humility and examine its characteristics. Further, the study tells a story about humble leaders in a contemporary organizational context and proposes a grounded theory that explains how humility is enacted by organizational leaders. The assimilated findings, conclusions, and proposed grounded theory are expected to contribute to the delineation of future inquiry into humble leadership. Finally, it is expected that the study will offer guidance to practitioners whose aim is to support enhanced leadership effectiveness.

Limitations

The questions in this study represent contextually complex phenomena. While the qualitative research tradition in general and the grounded theory method in particular are well suited to the questions explored in this study, there are limitations to its design that

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should be acknowledged. One limitation is that the data were collected via single interviews with participants. According to Charmaz (2006),

> Telling incidents become evident during data gathering and analysis and may not affect all participants, thereby limiting the source of comparisons. Many if not most grounded theory studies rely on one-shot interviews. Thus, researchers may not discover participants' other incidents that might offer sources of comparison. A researcher also loses the chance to ask more questions about the incident of original interest. (p. 95)

This limitation can be mitigated by engaging in more in-depth interviews with participants. The interviews for the present study were in-depth, typically spanning an hour or longer.

Unlike quantitative studies, the findings of a qualitative study are not intended to be empirically generalizable to a larger population due to their contextually rich nature. That notwithstanding, a second limitation of this study that should be acknowledged is that the findings may be subject to alternative interpretations by readers. Another limitation is that, despite the fact that the reflexivity of the qualitative researcher means that he or she is immersed in the context of the phenomenon being studied, inherent biases that may color the researcher's interpretation of the data are consciously or unconsciously brought to the investigation by the researcher. While these biases are acknowledged and managed to the fullest extent possible, errors in interpreting the findings may nonetheless result. Further, the author's limited experience as a researcher with grounded theory methods represents another limitation. With these considerations in

mind, it should be noted that the limitations were mitigated to varying degrees by other aspects of the study's design, as explained in detail in Chapter 3.

Delimitations

A high quality study is designed to address specific questions in relationship to a specific population. The delimitations serve as quality control methods by providing the study's boundaries. With that standard in mind, this study was delimited in three ways: (1) participants were mid-level or senior level leaders in a public or private sector organization in the United States or Canada, (2) participants had held more than one leadership role, and (3) each participant was from a different organization.

Definition of Terms

Authenticity: having self-awareness; knowing, accepting, and remaining true to oneself; acknowledging one's limitations (Avolio and Gardner, 2005).

Acting with integrity: behavior that demonstrates that the leader regards the good of the organization as more important than satisfying one's personal ambitions (Alimo-Metcalfe and Alban-Metcalfe, 2005).

Arrogance: engaging in behaviors that exaggerate a person's sense of superiority by disparaging others (Johnson, et al., 2002).

Charisma: a leader's stimulation of emotional reactions in others by means of image-based rhetoric (allegory, analogy, metaphor, and symbol) and expressive non-verbal communication (Judge, Piccolo, and Kosalka, 2009).

Emotional intelligence: the ability to monitor one's own and others' emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions (Salovey and Mayer, 1990).

Enabling: actions by a leader that facilitate direct reports' ability to employ discretionary effort (Alimo-Metcalfe and Alban-Metcalfe, 2005).

Grounded Theory: "a general methodology of analysis linked with data collection that uses a systematically applied set of methods to generate an inductive theory about a substantive area" (Glaser, 1992, p. 16).

Humility: "a personal orientation founded on the willingness to see the self accurately and a propensity to put oneself in perspective, involving neither self-abasement nor overly positive self-regard" (Morris, et al., 2005, p. 1331).

Integrity: from the Latin word integrin, meaning wholeness; it is a state of being whole or undiminished, a state of soundness of, and adherence to, moral principle (Sankar, 2003).

Modesty: "externally focused behavior that is designed to diminish the extent to which an individual draws attention to oneself" (Morris, et al., 2005, p. 1331).

Narcissism: "a personality trait encompassing grandiosity, arrogance, self-absorption, entitlement, fragile self-esteem, and hostility" (Rosenthal and Pittinsky, 2006, p. 617).

Optimism: an individual's propensity to explain positive events in terms of personal, permanent, and pervasive causes and that explains negative events in terms of external, temporary, and situation-specific ones (Seligman, 1998).

Psychological safety: feeling able to show and employ one's authentic self without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status, or career (Kahn, 1990.)

Resilience: the developable capacity to rebound or bounce back from adversity, conflict,

and failure, or even positive events, personal progress, and increased scope of

responsibility (Luthans, 2002).

Self-awareness: the process by which leaders come to understand their unique

capabilities, knowledge, and experience (Avolio and Gardner, 2005).

Virtue: "a pervasive trait of character that enables someone to fit into society" (Solomon,

1999, as cited in Vera and Rodriguez-Lopez, 2004, p. 394).

CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In this chapter the author draws on various literatures to define the construct of humility and examine its characteristics in organizational leaders. Specifically, the literature review chronicles humility in historical and contemporary contexts and the evolving perceptions of humility. The literature review also examines humility in the context of implicit theories of self and contrasts humility with the closely related concepts of modesty and narcissism. Further, the strategic importance of humility as well as possible limitations of a leader's expression of humility in light of contemporary organizational realities is examined. The question of whether and how humility can be developed in leaders is discussed. Finally, different leadership approaches in which humility has a central role are described. The literature review concludes with a discussion regarding gaps in the literature and how the present study is situated in the literature.

Humility in a Historical Context

Humility, which comes from the Latin word *humus* meaning *earth* or *grounded*, has been the subject of rich discussion by philosophers and religious leaders from the time of recorded human history. For example, the early Greeks recognized humility as a virtue. They did not, however, view the notion of humility as paramount in importance because it was thought that those who were *rightly educated* were well aware of their limitations. Thus, humility was seen as a *starting point* for a virtuous life, not the goal in and of itself (Morris, et al., 2005).

Because it is seen as involving an appreciation of something bigger than oneself, humility has held special significance in the teachings of Christianity, Buddhism, and Taoism, all of which view it as a virtue (Morris, et al., 2005; C. Peterson and Seligman, 2004). In their in-depth discussion of the role of humility in religious traditions, Morris, et al. (2005) observe that in Christianity it is widely believed that humility enables people to see others as worthy of love and compassion. Furthermore, in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, humility represents submission to God. They note that the word *Muslim* means one who surrenders.

In their discussion of values and beliefs in the eastern spiritual traditions, C. Peterson and Seligman (2004) suggest that from that perspective humility is not so much about recognizing one's limits as it is about acknowledging a need to let go of the self and connect with a greater reality. The concept of forgetting of the self is a recurring theme in the scholarly literature on humility.

Humility in a Contemporary Context

Drawing on their review of contemporary philosophical and social science perspectives, Morris, et al. (2005) suggest that humility is a much more complex construct than historical religious and philosophical views might suggest. They point to Comte-Sponville's (2001) argument that humility should be thought of as the science of the self, inasmuch as it arises from a deeper understanding of one's strengths and weaknesses. From this perspective, humility requires people to "love the truth more than [they love] themselves since all knowledge is a wound to the ego" (p. 1330).

The seminal work on character strengths and virtues by C. Peterson and Seligman (2004) referred to earlier, marked the beginning of what is now widely recognized as the

positive psychology movement. The focus of positive psychology is to support people to achieve their highest potential by studying virtues and human strengths, *including humility*, and shifting psychology's longstanding emphasis from dysfunction and what is wrong in people to what is right in them. In the positive psychology realm, humility is seen as a positive human trait that is both stable and enduring (Vera and Rodriguez-Lopez, 2004).

Even though the construct of humility has been vigorously debated by religious leaders and philosophers, it has been largely neglected in the scholarly literature until recently. Tangney (2002) suggests that this is because humility has been linked to values, which have been ignored in the mainstream psychology literature because of the emphasis on psychology as a science, with the requisite objectivity that science entails. She further notes the lack of a well-established measure of humility as a likely factor in its being neglected by researchers. Indeed, humility has been viewed as a difficult construct to measure, particularly attempts to measure it via self-report. The concept of presentational bias suggests that self-report measures can be exaggerated in either a positive or negative direction. As a result, they have been viewed with skepticism (Exline and Geyer, 2004; Tangney, 2002). After all, it seems somewhat paradoxical to the very notion of humility that someone would proudly report his or her *humbleness*. With that limitation duly noted, some recent and still preliminary work in the area of creating a measure of humility by Owens (2009) and Elliott (2010) appears to hold promise for clarifying what humility is, how it is enacted, and how it is perceived. Despite these recent attempts to validate a measure of humility, Tangney (2002) concedes that the absence of clear agreement on a definition of humility is a continuing challenge for

scholars. This view is echoed by Vera and Rodriguez-Lopez (2004), who argue that despite the trend in the management literature to place greater emphasis on the value of human strengths, humility is still largely misunderstood. Furthermore, humility research is still in its infancy, and the absence of clear agreement on a construct is typical of early phase research when a complex, detailed understanding of a phenomenon is needed (Creswell, 2007).

Perceptions of Humility

Despite the scholarly attention given to the phenomenon of humility during the last decade, there is still no clear agreement about how people perceive humility, especially if they view it as a strength or weakness (Exline and Geyer, 2004; Vera and Rodriguez-Lopez, 2004), or even what the personal and situational factors are that determine its effectiveness (Owens and Hekman, 2012). Tangney (2002), whose theoretical work no doubt played a pivotal role in fostering the renewed interest in humility among psychologists during the past decade, describes humility as a "rich, multi-faceted construct that is exemplified by an accurate assessment of one's characteristics, an ability to acknowledge limitations, and a forgetting of the self" (p. 441).

Other perspectives on humility have not always been as charitable. Tangney notes that humility has also been associated with feelings of unworthiness and low self-regard. Similarly, Morris, et al. (2005) point to philosopher Nietzsche's 1974 writings in which he suggested that humility is the "virtue of slaves" (p. 1330) as it necessitates self-abasement. From his perspective, all humility is worthy of contempt. The authors also point to moral philosopher Immanuel Kant's 1964 writings in which he states that

humility is the "*awareness of the insignificance of one's moral worth* (emphasis added) in comparison to the law" (p. 1330).

Perhaps at no time in history was the perception of humility as *lowliness* as clearly articulated as it was by St. Benedict of Nursia. Bekker (2008) writes that St. Benedict was a sixth-century Christian monk (480-540 A.D.) who is considered to be the father of Western Cenobitic Monasticism. He wrote a rule in which he provided his followers a twelve-step process description of how humility is formed in followers and leaders alike. Bekker notes that Benedict's rule on humility has served as a spiritual manual within the Benedictine Order and others for over 1500 years. Step #7 of Benedict's rule suggests that the monk should have a "correct but lowly estimation of self" (p.5). He continues,

> The seventh degree of humility is that he consider himself lower and of less account than anyone else, and this not only in verbal protestation but also with the most heartfelt inner conviction, humbling himself and saying with the Prophet . . . But I am a worm and no man, the scorn of men and the outcast of the people . . . After being exalted, I have been humbled and covered with confusion . . . And again, it is good for me that You have humbled me, that I may learn Your commandments. (p. 5)

Thus, with humility being reviled by some scholars and acknowledged as poorly understood by others, it is little wonder that humility has been neglected in contemporary scholarly research. Perhaps it would still not be receiving the attention it deserves within the scholarly communities of psychology, organizational development, and sociology

were it not for the public outcry following the spate of corporate scandals and moral crises during the past decade.

As noted earlier, the positive psychology movement can be credited with shifting the perspective with which humility is regarded from one that views it as representing lowliness, to one that elevates it to the level of character strength. Accordingly, Park and Peterson (2003) describe humility as a temperance virtue that guards against excess. Similarly, Vera and Rodriguez-Lopez (2004) describe it as "the mid-point between the two negative extremes of arrogance and lack of self-esteem" (p. 395). Expanding on her suggestion that humility is characterized by accurate self-assessment , ability to acknowledge limitations, and forgetting of self, Tangney (2000, 2002) suggests that humility also involves:

- An accurate sense of one's abilities and achievements

- The ability to acknowledge one's mistakes, imperfections, gaps in knowledge, and limitations (often with reference to a Higher Power)

- Openness to new ideas, contradictory information, and advice, and

- An ability to keep one's abilities and accomplishments in perspective

In substantial agreement with Tangney, Exline and Geyer (2004) suggest that humility involves a "nondefensive willingness to see the self accurately, including strengths and limitations" (p. 97). The authors describe what they believe represents the positive basis of humility:

Humility is likely to stem from a sense of security in which feelings of personal worth are based on stable, reliable sources (e.g., feeling unconditionally loved,

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belief in value of all life) rather than on transient, external sources such as

achievement, appearance, or social approval. (p. 97)

Exline and Geyer's 2004 study of perceptions of humility found that participants viewed

humility as a personal strength across all social roles sampled. Study participants also

made a clear association between humility and good psychological adjustment, thus

viewing humility favorably.

Tangney (2000) argues that, despite the prevalence of low self-esteem

conceptualizations of humility among psychologists, when the experts dig deeper, a

deeper and much richer picture of humility emerges. For examples, she points to

Emmons's 1998 writings in which he suggests that humility is the antithesis of the

caricature of a "stoop-shouldered, self-deprecating, weak-willed soul only too willing to

yield to the wishes of others" (p. 71), and to Templeton's 1997 writings in which he

argues, "humility represents wisdom" (p. 72). He adds, "Humility is knowing you are

smart but not *all-knowing*" (p. 72).   Exline and Geyer (2004) concur in the assertion that

humility does not equate to weakness. They suggest,

> [Humility] is likely to stem from a sense of security in which feelings of personal
>
> worth are based on stable, reliable sources (e.g., feeling unconditionally loved;
>
> belief in value of all life) rather than on transient, external sources such as
>
> achievement, appearance, or social approval. (p. 97)

When humility is seen in this context, it can be argued that the excessively self-

deprecating individual is in reality *lacking humility* due to his or her inordinate self-focus;

e.g., the person who protests that she is unworthy of praise—that her accomplishment

was really nothing at all (Tangney, 2000). In referencing Templeton's (1997) notion of

becoming unselved, Tangney (2002) suggests that having humility speaks to one's having an other-focus that places one in the broader community, *not* at the center of one's world. She writes, "In relinquishing the very human tendency toward an egocentric focus, persons with humility become ever more open to recognizing the abilities, potential, worth, and importance of others" (p. 413). She adds that in the process of becoming unselved, there is less need to for someone to "enhance and defend an all-important self" at the expense of others (p. 413).

In alignment with Tangney, Vera and Rodriguez-Lopez (2004) propose that humility involves having a down-to-earth perspective on oneself that enables an individual to view success, failure, work, and life without exaggeration. Continuing on the theme of humility viewed in a positive perspective, they refer to Luthans's 2002 work in the area of positive organizational behavior. Positive organizational behavior is focused on developing positively oriented human strengths and capabilities such as confidence, hope, and optimism with the goal of improving workplace performance. The authors suggest that the work in positive organizational behavior is well aligned with their work in humility because it is a virtue that has strategic value for organizations.

C. Peterson and Seligman's (2004) exploration of human strengths, as represented in dominant eastern and western spiritual and philosophical traditions, reveals a set of core virtues that seem to be universally valued. Notably among them is the strength of humility. Similarly, and as noted earlier, Vera and Rodriguez-Lopez (2004) suggest that humility is a virtue that reflects a relatively stable character trait.

Luthans and Youssef (2007) suggest that the value of positivity as a basis for theory building, research, and application in psychology and organizational behavior has

only recently been recognized. They note that several identifiable theoretical domains have been identified, including that of emerging positive organizational behavior. Their review of relevant prior scholarly contributions in the areas of positive personality traits, psychological capacities, positive organizations, and positive behaviors underscores the recognition of humility as a factor in positive organizational behavior, and therein a shift in perspective on the value of humility in an organizational context.

Thus, the literature chronicles not only a renewed interest in the phenomenon of humility over the past decade but also a greater recognition of it as a potential source of human and organizational strength. Further, scholarly research appears to be converging along several exciting dimensions, particularly as it relates to humility in leaders and organizations, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

Defining Humility

Tangney (2000, 2002), as noted earlier, emphasizes that humility is characterized by an accurate assessment of one's characteristics, an ability to acknowledge limitations, and a forgetting of the self. Morris, et al. (2005) define humility as a "personal orientation founded on a willingness to see the self accurately and a propensity to put oneself in perspective" (p. 1331), and as "that crest of human excellence between arrogance and lowliness" (p. 1331). Based on their review of the various literatures in theology, philosophy, and social psychology, the authors note the consistent themes of *self-awareness, openness, and transcendence* in definitions proffered by scholars, which they define as follows:

Self-awareness: an enduring orientation to objectively appraise one's strengths and limitations.

Openness: the willingness to learn from others—to be open to different ideas and ways of knowing.

Transcendence: the acceptance of something greater than oneself and understanding the small part one plays in the universe, and accompanying this, an appreciation of others and their inherent worth. From these scholars' perspective, such transcendence supports *having a proper perspective on life*.

Grenberg (2005) engages a rich discussion of the construct of humility. He offers a definition that emphasizes the *awareness of one's limits*:

> The humble person is one who has achieved a balance of appreciation of [personal] worth and limit, and thereby avoids despair. Humility . . . would not be a virtuous state unless it maintained just this balance. The humble person takes her awareness of limit as an impetus to action instead of as a warrant for despairing inaction. (p. 181)

The awareness of one's personal limits may be the basis for having a balanced view of oneself in comparison to others. In this vein, Tangney (2002) points to the 1990 work by Means, et al., in which they observe that "humility is an increase in the valuation of others and not a decrease in the valuation of oneself" (p. 413).

Ashton and Lee (2005), in their elaboration on the so-called big-five personality model that has been the subject of much discussion in the personality literature, suggest that *honesty-humility* represents the sixth dimension of personality. They further suggest that humility is a behavioral pattern characterized by the avoidance of self-interested manipulation of others, resistance to breaking rules, eschewing possession of wealth and luxury, and feeling no special entitlement to elevated social status or privilege. Their

work would suggest that humility is a stable personality trait that is mirrored in observable behavior.

Owens (2009) describes humility as a *developmental orientation* that is associated with willingness to view oneself accurately, teachability, appreciation of others' strengths, and low self-focus. Owens, Rowatt, and Wilkins (2010) suggest that humility may enable an individual to "transcend the comparative-competitive model of self-evaluation, allowing the humble person to view others as exemplars from whom she might learn" (p. 7). Following on this theme, Yi Ou (2011) defines humility as a developmental orientation that is grounded in a self-concept that subordinates oneself to an ideal. And in substantial agreement with Owens, et al., she suggests that humility is manifested as self-awareness and self-improvement, other- appreciation and other-enhancement, as well as self-transcendent pursuit and low self-focus.

Humility has often been defined in the context of self-esteem. As noted earlier, in a historical context, it was defined as someone's having a *low estimation of oneself*. Morris, et al. (2005) argue that rather than thinking of self-esteem as being *equivalent* to humility, self-esteem can be viewed more appropriately as a *predictor* of humility. In making their case, the authors cite Brockner (1988) who defines self-esteem as "the degree to which individuals hold positive or negative views of themselves" (p. 1336). Morris, et al. note the challenges of equating humility with *high self-esteem*, pointing to the tendency of those with high self-esteem to be more resistant to persuasion and to ignore negative feedback. Thus, they argue for the need to distinguish between *authentic self-esteem* and *defensively high self-esteem*. They suggest that the relationship between self-esteem and humility is contingent upon the extent to which an individual holds

genuinely favorable feelings of self-worth versus holding negative feelings that he or she is fearful of admitting due to the need for external approval. They argue,

> Defensively high self-esteem reflects both a lack of true self-awareness and a lack of openness to others' input. In essence, the need to protect an ideal self prevents the defensively high self-esteem person from recognizing personal limitations and asking for help. (p. 1337)

Thus, it can be reasonably concluded that humility is predicted by (and by implication, defined in part by) an individual's having authentic self-esteem that is neither defensively high nor excessively low. In this context authentic self-esteem diminishes the individual's need to seek external affirmation by means of being overly self-promoting. Moreover, because the individual is not trying to protect a fragile (defended) sense of self-worth, he or she is less likely to be resistant to others' feedback and more willing to admit mistakes. This discussion also suggests that humility is not the opposite of high self-esteem. Neither is it defined by having low self-esteem. It is about *having a down-to-earth perspective* that enables the humble individual to view success and failure without exaggeration (Vera and Rodriguez-Lopez, 2004).

What stands out in the richness of the above discussion is that there appears to be broad agreement that humility is first and foremost about having a grounded, down-to-earth perspective on one's strengths *and limitations*—having neither an overly low nor excessively high regard for self. This balanced self-regard is accompanied by an appreciation of the inherent worth of others, openness to learning, and a willingness to subordinate oneself to a higher purpose.

Contrasting Humility with closely related Constructs

The understanding of any theoretical construct as complex as that of humility necessitates that consideration be given to how the construct of interest might be distinguished from other related constructs with which it is often compared. With that in mind, the construct of humility will be distinguished from the constructs of modesty and narcissism.

Humility and Modesty

The terms humility and modesty are often used interchangeably in the common vernacular. While the two concepts share some characteristics, there are clear distinctions to be made as well. Tangney (2000, 2002) suggests that modesty is about an individual's having a moderate estimation of one's merits or accomplishments. She argues, however, that while this is true of the person with humility, modesty doesn't capture the other facets of humility such as a forgetting of the self and the appreciation of the worthiness of others. In support of this argument, C. Peterson and Seligman (2004) suggest that, in contrast with humility, which is internally focused, modesty is more likely to be externally focused. Further, Morris, et al. (2005) argue that modest behaviors are, at the core, efforts designed to diminish the attention people draw to themselves. They suggest that, similar to the notion of expressed emotion, modesty is subject to social norms; i.e., its expression is modulated by what is socially acceptable, irrespective of what the person who is being modest actually feels internally.

Seen in this context, modesty is an element of humility, but humility may or may not be an element of modesty. In other words, the genuinely humble individual may not be apt to report one's humility, whereas the modest individual might be inclined to create

the *appearance* of humility by verbally discounting his or her strengths or accomplishments. Thus, modesty is too narrow a concept to fully explain humility (Tangney, 2000, 2002).

Humility and Narcissism

Narcissism is a personality trait encompassing grandiosity, arrogance, self-absorption, entitlement, fragile self-esteem, and hostility (Rosenthal and Pittinsky, 2006). Morris, et al. (2005), referencing Emmons (1984), suggest that narcissism has been linked with self-promotion and an inflated sense of self. The authors suggest that having a significant degree of either humility or narcissism diminishes the likelihood that there will be a significant degree of the other. Thus, the behavior motivated by humility is typically in stark contrast with behavior motivated by narcissism, and vice versa.

Holding a somewhat different perspective, Tangney (2002) suggests that while it is clear that people who are narcissistic lack humility, it is not clear that people who lack narcissism do in fact have humility. For example, people who score low on a measure of narcissism may or may not make accurate assessments of their abilities and achievements, and they may or may not appreciate the worthiness of others' gifts and talents. Furthermore, she asserts, "low self-esteem, self-deprecating individuals are neither narcissistic nor paragons of humility" (p. 414).

Conger and Kanungo (1998) describe narcissistic leaders as self-absorbed and attention-seeking individuals who have a propensity to ignore others' viewpoints or welfare. The ease with which an individual ignores the feelings of others and exploits them for personal gain may be associated with more serious clinical pathology, but it is also associated with narcissism and the personalized (self-interested) use of power

(Rosenthal and Pittinsky, 2006). Similarly, Conger (1990) and Maccoby (2000) suggest that the narcissist's inflated sense of entitlement can lead to self-serving abuses of power. Moreover, Rosenthal, and Pittinsky (2006) suggest that the leadership style of the narcissistic leader is typically autocratic.

Tangney (2002) asserts that while social psychologists tend to emphasize the narcissist's grandiosity, exaggerated sense of self-importance, and over-estimation of one's abilities, the construct of narcissism is much more complex when viewed in the clinical domain. From a clinical perspective, narcissism connotes a pathological self-focus and unstable self-regard. Tangney explains,

> [The narcissist] is not simply an over-confident, conceited dolt, but rather someone with a damaged sense of self. Attempts to shore up the self with unrealistic fantasies of grandiosity inevitably alternate with a grinding sense of emptiness and self-loathing. (p. 414)

Rosenthal and Pittinsky (2006) elaborate on their characterization of narcissistic leaders as autocratic by describing them as "individuals whose aspirations, judgments, and decisions, both good and bad, are driven by unyielding arrogance and self-absorption" (p. 617). They further describe these individuals as:

- arrogant

- holding feelings of inferiority

- having insatiable need for recognition and superiority

- prone to hypersensitivity and anger

- lacking empathy

- prone to amorality

- irrational and inflexible

- exhibiting paranoid tendencies

Ouimet (2010) summarizes several theoretical works in her characterization of narcissistic individuals as primarily motivated by the satisfaction of their own needs, which leads them to using self-interested influence. Pointing to the evidence for the narcissist's propensity for self-enhancement, the author summarizes three egocentric preoccupations of the narcissistic individual: *a sense of entitlement, the pursuit of self-image goals, and the attribution of humanizing traits to oneself versus others.*

Gilbert, Carr-Ruffino, Ivancevich, and Konopaske (2012) argue that narcissism can actually lead to toxicity in organizations because "excessive self-focus precludes an extension of self on behalf of others, and encourages 'winning' at any expense" (p. 31). They point to Berdeian's 2002 explanation that "the process of learned superiority creates individuals who are rigid, suspicious, easily slighted, distrustful of others, insensitive, undiplomatic, and inconsiderate" (p. 33). Similarly, Capreta, Clark, and Guangrong (2008) observe that leaders who eventually derail tend to be volatile under pressure and are prone to moodiness, angry outbursts, and erratic behavior, all of which undermine interpersonal relationships. The authors cite the 1985 findings by Sorcher that between 30 and 50 percent of managers and executives fail as a result of their mismanagement of relationships. Further, Exline, Baumeister, Bushman, Campbell, and Finkel (2004) argue that narcissistic entitlement impedes an individual's capacity to forgive others. The potential impact of this in an organizational context is at once clear and sobering. Thus, the problem of narcissism is not easily dismissed as infrequent or inconsequential.

Not only might the behavior of narcissistic leaders lead to toxicity and damaged interpersonal relationships in organizations, but it may also undermine performance. For example, Chatterjee and Hambrick (2007) found that organizations with narcissistic CEOs at the helm had more erratic and extreme fluctuations in performance.

Thus, it can be argued that in its most destructive presentation, narcissism represents a damaged and unstable sense of self with the narcissistic leader having a propensity to abuse power and people, mismanage performance, and resist change—even when the individual is confronted with the hard reality of diminished performance. In its least destructive presentation, narcissism appears to involve an attention-seeking individual with an exaggerated sense of self-importance and over-estimation of one's abilities that may lead to greater risk-taking.

The above notwithstanding, the depiction of the narcissistic leader as inherently self-aggrandizing and attention seeking—or worse—destructively power-grabbing, does not find support among all scholars. For example, Maccoby (2000) argues that not all narcissistic leaders are destructive. He makes a distinction between what he refers to as e *productive narcissists* and their more destructive counterparts. He suggests that productive narcissists are "risk takers willing to get the job done but also charmers who can convert the masses with their rhetoric" (p. 70). Their strength, in his estimation, is their charisma—their ability to inspire others with their personal magnetism and gifted use of language. He argues that it is the narcissists who come closest to our collective image of great leaders because of their compelling visions and their ability to attract followers.

The above notwithstanding, Maccoby (2000) acknowledges that "narcissism can become unproductive when, lacking self-knowledge and restraining anchors, narcissists become unrealistic dreamers" (p. 70). He also acknowledges that, perhaps due to their discomfort with their own emotions, narcissistic leaders don't learn easily from others, and are therefore not typically open to feedback. Further, they tend to listen only for the information they want to hear, prefer to indoctrinate versus teach, and tend to dominate conversations. Maccoby concedes that, despite their positive qualities and clear strengths in certain contexts, even the most productive narcissistic leaders can self-destruct and take their organizations down with them.

In agreement with Maccoby, Conger (1990) observes, "When a leader's behaviors become exaggerated, lose touch with reality, or become vehicles for purely personal gain, they may harm the leader and the organization" (p. 44). Kets De Vries, in an interview for *Harvard Business Review* with Coutu (2004) concurs with Maccoby (2000) in his observation that narcissism can be productive. De Vries argues,

> Narcissism has a terrible reputation, often rightly so. But all people—especially leaders—need a healthy dose of narcissism in order to survive. It's the engine that drives leadership. Assertiveness, self-confidence, tenacity, and creativity just can't exist without it. (p. 4)

In De Vries's view, narcissism and leadership are intricately connected. He counsels that everyone has narcissistic tendencies—they are the basis of personal identity and self-esteem. Further, he argues that the *constructive narcissist* is relatively well balanced, with a secure level of self-esteem, and that this individual can become an excellent leader. He contrasts the constructive narcissist with what he refers to as the *reactive narcissist*. He

characterizes the reactive narcissist as having a grandiose sense of self-importance that drives the individual's self-serving behavior, elevated sense of entitlement, and propensity to envy and rage (Coutu, 2004).

The descriptions of narcissism provided by the various scholars above stand in sharp contrast to the descriptions of humility provided earlier. Generally speaking, the presence of either narcissism or humility appears to diminish the likelihood of the other. There appears to be consensus that, while humility may be defined in part by an absence of narcissism, the absence of narcissism does not necessarily suggest the presence of humility. Furthermore, it appears that narcissism can be viewed on a continuum of productive/constructive and destructive/reactive tendencies, with the destructive/reactive narcissistic leader bearing the least resemblance to the humble leader.

Humility and Implicit Theories of the Self

As noted previously, the phenomenon of humility is complex and deeply nuanced, and thus does not lend itself to straightforward interpretation. It has been the subject of widely varying definitions, interpretations, and perceptions among religious leaders, philosophers, and scholars alike. Little is known about how humility is enacted, what enables it, and what its outcomes are. Aside from the question of what situational factors that might enable it, the question of where it emanates from within the individual is an intriguing one. As a means of examining this question, the literatures related to several theoretical frameworks: *theory of self-concept, contingencies of self-worth, and core self-evaluations,* are reviewed here for the additional depth they lend to understanding of the construct of humility and where humility might originate from as a manifestation of the self.

Theory of Self-Concept

There appears to be substantial agreement among scholars that humility is associated with stable self-esteem—a valuation of self that is neither overly high nor low, or a grounded sense of self. What might describe how this grounded view of self develops? Baumeister's (1998) theory of self-concept provides some insight into this question. He suggests that through one's experience of oneself, an individual attempts to makes sense of his or her world through three prototypical patterns of experiences: *reflexive consciousness, interpersonal being, and the executive function.*

Through the experience of *reflexive consciousness* the individual attempts to understand the self in relationship to the world. Through the experience of *interpersonal being*, he or she attempts to understand oneself in relationship to other people. And through the *executive function*, the individual attempts to understand oneself through what one does; i.e., one's purpose. Thus, in Baumeister's framework, the individual *constructs* a self-concept based on one's relationship to the world in which one lives, the relationships one has with others, and the relationship to one's purpose in the world.

Viewing humility through the lens of theory of self-concept, there appears to be theoretical support for the suggestion that the humble individual is likely to have a self-concept that involves seeing oneself as a small part of something bigger in the world (as opposed to seeing oneself as the center of one's world). Further, the humble individual is likely to have an appreciation of others and their inherent worth, and a commitment to a purpose that is bigger than oneself.

Contingencies of Self-Worth

According to Crocker and Knight (2005), high self-esteem is often seen as "the holy grail of psychological health—the key to happiness, success, and popularity" (p. 200). Correspondingly, low self-esteem is blamed for a host of societal problems. The authors suggest that, despite these widespread beliefs, the reality is that high self-esteem is *not* associated in research findings with academic achievement, good job performance, or even great leadership for that matter. They argue, however, that even though high self-esteem isn't the reason for most positive outcomes in work and life, and low self-esteem isn't the cause of most societal ills, *self-esteem is not irrelevant.* They suggest that the importance of self-esteem doesn't depend so much on whether it is high or low, but on what someone believes is necessary to have value or worth—what the authors refer to as *contingencies of self-worth*. They argue that when someone's self-esteem is highly contingent on external circumstances and others' evaluations, it is a fragile, unstable level of self-esteem. They further argue that the instability of self-esteem is the result of someone's being ego-involved in events, or having contingent self-worth. In other words, an individual whose self-esteem is contingent upon external events or the evaluations of others will have less stable self-esteem than if it is based on factors internal to the individual.

Thus, it seems that as a source of motivation, contingencies of self-worth have significant drawbacks. In support of this view Crocker and Knight (2005) argue that when the task is difficult and the threat of failure is real, contingencies of self-worth lead to feelings of stress, pressure, and loss of intrinsic motivation. In these circumstances, highly contingent people are likely to let go of their goals and withdraw effort. The

authors suggest that the *psychological high* someone experiences from having success in a domain of contingency may be quickly followed by painful feelings of anxiety that one's flaws will be exposed to others. Thus, in domains of contingency, the goal to succeed can represent a vicious cycle characterized by a relentless quest for externally validated success. The authors argue that when their self-worth is at stake, people prioritize boosting self-esteem by ensuring that they can satisfy their contingencies at the expense of their other, perhaps more important goals. In practical terms, this may result in an individual's selecting easier, low-risk goals around which success is assured. Similarly, Crocker, Brook, Niiya, and Villacorta (2006) argue,

> Contingencies of self-worth can facilitate self-regulation because people are highly motivated to succeed and avoid failure in domains of contingency. However, because boosts in self-esteem are pleasurable and drops in self-esteem are painful, protection, maintenance, and enhancement of self-esteem can become the overriding goal. (p. 1749)

Kernis's 2003 work in the area of optimal self-esteem appears to be in substantial agreement with the work of Crocker and Knight (2005) and Crocker, et al. (2006). Kernis makes a distinction between *fragile high self-esteem* and *secure high self-esteem.* He describes the individual with fragile high self-esteem as having a sense of self-worth that is highly vulnerable to threat from outside the self and is associated with a variety of strategies aimed at bolstering one's positive feelings about self. In contrast, the individual with secure high self-esteem is someone who values and accepts oneself, limitations included. From this vantage point, the individual feels no need to be in a superior position to others or to out-perform them. Kernis argues that the individual with secure high self-

esteem is not in need of continual external validation. Neither is the person's self-esteem highly vulnerable to threat.

Similarly, Morris, et al. (2005) argue that the relationship between high self-esteem and humility is likely to be contingent on the extent to which one's self-esteem reflects authentic versus defensively high self-esteem. In their view, those with defensively high self-esteem can't admit their privately held negative self-views due to their inordinate need for external (social) approval.

Using the contingencies of self-worth framework as a lens for viewing the construct of humility, there appears to be substantial theoretical support for the suggestion that the humble individual is likely to have a more stable, internally-anchored sense of self-worth that does not vary as a consequence of external circumstances or others' assessments. Further, the humble individual is not likely to de-value others in an effort to elevate his or her self-esteem. It is also unlikely that the individual will attempt to avoid others' feedback in an effort to protect a fragile sense of self. Thus, it could be argued that internalized self-worth may serve as a protective buffer of sorts when the individual is confronted with trying external circumstances or harsh evaluations by others.

Core Self-Evaluations

Judge and Krammeyer-Mueller (2011) suggest that people's fundamental beliefs about themselves, or core self-evaluations, affect how they see themselves in their varied environments. Core self-evaluations refer to several sub-components including self-efficacy (an individual's belief in one's capability to successfully perform), self-esteem (an individual's feelings of worthiness of respect and regard), locus of control (an

individual's belief that he or she can control circumstances), and emotional stability (an optimistic stance and freedom from worry and doubt).

Not surprisingly, the authors conclude that people who have high core self-evaluations are likely to be more motivated and diligent in their work and to see themselves as likely to succeed. Perhaps most importantly, these individuals are more likely to have healthy, *internally driven*, learning goal orientations. Their conclusions appear to be in agreement with Exline and Geyer (2004), who suggest that humble individuals have a nondefensive stance towards themselves, and with Owens (2009), who proposes that there is a strong connection between humility and positive core self-evaluations.

Through the lens of core self-evaluations, there appears to be strong corroborating theoretical support for the suggestion that the humble individual is likely to be nondefensively and optimistically open and persistent in learning, and this openness is likely to be stable in response to external factors, particularly the critical evaluations of others.

The Strategic Importance of Humility in Leaders

In the introductory chapter of this dissertation the author made the case that humility in leaders and organizations is now receiving greater emphasis due to a confluence of factors that has created a clarion call for a change in leaders and leadership approaches. Thus, humility's strategic role in leaders and organizations as discussed in the scholarly literature deserves thoughtful consideration.

Arguably, the most recognized commentary on humility's influence on leadership and organizational effectiveness is offered by Jim Collins (2001a, 2001b). Collins's

research, which spanned more than five years and analyzed data from 1435 companies, delved into what distinguishes those companies that out-perform their competitors over time. Collins was especially interested in learning what distinguishes the leaders of those companies. The top-performing companies, his results show, are headed up by what he calls Level 5 leaders. These top-ranked leaders are described as possessing a "paradoxical combination of personal humility plus professional will" (2001b, p. 70). Collins argues that, despite the historical association of humility with low self-regard, Level 5 leaders are not lacking ego; neither are they lacking ambition. Rather, they are leaders who are simultaneously modest and willful, and shy and fearless. Their ambitions are directed towards the success of their organizations as opposed to themselves. This *other-focus* enables them to channel their ambitions in ways that benefit the greater good without concern for their personal benefit. He elaborates on their humble characteristics:

- Personally humble leaders demonstrate a compelling modesty; they shun public adulation and never boast

- They act with calm and quiet determination, not relying on inspiring charisma to motivate but rather inspired standards

- Personally humble leaders avoid personal ambition in favor of multi-generational organizational growth and development

- They are self-reflective and tend to appropriate blame towards themselves and not others

Collins's findings are well supported by Vera and Rodrigue-Lopez (2004). Their findings, based on extensive review of the literatures on virtues (including humility), review of business case studies from a five-year period, and interviews with 33 managers

from seven countries, suggest that humility is a source of organizational competitive advantage. They propose that humility provides value to firms "through the processes of organizational learning, service, and the development of organizational resilience" (p. 396). They further suggest,

> When humility is defined as a down-to-earth perspective of oneself in relation to all other beings and accurate and realistic self-knowledge, it not only becomes desirable, but also necessary for survival and success regardless of the tradition or culture. (p. 396)

Expanding on the theme of accurate and realistic self-knowledge, Ancona, et al. (2007) comment on the positive outcomes engendered by those leaders who acknowledge their *incompleteness*, and who use this knowledge as the basis for their reliance on others. They argue that *incomplete* leaders differ from their *incompetent* counterparts because they understand how they can work with others to leverage their strengths and balance their limitations. Similarly, Edmonson (2008) suggests that leaders who create environments in which people are encouraged to offer their ideas, questions, and concerns are those who, among other things, model openness, humility, and curiosity.

Badaracco (2001), writing on the topic of quiet leadership, suggests that the most effective moral leaders he examined in his review of more than 150 case studies are the quintessential opposite of high-profile, heroic leaders. Rather, the most effective moral leaders are those who work behind the scenes creating quiet victories. He writes,

> They move patiently, carefully, and incrementally. They right—or prevent— moral wrongs in the workplace inconspicuously and usually without casualties. I have come to call these people *quiet leaders* (emphasis added) because their

modesty and restraint (emphasis added) are in large measure responsible for their

extraordinary achievements. (p. 121)

Badaracco's suggestion that leadership effectiveness is not found in dramatic shows of

heroism but in humble acts conducted well out of the limelight points to what might

represent an under-appreciated strategic benefit of leader humility.

Reave (2005) summarizes several related studies that compare self and other-

ratings as a method for examining the association between humility and perceived

leadership effectiveness. She reports that the consistent finding in the studies she

reviewed was that leaders who rated themselves lowest (suggesting humility) were rated

highest (and thus perceived to be more effective) by their followers. Conversely, leaders

who rated themselves highest were perceived as less effective. Similarly, leaders who had

high opinions of themselves were found to be the most unreceptive to criticism. These

findings clearly suggest the influence of humility on *follower perceptions of leadership*

effectiveness.

Other scholars suggest that the strategic importance of humility in leaders is

growing as a result of workplace trends that are creating a heightened emphasis on

organizational learning, collaboration, and interdependence (e.g., Schein, 2009; Senge,

2006; Weick, 2001). Morris, et al. (2005) concur and suggest that humility is an

important characteristic for leadership effectiveness in fostering supportiveness,

socialized power, and employee participation.

Vera and Rodriguez-Lopez (2004) argue that "humility is a critical strength for

leaders and organizations possessing it, and a dangerous weakness for those lacking it"

(p. 393). They suggest that humility leads to strong organizational performance through

its influence on organizational learning and resilience. In particular, humility may help executives avoid the performance consequences of complacency and over-confidence.

In their empirical study of leader performance, Chatterjee and Hambrick (2007) found that humble CEOs are more likely to pursue incremental improvements and to exhibit performance that fluctuates less over time. This stands in contrast to their other findings that narcissistic leaders take more risks, change strategy more often, and pursue larger and more frequent acquisitions.

Owens (2009) found that humility predicts individual performance beyond the common performance predictors of conscientiousness, general mental ability, and self-efficacy. Further, he found that humility was the strongest predictor of performance of his study participants over the course of an academic term, and that humility has a compensatory effect on performance for those with lower general mental ability. Owens suggests that this might be explained by the humble person's openness to feedback and willingness to learn from and improve upon mistakes. In other words, humility may foster a certain persistence on task-related behaviors in the face of obstacles that actually enhances performance over time.

There is also heightened awareness of the importance for leaders to bring more than the cognitive skills of big-picture thinking and futuristic vision to their roles. Goleman, et al. (2002) found that emotional intelligence is twice as important as cognitive skills in creating excellent performance at all levels of leadership. Self-awareness and empathy, both widely acknowledged as elements of humility, are described as two of the five components of emotional intelligence that the most effective

leaders demonstrate. Similarly, Morris, et al. (2005) identify high emotional intelligence as a predictor of humility, and by extension, effective leadership.

Following on the above, Goleman (2004) determined that emotional intelligence plays an increasingly important role at higher levels of leadership where the exercise of technical skills is diminished. He suggests that the higher the rank of a person who is considered to be a star performer, the more emotional intelligence capabilities emerge as the reason for the individual's effectiveness. His comparison of star performers with average ones in senior leadership roles showed that 90% of the difference was attributable to emotional intelligence—not cognitive abilities. These findings suggest that humility, as a critical element of emotional intelligence, is strongly linked to leadership effectiveness and organizational performance.

Finally, humility's role in fostering prosocial behavior in organizations suggests another strategically important factor. Exline and Geyer (2004) observe that humility fosters enhanced interpersonal relating as well as helping and cooperation. Similarly, Hilbig and Zettler (2009) found that honesty-humility is associated with cooperation among participants in an economic game. Further, in three investigations, each employing a different method, LaBouff, Rowatt, Johnson, Tsang, and Willerton (2012) found that humble people are more helpful than those who are less humble. Humble persons are also teachable—they are open to new ideas and advice from others (Exline and Geyer, 2004; Tangney, 2000; Vera and Rodriquez-Lopez, 2004). This openness can be seen as a likely basis of meaningful collaboration and positive interpersonal relationships.

The Personal Benefits of Humility

While the preceding discussion outlined the strategic importance of humility for organizations, there remains the question of how humility might personally benefit the leader. Given the historical association of humility with low self-regard, it is not self-evident that the humble individual would view his or her humility as desirable or beneficial. Furthermore, as previously discussed, it is unlikely that an individual possessing humility would openly proclaim its benefits, given that doing so would not be consistent with a humble demeanor. Thus, an exploration of the literature on the benefits of humility is indicated.

Collins (2001a) argues that truly exceptional leaders are able to "subjugate their own needs to the greater ambition of something larger and more lasting than themselves" (p. 75). In this context the leader's humility can be viewed as the basis of a higher calling that can sustain and inspire in challenging circumstances, suggesting a clear and compelling personal benefit of humility.

Vera and Rodriguez-Lopez (2004) suggest that humility may foster a leader's "pragmatic acceptance of failure" (p. 400). They argue that, given that fear of failure is an enormous obstacle to initiative-taking in organizations, humility may operate as a reminder to the leader that failure is the price of learning. Moreover, and by extension, a pragmatic acceptance of failure may temper the leader's tendency to excessively criticize the errors or failures of others, thereby enhancing interpersonal relationships and followers' trust.

The humble characteristic of having an accurate self-appraisal has been linked to positive psychological adjustment (Exline and Geyer, 2004). Moreover, the authors argue

that because humble individuals are less likely than their narcissistic counterparts to engage in boastfulness and grandiosity, they are likely to avoid the negative impressions by others (and by implication strained interpersonal relationships) that can be engendered by excessive self-focus. It seems reasonable to conclude from the above that humble people might have a propensity to adapt their approaches in their interpersonal interactions based on their positive self-regard, accurate self-appraisals, and openness to others' views.

Similarly, because the excessive self-focus that characterizes narcissism has been shown to be a risk factor for coronary heart disease (Worthington and Scherer, 2004), it is possible that humility may provide some kind of proactive heath benefit, perhaps through its influence in minimizing angry outbursts and in offering forgiveness to others. This seems to be supported by other research that has shown humility to be positively associated with life satisfaction, gratitude, and self-esteem (Rowatt, et al., 2006), and with emotional stability (Owens, 2009).

Humility may offer another benefit through its influence on emotional self-management. The emotionally self-managing individual controls one's presentations as a means of fostering positive interpersonal relationships (Morris, et al., 2005). Thus, the individual is able to maintain his or her emotional equilibrium despite internal or external triggers and is at ease with others.

There has been a great deal of emphasis placed on acceptance of one's limitations in the humility literature (e.g., Exline and Geyer, 2004; Morris, et al., 2005; Tangney, 2000, 2002; Vera and Rodriguez-Lopez, 2004). Such acceptance could represent a benefit to the humble individual by priming his or her valuing of others' strengths and

contributions as well as a positive orientation to learning and growth. Weick (2001) concurs and suggests that a leader's admission of ignorance and asking for others' input "establishes leader credibility in an unknowable world" (p. 112). Weick also suggests that such vulnerability in the leader strengthens relationships and activates follower sense-making.

Finally, but no less importantly, Tangney (200) suggests that humility offers "relief from the burden of self-preoccupation and the imperative to defend the vulnerable self" (p. 75), and that humility may help alleviate the symptoms of anxiety, depression, and social phobias—all of which are frequently associated with excessive self-focus. It seems likely then that the benefits of such psychological and emotional freedom could be realized in more positively externally directed energy, improved interpersonal relationships, and overall enhanced psychological adjustment.

The Limitations of Humility

Humility's strategic importance to the organization and its potential benefits to the leader are well supported in the literature. Additionally, the more recent shift in the perception of humility from one of lowliness and abject submission to a higher power to one of virtuous and stable character trait is also well documented. All this notwithstanding, it would be a leap to conclude that having humility it is the proper orientation for all organizational contexts and personal circumstances. Despite the evidence linking humility and leadership effectiveness, skepticism persists. There are those who still associate humility with humiliation, low self-esteem, or harsh self-criticism (e.g., Exline and Geyer, 2004), and thus conclude that it is a negative and highly

undesirable characteristic. So the first limitation that must be acknowledged is that humility is not universally acknowledged as representing character strength.

Owens, et al. (2012) pose seemingly very timely questions about humility, including the question of will those who are humble put themselves and their groups forward enough to excel, or will they be so *realistic* in their views of self and others that they will fail to take risks? While reminding the reader that they have made the opposite argument, the authors point out that in the business world, traits like humility that are viewed as *soft* could be seen as irrelevant or even counterproductive in an economically-driven, frequently cut-throat, and highly competitive marketplace. Following on this, they argue that humble individuals might be seen as unassertive or lacking initiative, and that it remains unclear if humility is predictive of upward mobility. In substantial agreement with this latter assertion, Morris, et al. (2005) suggest the possibility that individuals who make honest and accurate appraisals of their strengths and limitations might receive less compensation and fewer promotions.

Owens, et al. (2012) also suggest that the humble characteristic of admitting one's limitations might not be advantageous in all circumstances. For example, the humble individual might be at a disadvantage by resisting the tendency to be self-promoting in competitive situations. In a similar vein, Exline and Geyer (2004) observe that the humble individual who reveals personal limitations might not make a positive impression if his or her strengths are not also readily apparent. Morris, et al. (2005) argue that there may be contingencies that in reality call for non-humble leader behavior. For example, they suggest that an organization in need of rapid and dramatic transformation may not be well served by the humble leader who is unable to step into being the center of attention

to inspire a shared organizational vision. It is these circumstances that Maccoby (2000) believes call for a decidedly more narcissistic leader. Finally, Lawrence (2006), in discussing the Competing Values Framework, argues that any leadership characteristic that is taken to an extreme can create problems for the leader. For example, if the leader over-emphasizes relationships to the exclusion of organizational results, the leader will not be effective. In this context then, humility might be seen as a pitfall.

Thus, it appears that there may be some hard questions about whether the *nice leader* who's got a handle on reality, is open about personal limitations, and is open to learning from others can lead in difficult or challenging circumstances. Further, can this individual stand up to more aggressive/competitive individuals, and is this individual the *right* choice for higher level leadership roles, especially in challenging times?

Finally, Owens, et al. (2012) caution that humility, as a leadership endeavor, could be treated instrumentally and with self-interest as it is internalized and its practice made subject to strong situational influence. This latter suggestion is disquieting because it implies that humility could, if widely embraced without the attendant understanding necessary to elicit its benefits without its unwanted consequences, become the new in-thing to have—the latest fad in a long succession of leadership trends. The result might be something that is only remotely connected to humility's virtuous source of personal and organizational strength.

Is Humility a Capacity that Can Be Developed?

The pregnant question for many scholars and practitioners alike is how or if humility can be developed in organizational leaders. Humility has been variously described in the extant literature as a virtue and a character strength (C. Peterson and

Seligman, 2004), a meta-attitude (Grenberg, 2005), a developmental orientation (Ou, 2011; Owens, 2009), and a personal orientation (Morris, et al., 2005).

Despite the variations in definition of the humility construct, there seems to be broad consensus that it can be developed. C. Peterson and Seligman (2004) argue that humility is a character strength that is influenced by experience. They point to eastern and western religious practices that can influence the development of humility by "encouraging self-transcendence" (p. 473). Vera and Rodriguez-Lopez (2004) suggest that humility is "dynamic in nature and capable of improvement or deterioration" (p. 394).

Lawrence (2006) argues that the skills of empathy, social responsibility, and interpersonal relationships that are measured by the BarOn EQ-I, a widely recognized measure of emotional intelligence, all have elements of humility, and that these skills can be acquired and improved via training. Goleman (2004), also noting the importance of humility as a factor in emotional intelligence, concurs that emotional intelligence can be learned. He cautions that the process is not easy and that it requires an investment of time and commitment. He argues that the benefits, both for the individual and for the organization, make it worth the effort nonetheless.

Schein (2009) argues that *helping* is an urgent new role that leaders need to learn in order to foster the survival of their organizations in a complex environment. He observes that as the world becomes more complex, networked, interdependent, multi-cultural, and ideologically diverse, leaders will increasingly find themselves in situations where help from subordinates is necessary for success. Correspondingly, subordinates

will need to seek help in areas where leaders are not experts. Schein argues that in order to manage either situation effectively leaders will have to develop a degree of humility.

Notably, Collins (2001a) found that some of the humble Level 5 leaders in the good to great companies he identified had had significant life experiences "that might have sparked or furthered their maturation" (p. 37). He also found that strong religious beliefs or a [religious] conversion might nurture the development of Level 5 leadership traits. Bennis and Thomas (2002) characterize the kinds of transformative experiences described by Collins as *crucible experiences* or defining moments by which individuals come to a new or altered sense of identity, and in the process gain a clearer vision of themselves, their roles and their place in the world. They suggest,

> Extraordinary leaders find meaning in—and learn from—the most negative events. Like phoenixes rising from the ashes, they emerge from adversity stronger, more confident in themselves and their purpose and more committed to their work. Such transformative events are called crucibles—a severe test or trial. Crucibles are intense, often traumatic—and always unplanned. (p. 1)

Bennis and Thomas explain that while some crucibles are violent and life-threatening, such as encounters with prejudice, illness, or personal tragedy, others are positive— albeit deeply challenging— experiences such as working with a demanding boss or mentor. The authors argue that the importance of crucibles is that they force leaders into deep self-reflection. In a reflective frame of mind they are able to examine their values, question their assumptions, and hone their judgment. The authors suggest that regardless of the nature of crucible experiences, leaders create narratives that depict how they met the challenges and were transformed for the better as a result. The leader's creation of a

narrative and making oneself vulnerable through its telling vividly portray the humbling

nature of the experience and the leader's subsequent transformation. Moreover, the

crucible represents a powerful developmental experience for the emergence of leader

humility.

McCall, Lombardo, and Morrison (1988) interviewed 200 senior level leaders to

determine the experiences that had had the greatest impact on their careers. They found

that challenging experiences resulting from the impact of other people or hardships were

the basis of the most impactful learning. Challenging experiences involving other people

almost always involved working with bad bosses. Those involving hardships included

personal trauma, career setbacks, job changes, business mistakes, or subordinate

problems. These findings are corroborated by those of Collins (2001a) and Bennis and

Thomas (2002).

Finally, Owens, et al. (2012) discuss a study conducted by Owens, Rubenstein,

and Hekman (2010) that entailed 64 interviews with leaders from business, health care,

military, government, non-profit, and educational settings. They found that overall, there

was a high level of consensus among study participants that humility could be developed

in leaders and that leader humility would have a positive influence on performance.

The theoretical arguments and empirical findings discussed above strongly

suggest that humility, as a leadership quality, can in fact be developed. In other words, it

is not a static trait. However, it is also evident that developing humility is not necessarily

easy or straightforward, and achieving it sometimes comes at steep personal cost. Vera

and Rodriguez-Lopez (2004 argue,

True humility represents a certain attitude towards life and the world around us . .

. while it is possible to develop true humility, this learning process is hard because

it involves an effort and a commitment to change rooted in personal preferences,

and may lead to radical transformation of personal paradigms. (p. 398)

Humility and Contemporary Leadership Theories

The various literatures reviewed for the present study have examined the

phenomenon of humility as a virtue and character strength (C. Peterson and Seligman,

2004), a meta-attitude (Grenberg, 2005), a developmental orientation (Ou, 2011; Owens,

2009), and a personal orientation (Morris, et al., 2005). Humility has also been contrasted

with modesty and narcissism, two constructs with which it is frequently related, and

examined in the context of implicit theories of self.

The question that remains, however, is how humility fits into the broader realm of

leadership theories that have received a great deal of scholarly attention in their own

right. To that end, humility will be briefly reviewed in relationship to theories of *servant*

leadership, transformational leadership, charismatic leadership, and authentic

leadership. These theories were selected for review because they are widely regarded as

seminal theories of contemporary leadership.

Humility and Servant Leadership

Servant leadership, as a leadership concept, was introduced in 1970 by Robert

Greenleaf, a retired AT&T executive. The idea of the servant as leader came partly out of

Greenleaf's half-century of experience in working to shape large institutions—he worked

in management research and organizational development for more than 40 years.

However, his ideas on the leader as servant emerged when he read Hermann Hesse's

(1932) short novel *Journey to the East*—an account of a mythical journey by a group of people on a spiritual quest in which the hero is in fact a seemingly lowly servant. Hesse's writing inspired Greenleaf's conclusion that a great leader is first experienced as a servant to others, and that this is the basis of his or her greatness (Spears, 2005). Greenleaf (1997) writes that true leadership emerges from those whose primary motivation is a deep desire to help others. He further suggests that servant leaders approach their leadership roles by being other-focused—placing the needs of the organization and its members ahead of their own. By orienting around serving as opposed to leading, they place themselves in the background where they can facilitate others' development. In fact, the servant leader's development of others is a central focus in Greenleaf's model. Also important in his model is the creation of community and sharing power in decision making.

Morris, et al. (2005) suggest that the behaviors of the servant leader are consistent with humility, and that humility might be the primary vehicle with which servant leaders operate. Following on Greenleaf's theme of developing others, Sendjaya and Serros (2002), in their interpretation of his model of servant leadership, suggest that it is through the act of serving (versus leading) that the servant leader leads others into realizing who they are capable of becoming. Further, they suggest that the mental model of the servant leader is *I serve* as opposed to *I lead*. The authors caution that the servant leader's values-based, deliberate choice to serve should not be mistaken for weakness of character or a diminished sense of self-worth. Instead, the leader's self-awareness, moral conviction, and emotional stability—elements that are often associated with humility—are the likely basis. The authors also point to a consensus among a number of scholars that the servant

leader's motivation stems from personal values and beliefs *or* their humility and spiritual insights.

Kouzes and Posner (1993) observe that servant leaders visibly appreciate and value their followers. The appreciation of others' strengths and contributions is widely recognized by scholars as a key characteristic of humble leaders.

Humility and Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership theory was proposed by Bass (1985), who built on the 1970s work of James McGregor Burns. From the transformational leadership perspective, the leader's role is to transform and motivate followers to transcend their self-interests for the sake of the organization. A transformational leader serves as a role model whose followers aspire to identify with and emulate. The transformational leader's influence on followers is through charisma, or what Bass refers to as *idealized influence*. Further, Bass proposed that transformational leaders model ethical behavior, share risks, and consider the needs of others before self. They also provide intellectual stimulation by encouraging creativity, and they provide individualized consideration (attention) to followers with the goal of developing them.

The concept of exemplary leadership developed by Kouzes and Posner (1993) is also referred to as transformational leadership by the authors. They cite five leadership practices of exemplary leaders: *(1) modeling the way, (2) inspiring a shared vision, (3) challenging the process, (4) enabling others to act, and (5) encouraging the heart.*

The themes of other-focus and ethical role modeling that were surfaced in the work of Bass (1985) and Kouzes and Posner (1993) are themes that have been related in

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the literature to humility. Therefore, humility can be thought of as a core element of transformational leadership.

Humility and Charismatic Leadership

Conger (1989) observes that charismatic leadership theory emerged in the 1980s and 1990s when organizations that had grown huge and bureaucratic were faced with tumbling market shares and the resulting large numbers of employee layoffs. For the first time in modern history, companies were confronted with the imperative to be more innovative. In the wake of this turmoil, corporate executives such as Chrysler's Lee Iacocca and Apple's Steve Jobs took center stage as the champions of desperately sought business turnarounds. About these larger-than-life gurus Conger writes, "Their swashbuckling charm and risk-taking heroism were appealing" (p. xiii). This occurred at a time when the widening disenchantment with management was being supplanted by a growing interest in "the leader as a source of strategic vision and an agent of innovation" (p. xiii).

Charismatic leadership theory describes leaders who articulate a vision, empower followers to achieve the vision, demonstrate exemplary behavior, and set high performance expectations for followers (Bass, 1985; Conger and Kanungo, 1998). House and Howell (1992) extend charismatic leadership theory to distinguish between personalized charismatic leaders and socialized charismatic leaders. *Personalized charismatic leaders*, who are in concept closely related to narcissistic leaders described earlier in this review, act in their own self-interests, exploit and disregard others, and reject those who do not meet their demands. The authors suggest that, in sharp contrast, *socialized charismatic leaders* serve the larger interests of the organization and its

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members, develop and empower their followers, are follower-oriented, and are generally inclined to be altruistic.

Building on these distinctions, Nielsen, Marrone, and Slay (2010) propose a conceptual model that highlights the role of *humility* in facilitating socialized charismatic leadership. Specifically, they propose that humility enables the socialized charismatic leader to display three behaviors: *visioning, vision implementation, and communication*. They point to positive follower outcomes including identification with and trust in the leader, self-efficacy, motivation, and the willingness to sacrifice. The authors argue that the relationship between socialized charismatic leader behaviors and follower outcomes is optimized when followers perceive the leader to be *humble*.

In what might initially appear to be a lack of concurrence, Collins (2001a, 2001b) notes that effective leaders don't have to have to be strongly charismatic, like the larger-than-life corporate gurus such as Chrysler's Lee Iacocca in order to be effective. His depiction of leadership excellence as a paradoxical blend of humility and professional will implies that the extraordinary leader demonstrates those characteristics without having an inflated personal presence. He points to the quietness of the Level 5 leader, suggesting that the Level 5 leader "acts with quiet, calm determination" and "relies principally on inspired standards, not inspiring charisma, to motivate" (2001b, p. 73). Thus, it can be argued that Collins's Level 5 leaders act with *quiet charisma*—blending humility with a capacity to inspire others.

Nielsen, Marrone, and Slay (2010) cite the 1989 study conducted by Bass and Yammarino that found that leaders with higher transformational leadership scores rated their own leadership similarly to their followers' ratings. Those with lower

transformational leadership scores had larger discrepancies between their own and their

followers' ratings. This is consistent with other scholars' findings discussed earlier in this

review that showed a strong relationship between humility and the level of agreement

between self and other ratings on implicit measures of humility (Reave, 2005; Rowatt, et

al., 2006).

Thus, there is evidence in the literature that humility is an element of

transformational leadership, specifically socialized charismatic leadership. Humility can

be seen as the mechanism or set of behaviors by which the socialized charismatic leader

engages followers.

Humility and Authentic Leadership

Avolio and Gardner (2005) suggest that the concept of authentic leadership is at

the root of several positive leadership approaches, including charismatic and

transformational leadership as discussed in this review. They suggest that authentic

leaders are deeply aware of their values and beliefs, and they are confident in themselves.

Others perceive them to be genuine, reliable, and trustworthy. Moreover, they focus on

building followers' strengths, and they support followers to broaden their thinking. They

are credited with creating a positive and engaging organizational environment.

Kernis (2003) suggests that authenticity, as a psychological construct, reflects

"the unobstructed operation of one's true, or core, self in one's daily enterprise" (p. 1). In

substantial agreement, Ilies, Morgeson, and Nahrgang (2005) suggest that authenticity

reflects a general tendency to view oneself within the context of one's social environment

and to act in accordance with deeply held personal values. The authors also point to self-

awareness as a component of authenticity. They argue that self-awareness includes

knowledge of the contradictory aspects of one's self and the influence of these on one's thoughts, feelings, and actions.

Avolio and Gardner (2004) argue that the authentic leader develops authenticity via self-awareness, self-acceptance, and authentic actions and relationships. They emphasize that authentic leadership extends beyond the leader's authenticity as an individual to encompass *authentic relating* with others. They suggest that the authentic leader's relationships are characterized by (1) transparency, openness, and trust; (2) guidance toward worthy objectives; and (3) an emphasis on follower development.

The themes of other-focus, self-awareness, acceptance of one's strengths and limitations, a stable level of self-confidence, and values orientation, are all elements of humility that have emerged in the discussion of authentic leadership in the literature. Thus, it might reasonably be concluded that humility plays a central role in authentic leadership, perhaps as the intrinsic motivating factor or personal orientation that influences authentic leadership behavior.

The Positioning of Humility in Leadership Theories

Because humility is mostly thought of as a personal trait, attitude or orientation, it is not self-evident how humility interacts with other traits in a particular leadership model. In fact, there is evidence that leadership strengths *operate in combination* to engender positive outcomes. Zenger and Folkman (2002) found that leaders with identified strengths in multiple competencies were most effective. Specifically, they found that *combinations of competencies*, versus individual competencies, were more powerful predictors of effectiveness. For example, delivering feedback did not always correlate with effectiveness, whereas giving feedback while building trust did. They also

found that listening skills in isolation were not particularly valuable. On the other hand, listening skills in combination with other interpersonal skills such as being considerate and caring were effective.

Thus, it can be argued that while humility is an important leadership trait, and its role in contemporary theories of leadership is well documented, it is surely not the only trait that a leader must possess in order to be effective. More importantly, an inherent personal trait such as humility does not necessarily translate into leadership effectiveness in the absence of developmental experiences or environmental factors that shape it. So, while there is compelling evidence that humility is an important element in contemporary leadership theories, the picture of how it operates has not been rendered more clear as a result.

Chapter Summary

Humility is a complex phenomenon with a long, rich history that spans the length of recorded human history. As a personal trait, it has been variously reviled and exalted in the religious, philosophical, and scholarly literatures. Despite increased attention by scholars during the past decade and generally more favorable perceptions, there is still no clearly agreed-upon definition of humility. Moreover, despite the fact that humility can be placed in several contemporary theories of organizational leadership, gaps remain in the understanding of how it is operationalized within those leadership models. Thus, the picture of humility in varied leadership domains is not in sharp focus at this stage of inquiry. Most importantly, despite promising but still preliminary research, there is scant empirical evidence for how humility is enacted by organizational leaders, what enables its expression, and what individual and organizational outcomes it promotes. Hence, there

is still a gap in fundamental knowledge about humility as a leadership trait. It is this latter

gap that the present study addresses.

CHAPTER 3
RESEARCH METHODS

Introduction

In this chapter a detailed rationale for the research methods employed to explicate

a theory that explains how humility in organizational leaders is enacted is provided. In

brief: a qualitative versus quantitative approach was used because humility research is

still preliminary, the phenomenon of leadership is complex, and the study's purpose was

to explore and interpret the contextually rich meanings that individuals attached to their

experience as leaders. A detailed description of the specific methods employed in the

study is also provided.

Rationale for a Qualitative Approach

Quantitative research is the traditional, positivist approach for developing

empirically derived knowledge by using experimental methods, which are largely survey-

based in the leadership field. Conger (1998) asserts that quantitative studies have

significant shortcomings in the context of leadership research. First, quantitative studies

have tended to focus on a single level of analysis and have overlooked the role of intra-

psychic, group, organizational, or other environmental factors. In addition, he notes that

surveys measure attitudes about behavior versus the observed behavior itself and are

influenced by respondents' attempts to present in a socially desirable manner. Finally, he

notes that quantitative analysis is ineffective in measuring social interactions. Leadership

scholars have also found experimental and quantitative methods to be insufficient in

addressing questions about culture and meaning. Thus, qualitative research has gained

momentum as a preferred approach to studying the phenomenon of leadership (Ospina, 2004). Conger asserts that qualitative research is the preferred approach for topics as contextually rich as leadership. He argues that qualitative methods must play a central role in leadership research and that qualitative research must continue to play an important role in the investigation of leadership topics. The main reason is the extreme and enduring complexity of the leadership phenomenon itself. He argues that for the foreseeable future there will not be a point where researchers reach a complete and shared understanding of leadership, citing the multiple levels of phenomena, dynamic character, and symbolic components of leadership.

Ospina (2004) suggests that qualitative researchers of the post-modernest persuasion see qualitative research as an approach that best allows a glimpse of the world. Scholars with this aim choose qualitative approaches to understand social phenomenon from the perspective of the actors involved, to understand complex phenomena that are difficult to quantify, to understand any phenomenon in its complexity, or to advance a novel perspective of a phenomenon previously studied quantitatively but not well understood due to the narrow perspectives employed. It is the aim of the present study to attempt to understand the construct of leader humility in its complexity from the perspective of leaders themselves. Such an investigation would not have been possible using quantitative methods.

Creswell (2007) describes qualitative research as a process of inquiry into the meaning people ascribe to a social problem. He argues that the qualitative approach is appropriate when a problem needs exploration, a complex and detailed understanding is important, and when existing theory is inadequately or only partially developed. Creswell

characterizes the research process as involving collection of data in natural settings and data analysis that enables the researcher to inductively establish patterns and themes. He emphasizes the importance of inclusion of participant voices, researcher reflexivity, complex problem description and interpretation, and findings that extend the literature or make a call to action.

Elaborating on Creswell's (2007) criteria for qualitative research, a more detailed description of the appropriateness and fit of a qualitative approach for this particular study and how the author's methods aligned with Creswell's criteria is offered below:

1. *Natural settings.* The intent of this study was to explore and understand humility in organizational leaders. In order to explicate the construct of humility, it is important to understand the organizational context for participants' experiences. The need for this understanding underscores the appropriateness of the qualitative approach for this study. Moreover, the author selected participants from natural settings (organizations) that were the focus of inquiry for the present study.

2. *Participant meanings.* The very essence of qualitative inquiry is the understanding of the meaning that participants make of their experiences. In-depth interviews with 14 organizational leaders that yielded rich, thick descriptions in the form of personal narratives describing of the phenomenon of humility provided the basis of the present study's inquiry and its analysis, which is consistent with the qualitative approach.

3. *The researcher as key instrument.* Qualitative research emphasizes the lived and experienced meaning made by participants. It also emphasizes the researcher's immersion with both participants and the data. In keeping with this research

tradition, in-depth individual interviews conducted by the researcher that yielded contextually rich narratives were the method of data collection in this study. The author personally transcribed all of the participant interviews in their entirety in order to immerse herself in the conversational flow with participants and to capture nuances of meaning and emotion not readily accessed when transcriptions are done by a third party.

4. *Multiple sources of data.* Consistent with Creswell's qualitative research criteria, in-depth interviews with participants representing diverse perspectives across a broad range of private and public sector organizations in the United States and Canada were employed. Additionally, interviews with a selected sample of 17 third party observers of one of the participants were conducted. Further, the author's observations that were documented during and after each participant interview were sourced. Thus, this study aligned with Creswell's notion of multiple sources of data.

5. *Emergent design.* As stated earlier, much of the preliminary work in the area of leadership humility has been conceptual and speculative. Empirical research seeking to validate the constructs put forth by theorists has been scant. Therefore, there was no single clearly delineated theory that informed the process of inquiry for this study. However, as the process of data analysis unfolded, patterns and themes—and ultimately a substantive theory—emerged. The flexibility of the qualitative approach allows for the emergence of theory, and thus was appropriate for this study's purposes.

6. *Inductive Data analysis.* Patterns and themes were derived by organizing the in-depth interview data into increasingly more abstract units of information. Again, the lived experience of the participants was critical to generating patterns, themes, and a theory that explains how humility is enacted in leaders. All phases of the current study were aligned with the qualitative research tradition and the grounded theory method in particular.

7. *Theoretical lens.* A preliminary review of the extant literature on humility was conducted many months prior to the data analysis and thus provided a theoretical lens with which the author was able to view the humility construct. Moreover, the author's nearly fifteen years' experience as an organizational leadership consultant and coach has provided prolonged contact with leaders and their organizational contexts, thus creating another theoretical lens.

8. *Interpretive inquiry.* In qualitative inquiry the researcher's interpretations or sense-making of the data cannot be separated from one's own background, context, and prior understanding of the phenomenon under study. In fact, the researcher's perspective adds to the richness of the accounting of the data. The researcher's perspectives are augmented by the interpretations provided by participants and readers. In essence, the researcher's context of personal experience, cultural influences, gender, and history shapes all aspects of the study. The researcher's positioning oneself within, versus outside the study, is at the heart of the qualitative approach and is thus aligned with the methods incorporated into this study.

9. *Holistic account.* In the qualitative approach, the researcher takes individual units of information and up-levels them into increasingly more complex and abstract generalizations based on a holistic view of the interactions among the various data elements. In this study multiple perspectives were obtained by interviewing leaders from a broad range of organizations. Patterns and themes were identified by comparing data to data, and a theory that proposes how humility is enacted in leaders was identified. In this way, the study honored Creswell's notion of holistic account.

Grounded Theory in Qualitative Research

Ospina (2004) suggests that the aspiration of all qualitative researchers is to illuminate social meaning. It is this aspiration that propels the work of generating grounded theory. Grounded theory involves the researcher's attempt to derive a general, abstract theory of a process, action, or interaction that is *grounded* in the views of the participants. It involves multiple stages of data collection and the refinement and interrelationship of categories of information (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Charmaz (2006) suggests that grounded theory methods, as part of the qualitative approach, consist of "systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories 'grounded' in the data themselves" (p. 2). Thus, the researcher uses the data as the foundation of theory. In Charmaz's view, the theory offered by the researcher is an interpretive portrayal rather than an exact picture of the studied world. She explains that grounded theory "aims to get at varied constructions or competing definitions of the situation, as given in *action*, not merely stated in reconstructed accounts" (p. 180). Glaser (1992) describes the grounded theory as "a general methodology of analysis linked with

data collection that uses a systematically applied set of methods to generate an inductive theory about a substantive area" (p. 16).

The central research question explored in this study was complex and highly contextual in nature, addressing a phenomenon that would be difficult if not impossible to address using quantitative methods. The central question asked was: *What explains humility in organizational leaders?* The grounded theory method is uniquely suited to addressing such a question, especially when the area of inquiry is within the field of leadership (Conger, 1998). Furthermore, the central question of this study calls for a *theory*, which is substantially lacking in the literature and is needed in order to guide subsequent qualitative and quantitative research as well as inform practice in the field.

Researcher Role and Assumptions

Central to the qualitative tradition and the generation of grounded theory is the researcher's willingness to draw on one's own experiences in analyzing the research data, recognizing that personal experiences provide a valuable foundation for making comparisons and discoveries. In this vein Strauss and Corbin (1998) identify six characteristics of the grounded theory researcher, including the ability to:

1. step back and critically analyze situations

2. recognize the tendency toward bias

3. think abstractly

4. be flexible and open to helpful criticism

5. be sensitive to the words and actions of respondents

6. have a sense of absorption and devotion to the work process. (p. 7)

Indeed, as noted earlier, the richness of the qualitative approach relies on the immersion of the researcher in participants' contexts (reflexivity), the researcher's use of oneself as the instrument, and employing interpretive inquiry that integrates the researcher's personal experiences with those of participants and readers. As Charmaz (2006) elegantly states,

> We stand *within* the research process rather than above, before, or outside it . . . we are part of the world we study and the data we collect . . . We *construct* our grounded theories through our past and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives, and research practices. (p. 180)

Thus, the researcher plays a key role as a participant observer of the complexity of the phenomenon by being willing to be intimately connected to the participants, their contexts, and their lived experiences in order to make sense of and interpret the findings for the purpose of generating grounded theory. The researcher's own history, values, and assumptions are a part of the study's emergent design (Charmaz, 2006), and can be considered a strength of the approach.

Every researcher comes into an investigation with certain beliefs, biases, and assumptions. This is not a negative or even undesirable circumstance (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), but it is important that the researcher denote his or her assumptions. As context for the assumptions the author brought to this study, she has both internal and external organizational experience, which will be briefly described. Having received professional coaching training and master coach certification, she has extensive experience working as an organizational leadership consultant and executive coach to leaders in public and private sector organizations. She has worked with hundreds of

leaders at all levels of organizational leadership, most often in the capacity of executive coach and leadership program facilitator. Prior to commencing her work as an independent consultant she was an organizational leader in the behavioral health field for more than 20 years. Her combined internal and external experience led to the formation of several assumptions about organizational leaders that informed the design of the study:

1. Effective leaders are aware of themselves and others, and they use this awareness to improve their interactions

2. Effective leaders actively pursue their development as leaders—they are enthusiastic about coaching and other means to improve

3. Leadership skills are not innate—they can be learned through the active pursuit of various developmental experiences and sense-making as a result of experiencing adversity

To effectively manage one's role and assumptions as a researcher, reflexivity is important. In being reflexive, the researcher places oneself in the context of the phenomenon being studied, while being fully conscious of the biases, assumptions, and experiences brought to the study. Charmaz (2006) describes reflexivity as,

> the researcher's scrutiny of his or her research experience, decisions, and interpretations in ways that bring the researcher into the process and allow the *reader* (emphasis added) to assess how and to what extent the researcher's interests, positions, and assumptions influenced inquiry. A reflexive stance informs how the researcher conducts his or her research, relates to the research participants, and represents them in written reports. (pp. 188–189)

The author has engaged a reflexive stance via peer debriefing throughout the data analysis and report writing phases of the project, use of analytical memos, and through transparency in reporting the findings of the present study.

Limitations

As stated earlier, the questions in this study are broad in nature and represent complex phenomena. While the qualitative paradigm and the grounded theory method in particular are well suited to the questions explored in this study, there were limitations to this study's design. They include: single participant interviews, the researcher's limited experience with qualitative research and the grounded theory method, and the potential for alternate interpretations of the study's findings. These limitations are, at the core, issues of quality or trustworthiness. The methods of verification with which these limitations have been addressed within the context of the current study are described later in this chapter.

Delimitations

The trustworthiness procedures referenced in the limitations section above and described more fully later in this chapter are measures to ensure the quality or veracity of the study's findings. Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe such procedures as means for generating confidence in the study. The delimitations also serve as quality control methods by defining the study's boundaries. A high quality study is designed to address a specific question in relationship to a specific population. With that goal in mind, this study was delimited in three ways: (1) participants held or had recently held mid-level or senior level leadership roles, (2) participants had held more than one leadership role and thus could be characterized as seasoned leaders, and (3) participants were selected from a

range of diverse public and private sector organizations across the United States and Canada.

Selection and Care of Participants

The selection of the participants for inclusion in the present study followed the qualitative research traditions, especially grounded theory methodology. At the outset of a qualitative (a.k.a., naturalistic) study the researcher determines the contextual qualities necessary for participants to be included in the study. Then, throughout the study, the researcher purposefully selects participants who exhibit those qualities. Lincoln and Guba (1985) explain:

> In naturalistic investigations, which are tied so intimately to contextual factors, the purpose of sampling will most often be to include as much information as possible, in all of its various ramifications and constructions; hence, maximum variation sampling will usually be the sampling mode of choice. The object . . . is not to focus on the similarities that can be developed into generalizations, but to detail the many specifics that give the context its unique flavor. A second purpose is to generate the information upon which the emergent design and grounded theory can be based. (p. 201)

In grounded theory as described by Glaser (1978), selection occurs concurrently with data collection, rather than being restrained until each case is fully analyzed (contrary to what might be done in other qualitative approaches). One unit is selected at a time, but selection may occur before the current unit is fully analyzed. In the present study participants were selected for inclusion throughout the process of data coding and analysis. In this manner the author honored the principles of theoretical sampling. As

Charmaz (2006) explains, "The purpose of theoretical sampling is to obtain data to help you explicate your categories. When your categories are full, they reflect qualities of your respondents' experiences and provide a useful analytic handle for understanding them" (p. 100). She cautions that theoretical sampling is relevant only to conceptual and theoretical development, not population representation or generalizability. She adds, "Whereas quantitative researchers want to use their data to make statistical inferences about their target populations, grounded theorists aim to fit their emerging theories with their data" (p. 101).

Another important aspect of participant selection in grounded theory is minimal criteria for inclusion. The grounded theorist operates with fewer preliminary conditions than in quantitative research and even in many qualitative studies. Glaser (1978) explains,

> Selective sampling refers to the calculated decision to sample a specific locale according to a preconceived but 'reasonable' initial set of dimensions (such as time, space, identity, or power) which are worked out in advance for a study. The analyst who uses theoretical sampling cannot know in advance precisely what to sample for and where it will lead him. (p. 37)

As described earlier, the delimiting factors of this study included not only the requirement that participants be current or recent mid-level or senior level leaders in public or private sector organizations in the United States or Canada, but also that they had held more than one leadership role in the same or different organizations. Thus, they could be described as seasoned leaders. The reason for these conditions was to assure that participants had the necessary experience to address the questions to be explored. Newly placed or emerging leaders were not included in the study due to the aforementioned

factors. Participants' critical reflections related to their leadership experiences were the central interest of this study.

In keeping with both the qualitative paradigm and the standards for grounded theory research, no further inclusion criteria were determined in advance, but instead, were allowed to emerge from the data during the data analysis process.

Identification and Selection of Participants for Inclusion

The selection of participants for the present study was in accordance with qualitative research traditions in general and the grounded theory method in particular. At the outset of a qualitative (naturalistic) study the researcher determines the contextual qualities necessary for inclusion of participants. Then, throughout the study, the researcher purposefully selects participants who exhibit those qualities. To reiterate, Lincoln and Guba (1985) explain:

> In naturalistic investigations, which are tied so intimately to contextual factors, the purpose of sampling will most often be to include as much information as possible, in all of its various ramifications and constructions; hence, maximum variation sampling will usually be the sampling mode of choice. The object . . . is not to focus on the similarities that can be developed into generalizations, but to detail the many specifics that give the context its unique flavor. A second purpose is to generate the information upon which the emergent design and grounded theory can be based. (p. 201)

Participants were identified via direct invitation of the author or by referral from close colleagues of the author. At the time of the invitation to participate in interviews for the study, all participants were serving in or had recently served in mid-level or senior level

leadership roles in public or private sector organizations in the United States or Canada. All had held more than one leadership role; most had held a number of progressively more responsible leadership roles in the same or different organizations.

Participant selection occurred in two phases. First, an initial screening was performed to ensure that participants met the delimitation criteria. An invitation was sent by email to determine each participant's eligibility and personal interest in being interviewed. If the participant met the inclusion criteria and expressed an interest in being interviewed, the informed consent document was forwarded for the participant to sign. Upon receipt of the consent form, the researcher forwarded email communication to the participant to support the participant's readiness for the formal interview. The email communication confirmed the purpose and focus of the interview, and it gave the participant time to reflect on the topic for discussion in advance of the interview. This was deemed to be important inasmuch as the formal interviews were designed to explore a complex phenomenon that participants may not have thought about previously.

There are no limits set on the number of participants or their representativeness of a larger population, as with quantitative studies, in a grounded theory study. Charmaz (2006) advises, "Initial sampling in grounded theory is where you start, whereas theoretical sampling directs you where to go" (p. 100). In this study a goal was set to include a minimum of 15 participants, allowing that the number might need to be increased in order to achieve categorical saturation. As it turned out, categorical saturation was achieved with 14 participants. 17 focused interviews with first and second level reports of one of the participants were also conducted as a triangulation procedure.

Participants from multiple organizations with mid-level or senior level leadership responsibility were sought, including those from public and private sector organizations in the United States and Canada. Participants were selected because of the depth of their experience with the phenomenon of interest—they had held multiple leadership roles in one or more organizations. Moreover, each individual had participated in highly individualized leadership development such as coaching. More specific detail regarding the identity of organizations, states, or provinces where they were located, as well as actual titles of participants, are *not* reported in this document. This is in order to protect participants' privacy as well as sensitive information about specific participants or organizations.

Inclusion of participants from a range of different organizations and organizational levels of leadership provided the variation necessary to support theory development. This enabled the exploration of similarities and differences among leaders in different contexts holding different levels of leadership responsibility. As an additional safeguard for participants, no more than one individual from any given organization was included. The diversity of participants and organizations thus served as a basis of protection of participants' privacy.

Safeguards for Participants

There was minimal to no risk to participants through their participation in the study. The minimal risk involved in participation might be the potential that participant's identity or that of his or her organization is identifiable through statements that could be recognized by a third party. Every effort was made to avoid this possibility by eliminating references to actual organizations or participants' real names. Additionally, a

careful examination of the final report was performed by the researcher and her advisor to ensure that no identifiable information is contained herein.

Protection of Participant Confidentiality

The data received from participants included sensitive information, particularly the information shared by those who had worked for *bad bosses*. However, readers of this study should not be able to ascertain which participant or even which organization relates to a given statement. Specifically, neither participants nor their organizations are identified in the dissertation document. Only the author has knowledge of the identities of participants and the organizations they are from. Participant identities were separated from the collected data prior to its compilation for this dissertation. All written materials and audio recordings were stored in files on a desktop computer, which is protected by password access and maintained in a locked office to which only the author has access. The data will be maintained in this manner until it is destroyed by deleting the information from the author's computer system. The informed consent form signed by participants indicated that the interview data would be maintained by the author for future analysis and publication. Any materials printed from the computer will be destroyed through shredding. Names, employers, position titles, and other potential identifying information were disguised or deleted to protect anonymity. Thus, participant privacy has been preserved and protected.

Data Collection

Data were collected via telephone interviews. The following outlines the steps observed in data collection and analysis:

1. Initial contact with potential participant

2. Participant completion of informed consent document

3. Researcher contact with participant to schedule the telephone interview

4. Follow-up e-mail communication with participant to clarify purpose and focus of the interview

5. Scheduling of interview at the convenience of the participant

6. Formal interview with participant

7. Interview conducted (interviews were typically 60 minutes in duration. Computer assisted audio recordings were made, and extensive memos were written by the researcher during and after the interviews)

8. Interview input summarized and reviewed with participant during the course of and at end of interview as an immediate method of verification

9. *Interviews transcribed personally by the researcher*

As discussed in chapter 2 of this dissertation, direct interview inquiry into the phenomenon of humility is challenging due to the possibility of participant presentation bias as well as the propensity for truly humble individuals to be hesitant about proclaiming or even acknowledging their humility. The researcher attempted to mitigate these factors by inquiring about topics that didn't speak directly to humility, such as lessons learned from working with bad bosses, experiences of missteps and setbacks, the impact of developmental experiences, and processes for developing skills for higher level leadership roles. Topics such as these promoted a degree of comfort on the part of participants by staying clear of direct inquiry about their humility. Additionally, because the interviews averaged at least an hour in duration, there was ample opportunity for the

researcher to establish good rapport that enabled her to gently probe specific areas for nuanced meaning.

Data Analysis

As context for this section it should be noted that data analytic methods for the present study were informed by the work of Charmaz (2006), Creswell (2007), Glaser (1978, 1992), Glaser and Strauss (1967), and Lincoln and Guba (1985). Data analysis in the qualitative tradition is both simultaneous and interactive; i.e., analysis occurs concurrently with data sampling, and the analysis informs further data sampling. The latter is referred to as theoretical sampling (Creswell, 2007; Glaser, 1978). Glaser (1978) explains the relationship between data analysis and theoretical sampling:

> The general procedure of theoretical sampling . . . is to elicit codes from raw data from the start of data collection through constant comparative analysis as the data pour in. Then to use the codes to direct further data collection, from which the codes are further theoretically developed with respect to their various properties and their connections with other codes until saturated. (p. 37)

Informed by the researcher's theoretical lens, the analysis begins with identification of conceptual categories, then moves to describing the properties of these categories and on to understanding the relationships among them. Theoretical data sampling continues to occur simultaneously with the coding process until saturation of categories and properties takes place, or until no new information is emerging. Glaser (1978) explains, "Theoretical saturation of a category occurs when in coding and analyzing both no new properties emerge and the same properties continually emerge as

one goes through the full extent of the data" (p. 53). Glaser describes two types of

grounded theory codes: *substantive and theoretical:*

> There are basically two types of codes to generate: substantive and theoretical.
>
> Substantive codes conceptualize the empirical substance of the area of research.
>
> Theoretical codes conceptualize how the substantive codes may relate to each
>
> other as hypotheses to be integrated into the theory. (p. 54)

The procedures of open and selective coding are employed to develop substantive codes

while theoretical coding is used for theoretical codes. Glaser includes open coding and

selective coding as procedures within substantive coding.

Open coding is, "coding the data in every way possible" (p. 56). In the open

coding phase of substantive coding, the data must be analyzed line by line. According to

Glaser, this is necessary to verify and saturate categories. Otherwise, he argues, "the

emerging theory does not fully fit or work for the data" (p. 56). The analyst continues to

employ open coding until a core process emerges, resisting the temptation to become

selective too quickly or to apply preconceived codes.

Selective coding is the second coding phase of substantive coding and is

essentially a sorting process through which the analyst delimits the codes to core

categories and their properties. As Glaser (1992) explains, "To selectively code for a core

variable, then, means that the analyst delimits his coding to only those variables that

relate to the core variable in sufficiently significant ways to be used in a parsimonious

theory" (p. 61).

Theoretical coding is the final phase of the data analysis in the grounded theory

method. In this phase the analyst observes the systematic relationship of the previously

generated categories to the central phenomenon being investigated (Creswell, 2007). In the course of theoretical coding, the analyst conceptualizes the hypothetical theoretical relationships between substantive codes.

Theory generation follows the creation of substantive and theoretical codes. It proceeds when all categories and their properties have become saturated, and a core category has emerged. This may include the creation of a story line that connects the categories (Creswell, 2007).

A key procedure in Glaser's model of theory generation is analyst memos. "Memos are the theorizing write-up of ideas about codes and their relationships as they strike the analyst while coding" (Glaser, 1978, p. 82). Glaser advises that the researcher use memos in each phase of the analytical process—from data collection through the various iterations of coding. Memos enable the analyst to make constant data comparisons, lending trustworthiness to the generated theory. Memos can also guide theoretical sampling.

Coding proceeds until a point is reached where all categories and their properties have become saturated, and a core category has emerged. A theory emerges from the data when the researcher has developed trust in the theory, and when she sees that it fits, works, and is modifiable (Glaser, 1992). Glaser and Strauss (1967) explain how the researcher will know the theory is complete:

> When the researcher is convinced that his conceptual framework forms a systematic theory, that it is a reasonably accurate statement of the matters studied, that it is couched in a form possible for other to use in studying a similar area, and

that he can publish his results with confidence, then he is near the end of his

research. (pp. 224–225)

The trustworthiness of the theory developed in this study was assessed by the

author, her advisors, and peer reviewers applying Glaser's (1992) criteria: (1) fit, (2)

work, (3) relevance, and (4) modifiability:

If a grounded theory is carefully induced from the substantive area, its categories

and their properties will fit with the realities under study in the eyes of subjects,

practitioners, and researchers in the area. If a grounded theory works it will

explain the major variations in behavior. If it fits and works the grounded theory

has achieved relevance. The theory itself . . . should be readily modifiable when

new data present variations in emergent properties and categories. (p. 15)

It should be noted that while the researcher generates and reports theory, it is ultimately

the reader who decides if the presented theory explains all of the variation in behavior

and if the study is trustworthy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Theory development for the present study proceeded generally along the pathway

laid out by Glaser (1992), through the dynamic and generative phases of data collection,

comparative analysis, substantive coding, and theoretical coding.

Methods of Verification

As stated earlier, the questions in this study are broad in nature and represent

complex phenomena. While the qualitative paradigm and the grounded theory method in

particular are well suited to the questions explored in this study, there were limitations to

this study's design, including single participant interviews, the researcher's limited

experience with qualitative research and the grounded theory method, and the potential

for alternate interpretations of the study's findings. As noted earlier, these limitations are, at the core, issues of quality or trustworthiness. The methods of verification with which these limitations have been addressed within the context of the current study are described below.

Creswell (2007) states, "My framework for thinking about validation in qualitative research is to suggest that researchers employ accepted strategies to document the 'accuracy' of their studies" (p. 207). *Five of Lincoln and Guba's (1985) suggested methods were employed in this study: (1) rich, thick description; (2) clarification of researcher bias at the outset of the study; (3) peer debriefing; (4) member checks; and (5) triangulation.*

Rich, thick description is a method for enabling readers to make decisions regarding the transferability of research findings to other settings, specifically to determine if the findings are transferable because of shared characteristics (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). According to Creswell (2007), reliability plays a minor role in qualitative research, while validity is seen as important. Trustworthiness is addressed by utilizing rich, thick descriptions to convey the lived experiences of participants as well as any reported negative or discrepant information that runs counter to the themes. *The author was able to develop rich, thick descriptions due to the number and depth of participant interviews and interviews with employees of one of the participants that addressed the complex phenomenon of humility. Rich, thick descriptions were also enabled by the delimitation of diversity of participants and organizations representing a broad range of public and private sector organizations in the United States and Canada that were included in the study.*

Clarification of researcher bias. In clarifying one's biases, experiences, assumptions, orientations, or prejudices that have likely shaped the interpretation and approach to the study, the researcher enables readers to understand outside elements that might have been introduced into the analysis. *This researcher's biases, etc. were discussed earlier in this chapter.*

Peer debriefing is defined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as "a process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytic session and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain implicit within the inquirer's mind" (p. 308). *Bernadette Howlett, PhD, served in the role of external advisor for this study. Dr. Howlett was a graduate faculty advisor to students writing theses and dissertations in a prior academic role, and she conducted a grounded theory study for her own doctoral dissertation. As such, she has expertise with the research methods employed in this study.* A limitation mentioned at the start of this section was that of the author's limited experience with qualitative research and the grounded theory method. The implications of this are errors or omissions in design or implementation that might have occurred as a result of inexperience. *The expertise of the author's external advisor served as a check on the author's methods. Furthermore, the author obtained input from several peer reviewers who hold doctoral degrees in fields related to that of the present study. Lastly, the author was guided by Glaser's (1992) criteria for determining if a grounded theory has been established: (1) fit, (2) work, (3) relevance, and (4) modifiability:*

> If a grounded theory is carefully induced from the substantive area, its categories
> and their properties will fit with the realities under study in the eyes of subjects,

practitioners, and researchers in the area. If a grounded theory works it will explain the major variations in behavior. If it fits and works the grounded theory has achieved relevance. The theory itself should not be written in stone or as a 'pet' it should be readily modifiable when new data present variations in emergent properties and categories. (p. 15)

Member checks. Lincoln and Guba (1985) define member checks as a process whereby, "data, analytic categories, interpretations, and conclusions are tested with members of those stake holding groups from whom the data were originally collected" (p. 314). *This procedure was performed during and at the conclusion of each interview and as a follow-up with selected participants.*

Triangulation. Triangulation is the process by which the researcher makes use of multiple and different data sources, methods, investigators, and theories to provide corroborating evidence for her findings. It is typically done to shed light on a particular theme or perspective (Creswell, 2007). *The author used several methods of triangulation in the present study: triangulation with the extant literature on humility, selecting a diverse group of participants from a range of public and private sector organizations in the United States and Canada (thereby increasing the credibility of the generated theory), reviews by the author's external advisor and several peer reviewers who hold PhDs in fields related to the author's, a member check with one of the study participants, and third party observations of one of the participants included in the study.*

Finally, to reiterate the point made earlier, the ultimate determination of trustworthiness of the author's findings is made by readers rather than by the author or

her advisors. This study is presented for critique and discussion among peers in the scholarly and practice communities in organizational development.

Chapter Summary

The broad nature of the research question explored in this study called for a qualitative approach. The grounded theory method specifically allows the researcher to develop theory inductively, based on participant data.

Interview data were obtained via telephone interviews with leaders from public and private sector organizations across the continental United States and Canada. Participants were selected for inclusion in the analysis through a process of theoretical sampling. 14 participant interviews were included as well as 17 interviews of first and second level followers of one of the participants. Selection criteria for the primary participants included the requirements that, at the time of the interview, they were in a mid-level or senior level leadership role (or had recently been in such a role), had held more than one leadership role, and were from different organizations.

Observational data were collected from the interviews, which were audio recorded and later transcribed in their entirety by the author. Theory development proceeded generally along the pathway laid out by Glaser (1992), through the dynamic and generative phases of data collection, successive phases of substantive and theoretical coding, and comparative analysis leading to the generation of a grounded theory. Additionally, five of Lincoln and Guba's (1985) methods of verification *(1) rich, thick description; (2) clarification of researcher bias at the outset of the study; (3) peer debriefing; (4) member checks; and (5) triangulation* were employed by the author. The trustworthiness of the theory developed in this study was assessed by the author, her

faculty advisor, her external advisor, and several peer reviewers. This study is presented

for critique and discussion among peers in the scholarly and practice communities in

organizational development.

CHAPTER 4
FINDINGS

Introduction

In this chapter, the author reports on the insights and perspectives of study participants on the attributes, actions, enablers and outcomes of leader humility. The findings that emerged from the rich, thick descriptions offered by participants validate and elaborate on the current understanding of humility as a leadership trait. Using an interpretivist approach, the author provides a contextually nuanced description of how humility is enacted and enabled in a leadership role as well as the individual and organizational outcomes it promotes. The richness of the lived experience of leaders as revealed through in-depth interviews tells a story about how humility is experienced and expressed in organizations. Illustrative interview excerpts with the study's participants are presented here as a means of inviting the reader into the humble leader experience. Further, excerpts from the interviews of followers of one of the participants are presented.

As noted earlier, the richness of the qualitative approach relies on the immersion of the researcher in participants' contexts (reflexivity), the researcher's using oneself as the instrument, and the researcher's employing interpretive inquiry that integrates the her personal experiences with those of participants and readers. Readers are reminded of Charmaz's (2006) remarks in this regard:

We stand *within* the research process rather than above, before, or outside it . . .

we are part of the world we study and the data we collect . . . We *construct* our

grounded theories through our past and present involvements and interactions

with people, perspectives, and research practices." (p. 180)

Thus, the researcher plays a key role as a participant observer of the complexity of the

phenomenon by being willing to be intimately connected to the participants, their

contexts, and their lived experiences in order to make sense of and interpret the findings

for the purpose of generating grounded theory.

Research Questions Addressed in the Present Study

The central research question explored in this study was: *What explains humility*

in organizational leaders? The related questions, which allowed the central question to

be more fully explored, were:

1. What are the attributes of humility in leaders?

2. How is humility enacted by leaders?

3. What enables humility in leaders?

4. What are the individual and organizational outcomes that humility promotes?

Each of these questions will be addressed in the following discussion.

Development of the Theoretical Framework and Grounded Theory

Insights gleaned from constant comparative analysis of the present study's data

are integrated into a theoretical framework (shown in Table 1 on Page 139). The

framework illustrates the attributes, actions, enablers, and outcomes of humility. The

study's coded and analyzed findings fell into four major theoretical categories: *(1)*

humble leader attributes, (2) humble leader actions, (3) humble leader enablers, and (4)

humble leader outcomes.

A grounded theory emerged from the assimilated findings from the data. The

proposed theory explains how humility is enacted by leaders in organizations—

specifically, the actions humble leaders demonstrate that distinguish them in their

leadership roles and that underscore their effectiveness. The study's findings are

triangulated with findings from the scholarly literature on humility and verified by

selected member checks, follower perceptions, and peer reviews as methods of

triangulation discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

As an overview, the framework illustrated in Table1 (shown on page 150) lists the

attributes, actions, enablers, and outcomes of humility in leaders. The model also shows

that humility promotes individual, interpersonal, and organizational outcomes. Each

theoretical component of the model will now be discussed in greater detail along with

selected participant quotes to add depth and dimension to the reported findings. The

discussion will be followed by the author's presentation of the grounded theory that

emerged from the theoretical framework.

Presentation and Discussion of Findings

Theoretical Framework Category 1: The Attributes of Humility

Within the category of *Attributes of Humility* three sub-constructs emerged from

the data: *self-awareness, other-focus, and resilience.*

Self-awareness

From the review of the scholarly literature on humility and the analysis of the

interviews for the present study, it appears that *self-awareness*, which has also been

associated with both self-acceptance and self-confidence, is an important attribute of humility. In the context of the present study, self-awareness was captured in the theoretical framework (shown in Table 1 on Page 139) to include the sub-constructs of awareness of one's strengths and limitations, accurate self-appraisal, openness to feedback and learning, healthy self-confidence, and vulnerability.

Several participants commented about the importance of self-awareness, particularly as it relates to a leader's being open to feedback and learning.

A male participant remarked on the *importance of knowing yourself*:

Another philosophy that I've developed is that the better you know yourself, the better you're able to understand others. If you don't understand yourself and what makes you tick and why you think the way you do and the psychology of your being, then there's no way you can understand others.

Another male participant spoke to the importance of *knowing one's strengths and limitations:*

You know, I know what my strengths are, and I also know what my weaknesses are, and if I know somebody can cover me on my weaknesses in the organization, then I want them to do that. I'm not threatened that they're better at that than I am.

He also spoke about *being open to feedback* when he gets into *persona*:

The one thing that the guys that I have around me, my closest people you know, the moment they see me doing something that's a little out of the ordinary for me, boy, they don't hesitate to let me know it. They do it in a fun way, but we're not against making fun of each other when we're stepping out of our kind of persona.

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Another male participant described the importance of *being open to learning*:

> Absolutely [you have to] be willing to learn. It opens you up as a leader. All
> leaders should be that way, no matter whether you've been doing that particular
> job for twenty years or twenty minutes. But when you get exposed to a very new
> area it really gets you back to the point where you ultimately, you really just don't
> jump to conclusions. You don't rely on those past experiences. You really do
> expect to be able to have people who can actually walk you through the process
> and why you make decisions the way that you do.

And another male participant spoke about the *importance of being open to feedback*:

> I think this is a very hard one for people—companies pay lots of money to get this
> —and that is to have good constructive criticism—to find someone who can say
> to you, 'You know, you are really out to lunch on this particular way of doing
> things,' and to be able to say it without fear of losing their job, losing the
> friendship, whatever.

It is apparent from the responses by participants that openness to feedback and learning
represents a primary means by which a leader maintains a healthy level of self-awareness.
These findings are supported in the scholarly literature. For example, Tangney (2000,
2002) suggests that humility involves:

- An accurate sense of one's abilities and achievements

- The ability to acknowledge one's mistakes, imperfections, gaps in
  knowledge, and limitations (often with reference to a Higher Power)

- Openness to new ideas, contradictory information and advice, and

- An ability to keep one's abilities and accomplishments in perspective

Further, Exline and Geyer (2004) suggest that humility involves a nondefensive willingness to see the self accurately, including one's strengths and limitations, and Morris, et al. (2005) characterize humility as a personal orientation that is grounded in a willingness to see the self accurately.

Other-Focus

The construct of *other-focus* was captured in the theoretical framework (shown in Table 1 on Page 139) as a service orientation, a higher purpose, and a heightened sense of responsibility to others.

Participants in the present study spoke about being keenly aware that the world doesn't revolve around them. In fact, several made the point that it's not about them, but about the organizational mission. They spoke about having a higher purpose and creating a legacy so that the organization will continue with capable successors long after they're gone, and about being a servant in support of others' growth. Participants were clear and compelling as they spoke about their roles in service to a purpose that transcended their self-interests. Their excitement for their work, the depth of their commitment, and their sincere desire to serve were conveyed frequently and without hesitation in their interactions with the author. They were quite believable. Interestingly, the author noted that their energy and enthusiasm were most pronounced when they were speaking about others, or about the organization, and much less so when they were speaking about themselves.

A male participant shared these remarks about *being a servant*:

I think there's a tendency at times with people when they move up that they think it's about themselves as opposed to its being about others. You know I really

believe that if you really understand leadership—the more that you're responsible for it means that you're just more of a servant leader to more people.

Another male participant offered this about the *responsibility for helping others*:

Your responsibility is to be able to help them perform, be able to help them move forward in their careers, be able to help move the company forward. It's not about you personally, but it's about how you now have more responsibility to help more people be able to thrive and to move forward.

And another male participant spoke about *being a part of a mission—a bigger purpose:*

I mean we all view this as our life's work. It's a mission, it's a passion . . . And so fortunately the folks I've hired over the years . . . we've always taken a look at this as being an ownership . . . the bottom line is the focus is on the organization. It's not about us. I mean this morning I'm sitting with my CFO, and we're having a conversation about, actually thinking now, ten years from now, who are going to be our next leaders because we're both committed to make sure that my legacy is not my time here. My legacy I hope is going to be that I set the organization up in a situation where another generation is going to be able to keep this thing moving in a positive direction.

Other-focus, as an attribute of humility, is well supported in the literature. For example, Collins (2001a) speaks about this attribute in his description of Level 5 leaders in his good to great companies. He argues that truly exceptional leaders are able to "subjugate their own needs to the greater ambition of something larger and more lasting than themselves" (p. 75). In this context the leader's humility can be viewed as the basis of a higher calling that can sustain and inspire in challenging circumstances, suggesting a clear and compelling personal benefit of humility. He also notes their compelling

modesty, their calm and quiet determination, their commitment to multi-generational organizational growth, and a propensity for self-reflection.

Similarly, Morris et al. (2005) point to the humble individual's capacity for *transcendence,* which they define as the acceptance of something greater than oneself and understanding the small part one plays in the universe, and accompanying this, an appreciation of others and their inherent worth. Tangney (2002) suggests that having humility speaks to one's being other-focused, and that in having this attribute, the individual places oneself in the broader community, *not* at the center of one's world. And Owens, et al. (2010) suggest that humility may enable an individual to "transcend the comparative-competitive model of self-evaluation, allowing the humble person to view others as exemplars from whom she might learn" (p. 7).

Resilience

As an attribute of humility, resilience was represented in the theoretical framework as openness to risk and change, staying on purpose in the midst of adversity, letting go, and staying true to one's self. The resilience that participants talked about was deeply personal, and they characterized it as not only an important survival tool in times of difficulty, but also as a mechanism for adapting to change. Being open to risk and taking chances and letting go were clearly articulated themes in participants' remarks about resilience, as was persistence in the face of obstacles. These leaders spoke about the value of being open to risk-taking for the sake of their learning and growth. They also spoke with conviction about their refusal to allow challenging circumstances to get the best of them.

A male participant summed up the *importance of being open to risk in the form of*

challenging developmental assignments:

> When you take a look at it particularly from a company perspective, you increase
>
> your value by being able to understand a wider breadth of the organization, and to
>
> do that you often times have to be able to take on some responsibilities where
>
> you're not necessarily gonna be the expert at that point in time . . . And being
>
> willing to take a chance on some things that may not necessarily be safe,
>
> absolutely broadens your perspective on the company and ultimately gives you
>
> more value to the rest of the organization.

A female participant described *staying on purpose* in the midst of chaos and uncertainty:

> Someone's acting like a terrorist doesn't mean that you have to believe that you
>
> have to be at the effect of that . . . And it is really difficult. I mean it's not a very
>
> pleasant experience, and I found that what I had to do was to keep at the forefront
>
> what I was trying to achieve . . . and what was important. As long as I kept those
>
> two things at the forefront, it seemed to work really well for me.

Another female participant described *letting go and staying true to herself* in the midst of

adversity:

> What I have really learned is that really asking myself the question, repeatedly, if
>
> I get upset over something or if I feel disappointed about something or angry over
>
> something, am I upset because this is something that I feel like I'm taking
>
> personally, and if it is, how could I just let go of that and move forward. Because
>
> if it's something that a decision was being made for the right thing for the
>
> company, if information that's being exposed that's the right thing for the

company, you know, if a change is occurring that's the right thing for the

company, I might not like it personally, but I need to let go of it so that when stuff

happens around me I'm not going to shift with the wind. I'm gonna stay true to

what I am.

And another male participant described his *persistence* in the midst of a negative climate

in his organization:

As hostile as it was, I actually don't recall that there was ever a point where I

wanted to get out of there because I always felt that this was so intense, this has

got to come to an end one way or another. So I kind of felt that it was so over the

top that it was almost ok—that there was going to be a light at the end of the

tunnel.

The literature clearly documents resilience as an attribute of humility. For

example, Collins (2001a, 2001b) suggests that the humble Level 5 leaders in his research

exemplify both personal humility and strong professional will. This suggests the leader's

resilience in the face of obstacles, especially as it creates the performance that sidelines

competitors over time. Similarly, Exline and Geyer (2004) argue that humility does not

equate to weakness. They purport that that humility involves a nondefensive willingness

to see the self accurately, including strengths *and* limitations. They argue, "humility is

likely to stem from a sense of security in which feelings of personal worth are based on

stable, reliable sources (e.g., feeling unconditionally loved; belief in value of all life)

rather than on transient, external sources such as achievement, appearance, or social

approval" (p. 97). The security that the authors reference implies emotional resilience in

the face of vulnerability when confronted with risk, thus offering support for the attribute of resilience seen in the participants for the present study.

Vera and Rodrigue-Lopez (2004) propose that humility provides value to firms "through the processes of organizational learning, service, and the development of *organizational resilience*" (p. 396). The implication of these authors' findings is that resilient leaders may serve as exemplars, modeling the way for others, and fostering organizational resilience. In this same vein, Collins 2001b) suggests that humble leaders "act with quiet, calm determination" and they rely on "inspired standards, not inspiring charisma, to motivate others" (p. 73).

Owens (2009) found that humility has a compensatory effect on performance for those with lower general mental ability. In other words, humility may be a factor in the persistence of these individuals, and this persistence may lead to enhanced performance over the long term. His findings are suggestive of a significant degree of resilience in the humble individual.

Theoretical Framework Category 2: How Humility Is Enacted by Leaders

Findings from participant interviews for the present study illuminated four primary ways that humility is enacted by leaders. They are captured in the theoretical framework (shown in Table 1 on Page 139) as *valuing others, empowering others, exercising right uses of power, and buffering.*

As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, the literature on humility is less descriptive of how humility is enacted in leaders than it is about humble leader attributes. This is due in large measure to the still preliminary stage of research on the phenomenon of humility as well as the fact that much of the early work has been conceptual and theoretical in nature.

Specifically, there is scant evidence for how humility is enacted by leaders in organizations. This gap in the literature informed a need for greater understanding, and thus illuminated the focus of the present study. And so the author is pleased to be able to provide insights into humble leader actions with the hope that they will inform the scholarly and practitioner communities and provide guidance for further research.

Valuing Others

The construct of valuing others was captured for the theoretical framework (shown in Table 1 on Page 139) in the actions of building relationships, valuing diverse perspectives, appreciating others, demonstrating individualized care and concern, guiding others, and speaking of others in appreciative and empathic ways. Insights gleaned from participants strongly suggest that valuing others is a critical action of the humble leader. In fact, it can be argued that this characteristic might serve as the basis of all of the other ways that humility is enacted by leaders.

Interestingly, one of the most remarkable indications of a leader's humility that emerged in the interviews for the present study was the manner in which leaders described their relationships with bad bosses. Despite the painful misgivings, setbacks, and disappointments in working for individuals who would very likely match the description of destructive narcissistic bosses, participants referenced these individuals with the same valuing and respect as they did others. They also expressed empathy for them.

Noteworthy was the clear valuing of diversity of thought by participants. Several participants spoke with excitement about their active pursuit of diverse opinions. Most

importantly, it is clear from the interviews that humble leaders value everyone's

contributions, and they see it as their responsibility to serve and support their employees.

A male participant described *valuing diversity* on the team:

> Now the players involved were, just out of interest, a young man from Columbia
>
> who I transferred from our company in Columbia, a Jewish girl from Minnesota .
>
> . . an English guy from Manchester, a young lady from Port of Spain, Trinidad —
>
> all different cultures, people from vastly different walks of life, vastly different
>
> religious traditions — all coming together and speaking with me on this subject.

A male participant remarked on *expressing care and concern for employees:*

> Honesty, integrity, being direct and caring—a sense of caring. Not to the point
>
> where you care more about people than the results, but you gotta care about the
>
> team around you. They gotta feel that you have some of their interests at heart . . .
>
> They have to know that it's not all about the money. It's about your overall
>
> success—how you want to be fulfilled in your job. What are you trying to get?
>
> Why are you here? And give me an opportunity to help you do that while we're
>
> focused on achieving the company goals, the company results or objectives, the
>
> goals we set forth.

A female participant described *having empathy for a previous bad boss:*

> Well, just as we were talking, what crossed my mind was [a question]: when is
>
> the boss bad and when is the match between the person and their assets and
>
> constraints a really bad match? And what does that do to people under the
>
> extreme pressure that leadership puts on them? So I think that some of the bosses
>
> I worked for where afterwards I said to myself: that's what I don't want to do or
>
> that's what I don't want to be, may have been put in situations where they just

didn't have in their asset drawer the appropriate assets to manage the position, and

I think we all resort to desperate measure when we're in those situations, and I

think that some of the behaviors we resort to make life very, very difficult for

other people and have a huge impact in the organization.

A male participant argued the importance of *valuing diverse perspectives*

I always tried to encourage contrarians. I wanted to make sure I didn't just have

yes men and women around me, and I tried to ensure that on every management

team I had what I call a 'shit disturber' who would disagree with just about

everything everyone was saying, just to (laughing) just to promote a more positive

dialogue.

The same male participant spoke about *building relationships*

Every three months I would take the group away for a three day offsite and just

build a relationship with them and create an agenda of both business and

socialization where we could get to know each other and where I could create an

environment, and create a process and agenda where people could perform their

best and feel they could speak out.

Tangney (2002) references the observation of Means et al. (1990) that humility is

an "increase in the valuation of others and not a decrease in the valuation of oneself" (p.

413). Owens (2009) describes humility as a developmental orientation that is associated

with willingness to view oneself accurately, teachability, appreciation of others'

strengths, and low self-focus. Tangney (2000) also points to Templeton's (1997)

argument that "humility represents wisdom" . . . "knowing that you are smart but not *all-*

knowing" (p. 412). The implication that could be drawn from this is that wisdom may

operate as the process by which the humble leader comes to value others.

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In agreement with Tangney, Vera and Rodriguez (2004) argue that humble leaders show respect and understand that they are not superior to those around them. And Kouzes and Posner (1993) observe that servant leaders visibly appreciate and value their followers. The appreciation of others' strengths and contributions is widely recognized by scholars as a key characteristic of humble leaders. Thus, the present study's finding that humble leaders demonstrate a propensity for valuing others that seems genuine and non-contingent appears to align with Tangney's, Owens's, Vera and Rodriguez-Lopez's, and Kouzes and Posner's views.

Using the contingencies of self-worth framework as a lens for viewing the construct of humility, there also appears to be substantial theoretical support for the suggestion that the humble individual is likely to have a more stable, internally-anchored sense of self-worth that does not vary as a consequence of external circumstances or others' assessments. As a result, the humble individual is not likely to de-value others in an effort to elevate his or her self-esteem, but to maintain a positive perspective on others' strengths and contributions (e.g., Crocker and Knight, 2005; Kernis, 2003; Morris et al., 2005). These propositions appear to be strongly aligned with the present study's findings as well.

Empowering Others

Empowering others was a frequent theme that surfaced in the participant interviews for the present study. It was captured for the theoretical framework (shown in Table 1 on Page 139) as building others' confidence, guiding and supporting learning, involving others, delegating responsibility, empowering others to act, and enabling others by obtaining resources.

A female participant spoke about *involving others at all levels:*

> So when I was looking at putting together initiatives to improve [processes] I
> always did it with teams of people, and I picked them from every level of the
> organization. So the main team leading the change was a diagonal slice of the
> organization, and so I never resorted to only focusing on the senior executives of
> the organization. I was meticulous about giving people the opportunity to be
> involved, and I was meticulous in allowing all of the work teams to set their own
> priorities . . . So it wasn't like . . . the fearless leader from the corner office
> coming out and telling people what needed to be done. I told them what the
> problems were, what I had seen that looked like problems, and they picked and
> they decided how to solve them.

A male participant emphasized *enabling others by providing resources:*

> My style was one of, ok, we're gonna commit to a plan, we're gonna execute the
> plan, and we're gonna deliver the plan results. I make sure my team has it and
> then I fall back into being the resource for my team to get the things they need to
> execute what we just established.

A male participant discussed *empowering and enabling others:*

> It's an undeniable fact of human nature that people obey autocrats but follow
> leaders. Leaders who provide vision, and who recognize that all individuals
> possess amazing and unique gifts and talents—I think that's the foundation of
> empowerment. It's not simply letting people get on to do the job. It's a very high
> level of trust, but it's also a very high level of servanthood in being there to
> remove those roadblocks which necessarily are a part of trying to achieve goals.

The same male participant talked about *enabling others:*

> I think empowerment is more than just empowering people to do their jobs.
> Empowerment is a willingness to let them do their job but to be there as a leader
> to move roadblocks out of their way, and that's where the servant comes in. I seek
> to serve you, not only by empowering you but by enabling you; in other words, if
> you have problems, if you have difficulties, if you have issues to deal with that
> are holding you up, you let me know and let me get those out of your way. Let me
> serve you in that manner.

Another male participant described *building others' confidence*

> And you know, the inspiration that derives from having people believe in their
> own capacity and in their ability to make something happen is as important as
> their technical competence because there's always fear, and if you can be the
> person that is the guarantor of their success, then incredibly enough, it happens.

With respect to the humble leader action of empowering others, Collins's (2001a, 2001b) work provides substantive support. His findings indicate that Level 5 leaders have a strong commitment to empowering others:

- They act with calm and quiet determination, not relying on inspiring charisma to motivate but rather inspired standards

- Personally humble leaders avoid personal ambition in favor of multi-generational organizational growth and development

Ancona, et al. (2007) note the positive outcomes engendered by leaders who acknowledge their incompleteness and use this knowledge as the basis for their reliance on others. They argue that incomplete leaders understand how they can work with others to leverage their strengths and balance their personal limitations. The strong suggestion

here is that leaders' reliance on others would naturally lead to empowering them.

Similarly, Edmondson (2008) proposes that leaders who create environments in which

people are encouraged to offer their ideas, questions, and concerns are those who, among

other things, model openness, humility, and curiosity. Empowering others, as a humble

leader action, seems well aligned also with Edmondson's description of environments

that encourage employee contributions.

It can be argued that a central theme that appears to underscore these scholars'

arguments about *Level 5 leaders, incomplete leaders, and encouraging environments,* is

that of empowerment. Thus it appears there is substantiation of the humble leader action

of empowering others illuminated in the present study in the extant literature on humility.

A sampling of the literature on empowerment also seems to offer corroboration of

this study's findings, particularly the research that focuses on the relational aspects of

empowerment. Spreitzer (2008), in her review of more than 20 years of workplace

empowerment studies, points to findings by Walsh et al. (1998) that suggest that it is

through forming mutual and meaningful connections with others that people are

empowered and developed as human beings, and to findings by Ergeneli et al. (2007) that

suggest that trust in one's manager is an especially potent factor in empowerment. These

findings seem consistent with the humble leader actions of both valuing and empowering

identified in the present study.

Exercising Right Uses of Power

The construct of exercising right uses of power is illustrated in the theoretical

framework (shown in Table 1 on Page 139) with the sub-constructs of communicating

vision, engaging others' commitment, using authority with discretion, managing

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accountabilities, balancing personal ambition with organizational interests, and acting with integrity.

There were strong indications in the comments by many of the study participants that *humble leaders view and use power differently than non-humble leaders*. In fact, this was the most prolific area of interview insights in the present study. It seems that how a leader uses *or misuses* power struck a chord with participants and is thus a pivotal concept in the story of how humility is enacted by leaders. A central theme was that of *using authority with discretion*—to act as if one has no authority. This is especially true as a leader advances to more senior level roles. It suggests a paradox: the more authority one has, the more careful and discreet one must be in exercising it. This careful use of authority stands in sharp contrast to the previously discussed literature describing narcissistic leaders, whose flagrant misuses of power stand out as the more damaging aspects of destructive narcissists' behavior.

Another theme that emerged in the analysis of the data for the present study is that of *balancing personal and organizational interests*. This can be interpreted to represent a primary means of avoiding the lapses in judgment that lead to misuses of power. *Acting with integrity* was a strong related theme. In fact, it seems to be an internal basis for the humble leader's calibrating the uses of power. Another significant finding was the humble leader's *building shared commitment* as opposed to using authority to dictate to others. This finding also stands in sharp contrast to the descriptions of destructive narcissistic leaders as coercive micro-managers discussed earlier.

A male participant asserted the need to *use authority with discretion:*

It's got to be more influencing from a position of authority as opposed to dictating. I have seen in many cases where you will get some degree of

compliance or apparent compliance when you just come from a position of

authority or being strictly directive. More often than not, I've seen teams dissolve

or begin to undermine the authoritative figure. So it's important for you to have

that license going in, but it's not the singular element of success because

sometimes I've seen that authority and $2 will get you a cup of coffee at Starbucks

. . . if you don't have a shared vision, if you don't have folks aligned behind the

objective that you want to achieve. And worse, if you have people pulling in the

other direction, you'll be pointing north, and the folks whose cooperation you

need are pointing south. Then authority by itself is not going to help you. So first

you need that alignment, common purpose, common objective, moving toward

the same vision. Then you have authority, and that's helpful.

A male participant talked about *using authority with discretion and acting with integrity:*

I think there is a place . . . for what you might call the authority card, but I think

you have to play it very selectively, and I think you have to think through very

carefully when you do play it what may be the vibrations of that down the road . .

. I think you need to make sure there's clarity, and that can come through actions

not words, about who is in charge and who is driving the organization, but I think

your actions can really be more about describing that and setting that tone than

anything else. I do believe in the adage that if you have expectations of your

people you need to have those same expectations on yourself.

A female participant asserted the importance of *balancing personal and organizational*

interests:

It comes out time and again, especially when I'm talking to these fast trackers . . .

if you wanna really be an honest to goodness fast tracker, you have to be able to

balance your self-interests with those of others. It's not about you. You're not a one man show, and you'd better be willing to invest in other people as much as you're willing to invest in yourself.

A male participant spoke about *using authority with discretion:*

It became glaringly evident that I had a responsibility for the wellbeing of the people in the organization, not only for the financial results . . . you have to live with yourself, and you have to understand that you have a stewardship — that you have to guard very carefully how you use your authority and how you use your ability to convince others. It can be used in a good direction or a bad direction, and you want to use it in the best possible direction for all concerned.

A female participant discussed *communicating vision and building shared commitment:*

I think you can take a whole organization along with you. In some ways I think about being a leader as having a dance card. You know, you can get the orchestra there and the food and make sure the dance floor is right, and you can have your dance card with lots of spaces, but ultimately, people have the choice about whether they wish to sign up to dance on the dance card . . . people will give you permission to lead them, and they will do so enthusiastically if they believe what you're saying and if they agree with that . . . I think I learned a lesson being the oldest child (laughing) with a bunch of younger brothers and sisters. You cannot make people do things so that it works really well, even if you have all the clout. It's just not possible. You know you have to lead as if you have no authority ultimately. I think that if you use all your other skills and leave the big stick in the closet, chances are you have a fully engaged staff.

The scholarly literature on narcissistic leadership appears to offer the most relevant and insightful corroboration of the present study's findings regarding the humble leader's *right uses of power* through the contrasting descriptions of narcissistic leaders' *misuses of power*. To that end, a brief re-entry into the literature discussing narcissistic leaders' propensity to misuse power is offered here.

Conger and Kanungo (1998) describe narcissistic leaders as self-absorbed, attention-seeking individuals who are dismissive of others' viewpoints or welfare. Rosenthal and Pittinsky (2006) observe that the ease with which an individual ignores the feelings of others and exploits them for personal gain is associated with the *personalized (self-interested) use of power*. Similarly, Conger (1990) and Maccoby (2000) suggest that the narcissist's inflated sense of entitlement can lead to self-serving abuses of power. Moreover, Rosenthal and Pittinsky (2006) suggest that the leadership style of the narcissistic leader is typically autocratic. They describe narcissistic leaders as "individuals whose aspirations, judgments, and decisions, both good and bad, are driven by unyielding arrogance and self-absorption" (p. 617). Similarly, Gilbert, et al. (2012) argue that narcissism can actually lead to toxicity in organizations because "excessive self-focus precludes an extension of self on behalf of others, and encourages 'winning' at any expense" (p. 31). These authors' characterizations of toxic leader behaviors clearly point to misuses of power by narcissistic leaders, and by extension, offer corroboration for the contrasting tendency of humble leaders to exercise discretion and good judgment in their use of power.

Despite his arguably more benevolent view of narcissistic leaders, Maccoby (2000) acknowledges that narcissistic leaders, perhaps due to their discomfort with their

own emotions, don't learn easily from others, and are therefore not typically open to feedback. Further, they tend to listen only for the information they want to hear, prefer to indoctrinate versus teach, and tend to dominate conversations. He concedes that, despite their positive qualities, even the most productive narcissistic leaders can self-destruct and take their organizations down with them. His observations suggest that these leaders misuse power and devalue those around them in order to achieve their goals.

Thus, there appears to be strong agreement among scholars that narcissistic leadership is often associated with misuses of power. This characterization stands in sharp contrast to the findings that point to the humble leader's *right uses of power* that emerged in the present study. Thus, the argument can reasonably be made that one of the principal ways humility is enacted is through the right uses of power described herein.

Buffering

The humble leader action of buffering was captured in the theoretical framework (shown in Table 1 on Page 139) with the topics of shielding employees, filtering upward and downward communication, over-communicating upwardly, standing up to misuses of power, creating soft landings for employees who fail, and advocating.

One of the most interesting and least expected findings from the present study was the degree to which humble leaders serve as buffers for their employees. In enacting a buffering role, humble leaders effectively shield their employees from toxicity and unnecessary complexity, often driven by demanding, coercive—and very likely destructively narcissistic bosses—above them. Again, the manner in which participants framed their comments about the toxic circumstances they had attempted to buffer was altogether respectful and appreciative of those they were describing. This finding is

consistent with the previously discussed findings about the humble leader's action of valuing others.

A female participant spoke about her *upward and downward filtering of communication*:

> I had to find a balance between not being so open that I made myself too vulnerable and then couldn't do my job well in the organization, but at the same time feeling that I wasn't just sticking my head in the sand and pretending this wasn't going on—that my own people in the organization deserved better leadership than that at the executive level, which is where I was. So it did really cause me to look inward and to find a balance between strategic and honest . . . the balance between being a bit of a shield to people who worked beneath me . . . but at the same time not encouraging them to isolate even more . . . that was another balancing point that I faced as a leader. So how do I act as a bit of a buffer, but at the same time not encourage this thing of we're all gonna hide in our separate caves kind of behavior that was starting to happen in the organization.

A male participant described his *over-communicating upwardly* as a way of buffering his employees:

> I think again what I learned personally in a case when I've got a boss that's like this individual we were speaking about was that I need to be more proactive in communicating. I mean extremely over-communicate to a detail to someone that's a micromanager . . . give them so much information that they get buried in the details themselves. That's a lesson I learned. I don't know how to make that elegant or things of that nature, but the best way I can say it is communicate, communicate, over-communicate . . . *You communicate to them so your team can be focused on the things they they've gotta do* (emphasis added).

Another male participant spoke about *shielding employees*:

> You know the reality is that the higher the positions that people have who
>
> surround you, the more vulnerable they are because they're highly visible. And as
>
> a leader or as a person responsible for being their mentor and supporter and
>
> coach, you have to anticipate and help people avoid getting themselves into dire
>
> straits or [onto] shores that are very dangerous, you know. And this is a role you
>
> play although it seldom appears in any job description.

A male participant described *creating soft landings* for others when they fail:

> This is where the softer side of management comes where you know, often times
>
> people who have worked for me said, 'I was never afraid to fail. I was never
>
> intimidated by you. I knew that you were supportive and that you had high
>
> standards and that you would hold me accountable, but I was never afraid to fail
>
> because I knew it would be a learning experience.'

Another male participant spoke about *creating soft landings* for others when they fail:

> I think you have to be honest in terms of what you really believe you're gonna be
>
> able to deliver and then you have to do all that you can in the right framework
>
> with the right character and integrity to do that. And even if you fail but it's very
>
> clear . . . the evidence that's littered around you would show that every effort was
>
> made to deliver, even if you fail, it doesn't end up looking like a failure or a
>
> breach of some commitment.

The scholarly literature on humility offers less descriptive evidence with regard to

the humble leader action of buffering, again illuminating the need for additional research-

based descriptive findings. That notwithstanding, there are some interesting and

seemingly corroborative findings that will be discussed here.

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In their 2012 study, Owens and Hekman found that leader humility corresponded with the perception among followers that mistakes are a normal and acceptable—even beneficial— part of learning. They describe the process as the "legitimization of followers' developmental journeys" (p. 792), and they suggest that it is related to feelings of increased *psychological freedom* and follower engagement.

Owens and Hekman (2012) also found that humble leaders' acknowledgement of their own uncertainty in the midst of organizational turbulence and change validated others' feelings of uncertainty. The authors suggest that this process of legitimization of uncertainty fosters an environment of active experimentation and dialogue that emphasizes learning. While Owens and Heckman don't specifically mention the term *buffering* in their discussion of their findings, it can be argued that a leader who legitimizes others' developmental journeys and who legitimizes uncertainty is in effect buffering—perhaps by providing *soft landings* for followers as they take risks, develop, and grow.

Farson and Keyes (2002) make a credible conceptual argument that effective leaders are "failure tolerant" and that they "break down the social and bureaucratic barriers that separate them from their followers" (p. 4). The authors further suggest that failure tolerant leaders push people to see beyond the simplistic view of failure as the opposite of success. They argue that failure tolerant leaders help people to see failure as a necessary complement to success when risk-taking in pursuit of innovation is the goal. It might reasonably be concluded from Farson and Keyes's arguments that they are describing a buffering process by leaders—buffering that creates the *soft landings* previously described by the author of the present study.

Similarly, Sutton (2010) argues that good bosses act as *human shields* for their employees, protecting them from distress and distraction behind the scenes and publicly and privately. He observes that they take pride in "absorbing or deflecting heat from inside and outside the company, doing all manner of boring and silly tasks, and battling idiots and slights that make life harder than necessary on their people" (p.1). Furthermore, they "foster a climate of comfort and safety" (p. 5). Sutton appears to describe the leader's action of buffering, and thus his arguments are consistent with those of this study.

Edmondson (1999, 2003, 2008) employs the term *psychological safety* to describe people's perceptions of their work environments as being conducive to taking interpersonal risks. She observes that in psychologically safe environments, people believe that others will not penalize or think less of them when they make mistakes. She asserts that a leader's ability to create conditions that foster psychological safety is essential to effective learning in organizations. She further asserts that in the absence of psychological safety people judge the risks of engaging in learning processes as too costly. Edmondson (2002) supports her arguments by pointing to the observation by Schein (1985) that psychological safety helps people overcome their defensiveness or the *learning anxiety* that occurs when they are presented with data that could thwart productive learning behavior.

Edmondson appears to describe a buffering role in the leaders who foster the conditions of psychologically safe environments. Similarly, in his early study of team dynamics in an architectural firm Kahn (1990) argues that interpersonal relationships promote psychological safety when they are supportive and trusting, and when they

provide flexibility for people to try and perhaps fail without fearing the consequences. He further argues that managers create safety when they are resilient, clear, and supportive.

Owens and Hekman's (2012) description of *legitimization of followers' developmental journeys* and *legitimization of uncertainty*, Farson and Keyes's (2002) description of *failure tolerant leaders*, Sutton's (2010) characterization of effective leaders as *human shields*, and Edmondson's (1999, 2003, 2008) and Kahn's (1990) characterization of leaders as *creators of psychological safety,* provide substantive corroboration for this author's finding that humble leaders enact a buffering role when followers need protection from organizational chaos and coercive demands, and when they experience failure in the process of risk-taking and learning.

Theoretical Framework Category 3: Enablers of Humility

The principal enabler of humility that was illuminated in the present study and captured in the theoretical framework is that of *adversity*. A secondary enabler of humility that emerged from the analysis of the data is that of *developmental experiences*. These are captured in the theoretical framework (shown in Table 1 on Page 139).

Adversity as an Enabler of Humility in Leaders

The present study's findings elucidated adversity as a significant enabler of humility in organizational leaders. The adversity described by participants is represented in the theoretical framework (shown in Table 1 on Page 139) under the topics of negative feedback, bad bosses, and personal crises.

The interviews on adversity as a shaper of humility offered rich, thick descriptions of the participants' experiences that were life-altering and values-shaping events that made their way into contextually rich personal narratives. It was as if the

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participants felt called to tell their stories. They wanted others to know about what they

had learned. Interestingly, there was no indication in any of the interviews that the

participants felt angry or resentful of the adverse circumstances that had shaped their

humility. Neither was there any defensiveness or exaggeration apparent. In fact,

participants seemed proud of having come through their experiences and changed for the

better. It was as though the crucibles themselves represented a badge of honor—*they*

were the experiences that made them the humbled leaders they are today.

A male participant described the humility enabling impact of *negative feedback:*

> It started with a letter, Jan. It was from [a] young lady who had resigned to my
>
> boss. And it was a scathing attack on my management style. There wasn't a kind
>
> word to say. I told people what to do. I demanded things of people. I was
>
> coercive. I was a very top down driven. If I wanted people's opinion I'd give it to
>
> them. And I was an absolute rascal of the very first order. And I read this thing,
>
> and you can imagine my reaction. I was troubled by all of this. Then my boss
>
> turned up, and he said, 'Are you ok?' I said, 'Yea, I think I am.' He said, 'Can I get
>
> you anything?' I said, 'I need another bloody drink!' And he brought me a drink,
>
> and I realized that he was being compassionate to me because he said to me, 'I
>
> want you to learn from this experience. I realize how you feel. I realize how this
>
> must affect you, but I don't want you to be devastated. I want you to learn from it.
>
> It's written, with a great deal of emotion, but some of it's true, and I don't need to
>
> know which bits are true and which bits aren't true and which bits are half true. I
>
> want you to go away and understand that for yourself and decide what you're
>
> going to do to change.' And I realized that this man was almost being Christ to
>
> me, and I realized the connection to Christ . . . realized that he also was being a

servant to me, by actually saying this, and I resolved . . . that I was going to

change—that wasn't the real me. I was trying to live up to how I thought I should

be seen . . . I began a journey, a journey of change, not trying to be what I thought

I SHOULD BE, but being my true self.

A male participant described the *health crisis that enabled his humility:*

 I was so incredibly demanding and so incredibly unreasonable, which I didn't

realize at the time, that it caused all kinds of trepidation. I did get the results that I

intended accomplished, but the price was incredibly high. In personal terms, a

stroke—super stress if you will. And also trampling over people because I didn't

realize that they were doing their best, and they couldn't do more without my

help.

The participant continues his story:

There was a public relations firm that came to make a presentation, and we were

all sitting in the board room, and the presentation was being given by a top notch

PR firm, and it was an interesting presentation, and all of a sudden I didn't feel

too well, and something happened and I woke up in the hospital. And I tried to

move, and I couldn't move. My left side was paralyzed. I tried to speak, and I

couldn't speak.

The participant continues his story:

So, all of a sudden you have one moment of realization of how fragile everything

really is. And what was astounding was the level of support and cooperation that I

received from everybody. And then it became glaringly evident that I had a

responsibility for the wellbeing of the people in the organization, not only for the

financial results. Because you have to live with yourself, and you have to

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understand that you have a stewardship—that you have to guard very carefully how you use your authority and how you use your ability to convince others. It can be used in a good direction or a bad direction, and you want to use it in the best possible direction for all concerned. And after a while you discover that doing that is in fact in the best interests of the stockholders also. It just happens. So it took me twenty years to learn that. And when I learned that, I discovered that you can't exercise leadership unless you have followership. And when you understand that, you understand that through others your dreams will come true. And you have an obligation to help these people realize their full potential. And you have an obligation to also give them opportunity and growth. And then all of a sudden things begin to happen and you realize that you can do them with a lot less effort and with a lot less controversy. And it works! So what was the magic shift? The magic shift was understanding that leadership is not the exercise of authority but it's the exercise of conviction that people doing the right things will benefit and will enjoy the accomplishment.

A male participant described the experience of *going from superstar to unemployed as enabling his humility:*

So I went from superstar to unemployed in the course of a year and a half. And so now I had to regroup, and of course I had all these wonderful relationships and it's not that I was without options, but it was something I had to really contend with. Talk about the paradox. And so I had to go forward with confidence with this job application, knowing all of my strengths but also saying I've learned a lot here. This has been a pretty costly but valuable lesson in how you use your skills as a

non-profit professional, but make sure that it's the volunteers who own the success

or the failure of the [organization], and it's not about YOU . . . Learning from

mistakes, if I ever am involved with a [non-profit organization] that's

contemplating moving forward with a major initiative and it's clear that the board

is relying upon me being there, I'll not do it. I wanted to have a major capital

campaign under my belt. They wanted me to have that experience. That was the

wrong reason to do it. And we probably would have waited a couple of years

before jumping into that.

A male participant spoke about how his experience of *a bad boss enabled his humility:*

I did work for somebody who absolutely—you talk about a bad boss—he almost

destroyed my confidence totally, and I took it personally. The way he treated me

he treated everyone, but I think I was very sensitive in the early going. And in

actual fact as I reflect back on my last 35 years of working, he is the only person I

ever worked for like that, and I did learn a lot from him though. I learned a lot of

how I did not want to behave and how I did not want to lead. He represented

almost everything that was against how I believed that things should be.

A female participant described her experiences with *bad bosses as enabling her humility:*

As I look at ineffective bosses, or working with ineffective bosses, I personally

believe that has been one of the best learning tools that I've had . . . over my 27

years, I would say that I've probably have had more bad bosses than good bosses.

The positive side of it is that they have helped me. I've learned from them. I've

learned from them, just like I've learned from my good bosses. I've learned from

those leaders too.

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The humility literature on adversity as a humility enabler in leaders stands in substantive agreement with the findings from the present study. As discussed previously, Vera and Rodriguez-Lopez (2004) have argued that humility, like other virtues, is "dynamic in nature and capable of improvement or deterioration" (p. 394). Other scholars have suggested that humility may be the result of the wisdom that results from accrued life experiences (Tangney, 2000).

Exline and Geyer (2004) found that individuals associate humility with the experience of loss or failure or receiving negative feedback, and this can lead to the correction of an over-inflated self-view. Collins (2001a) found that some of the humble Level 5 leaders in the good to great companies he identified had had significant life experiences "that might have sparked or furthered their maturation" (p. 37). Bennis and Thomas (2002) call these crucible experiences or defining moments by which individuals come to a new or altered sense of identity, and in the process gain a clearer vision of themselves, their roles, and their place in the world. They suggest,

> Extraordinary leaders find meaning in, and learn from, the most negative events. Like phoenixes rising from the ashes, they emerge from adversity stronger, more confident in themselves and their purpose and more committed to their work. Such transformative events are called crucibles—a severe test or trial. Crucibles are intense, often traumatic—and always unplanned. (p. 1)

The authors suggest that leaders create narratives that depict how they met the challenges and were transformed for the better as a result. The leader's creation of a narrative and making oneself vulnerable through its telling vividly portray the humbling nature of the experience and the leader's subsequent transformation. The authors further suggest that

the crucible represents a powerful developmental experience for the emergence of leader humility.

McCall, et al. (1988) identified challenging experiences resulting from the impact of other people or hardships as the basis of the most impactful learning. They found that challenging experiences involving other people almost always involved working with bad bosses.

The research findings reviewed above appear to provide strong corroborative evidence for the humility enabling effects of adversity and therefore are consistent with the author's findings reported herein.

Developmental Experiences as a Humility Enabler

Developmental experiences were also found to enable humility. The data suggested that developmental experiences, captured in the theoretical framework (shown in Table 1 on Page 139) as stretch assignments and being fostered and mentored, served as a positive means of shaping its development in several of the participants in the present study:

A male participant described having had *bosses who valued and fostered him:*

> You know the establishment of this individual connection . . . I can recall previous bosses showing that confidence and providing me that that benefit of, 'I trust that you know what to do and you'll do the right thing, for not only yourself but for those that are dependent upon you. And when you did that and you actually performed it seemed like it opened up further doors to move up into various organizations.

A male participant described *being fostered and developed by his bosses:*

> I was very fortunate to work for a company like [name of company] which had
>
> a formative training program and a performance management system and bosses
>
> that sat down with you once a year and went through your performance and told
>
> you what you did well and where your development areas were. And I always
>
> really tried to focus on my development areas and I think this is so critical in the
>
> early going.

A male participant spoke about *how taking on a stretch assignment developed him:*

> And we were going through some changes from a regional perspective. And I was
>
> afforded the opportunity, and they came and discussed it with me whether I would
>
> take over all of the retail operations pieces. So, it was going from the restaurant
>
> over to the retail part of the business, to what I'd never done before. So, it was,
>
> from a developmental experience very challenging in that you kind of think that
>
> you know a business when you see it kind of from its periphery, but when you
>
> actually get involved with that business, there's so much more that you have to
>
> learn. And it really stretches you, it makes you become much better at asking
>
> questions, where you don't assume things, and ultimately, it makes you a better
>
> leader because you quit jumping to conclusions.

A male participant described a *powerful personal shift precipitated by a developmental*
experience:

> Probably this course has added another dimension, and this is something I just
>
> talked with another young lady . . . about . . . We were discussing some of the
>
> things that went on in the class, and I told her that another philosophy I've
>
> developed is that the better you know yourself, the better you're able to

understand others, and I think that's what this whole leadership course stresses—the MBTI and all of that. If you don't understand yourself and what makes you tick and why you think the way you do and the psychology of your being, then there's no way you can understand others. And another revelation I've had is that I manage my life from the inside out, not from the outside in. In other words, people constantly complain about well, what *they* don't do or what *they* should do, or what *they* said, or what *they* didn't do. To me that's irrelevant. I can control everything in my life. I can manage my entire career if I can manage *me*.

A male participant talked about *working with an external mentor:*

I think it was interesting. I probably didn't feel that I was ready for the next phase of my life. I always felt that I had leadership skills and I was strong with people, but I think he [referring to his external mentor] really kind of nudged me along to say, 'Hey, you've got more things than you think. You better go start using these things.' And clearly when we were in a detrimental situation at the time, he was very encouraging about things. He'd say, 'Hey, listen, you gotta go do something about this. It's your responsibility to make sure this company doesn't fall apart.' I was probably more hesitant about doing it. I was probably more of the mindset of let it unfold on its own. It will happen. And so, [the external mentor] gave me the encouragement .

The humility literature provides support for the present study's findings that developmental experiences function as a potential shaper of humility. Tangney (2000) suggests that humility may be the result of the wisdom that comes from accrued life experiences. Collins (2001a, 2001b) reported that humble mentors were an important

shaper of humility in the Level 5 leaders he studied. In agreement with Collins, Bennis and Thomas (2002) argue that while some humility-shaping experiences are violent and life-threatening such as encounters with prejudice, illness, or personal tragedy, others are positive, albeit deeply challenging, experiences such as working with a demanding boss or mentor.

Tangney (2002) suggests that in the psychotherapeutic realm, humility might be shaped through the use of cognitive-behavioral strategies designed to correct "cognitive distortions regarding the centrality and importance of the self, relative to others, [thus] reducing self-serving biases" (p. 417). Similarly, Vera and Rodriquez-Lopez (2004) suggest that humility is "dynamic in nature and capable of improvement or deterioration" (p. 394). These authors also suggest that humility in an organization is a function of the humility of strategic leaders, mainly the CEO.

Thus, the literature provides corroboration of the present study's findings that personal developmental experiences other than adversity are important shapers of humility.

Theoretical Framework Category 4: Outcomes that Humility Promotes

The assimilated findings from the data showed that humility promotes relational, task and personal outcomes for the leader. These are represented in the theoretical framework (shown in Table 1 on Page 139) as *enhanced employee engagement; enhanced organizational performance; and enhanced personal satisfaction, credibility, and career success for the leader.*

Enhanced Employee Engagement

The construct of enhanced employee engagement was captured in the theoretical framework under the topics of employees making sacrifices, people sharing ownership of goals, cohesive and collaborative environment, increased trust in leader, and people taking risks.

Employee engagement is a relational outcome that was referenced by several of the participants during their interviews. Thus, there appears to be a strong relationship between humble leader behaviors and positive employee responses.

A male participant talked about *others taking ownership*:

I think you get more buy-in and more substance and more thought about how to . . . and greater chances for success if you put some of that ownership back upon the team, and that they as a group are guided by one to three key objectives that as they internally look at what they need to accomplish in order to achieve these things . . . they begin to believe that truly they are owners of the success and also owners of any failure that comes collectively as opposed to what sometimes occurs . . . 'Well, I did my job this year, but Sally or Susie over here didn't, and I don't really care that much because I did mine.'

A male participant spoke about *people's being willing to take risks:*

I think as you go through time it's important that the individual be confident in himself, but I think it's very motivating and reassuring to know that my boss also has that same level of confidence in me, so that as a result of that I am freer and more comfortable taking appropriate types of risks or making certain kinds of decisions if I'm so empowered versus if I don't think my boss has that confidence, I will naturally tend to get approval.

A male participant described *employees' willingness to make sacrifices:*

> There's another example of a lady whose husband had to go away and have some
> surgery. She needed to be with him. Well, everybody in her group banded
> together and said, 'We'll take it in turns to fill your slot so your work will be done.
> You'll still get paid, and we'll fill in until you get back. And we love you, and
> we'll hold you in prayer when your husband goes through all this stuff.' It's that
> sort of high trust, high compassion culture—*a culture of serve* that I think we
> need to create.

A male participant spoke about *employees taking ownership:*

> And so what you find is that people go within themselves and everybody is
> willing to help. Everybody in fact wants to be successful, so they want you to be
> successful in the same manner that you want them to be successful.

A male participant described a *cohesive and collaborative environment*:

> Leadership is the ability to make people understand why it is good for the
> organization and good for them to take the action or direction that you're
> imparting. And this comes out of initially cerebral conviction, but it eventually
> turns into a visceral conviction. And when that happens what you have is team
> that works together and functions on a one heartbeat basis. And that's nirvana.
> That's, 'Oh, my God!' You really have something that works beautifully. And it
> takes years to build.

A female participant described *employees taking ownership:*

> People come alive. You can see it in their faces. You can see it in their body
> language. They leap up to answer questions, so it's just like flipping it all right
> upside down.

Humility's role in fostering prosocial behavior in organizations is well documented in the literature. Exline and Geyer (2004) observe that humility fosters enhanced interpersonal relating as well as helping and cooperation. Similarly, Hilbig and Zettler (2009) found that honesty-humility is associated with cooperation. Further, LaBouff, et al. (2012) found that humble people are more helpful than those who are less humble. Humble persons are also teachable; they are open to new ideas and advice from others (Exline and Geyer, 2004; Tangney, 2000; Vera and Rodriquez-Lopez, 2004). This openness can be seen as a likely basis of meaningful collaboration and positive interpersonal relationships that support enhanced employee engagement.

Kahn (1990), who first used the term *employee engagement*, suggests that it is the set of behaviors through which people bring in their personal selves during work role performances. He further suggests that engaged individuals express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally in performing their roles. In so doing, they bring their preferred selves to their task behaviors in ways that promote connections to work and to others. His premise is that employees bring their full selves to their work when *psychological safety* is present.

In her 1999 study Edmondson found that employees' experience of *psychological safety* increased the chances of effortful, interpersonally risky learning behavior such as help seeking, experimentation, and discussion of errors. Moreover, she found that psychological safety promoted team learning, which in turn facilitated performance in teams throughout the organizational hierarchy. Her findings suggest that team leaders are a critical influence on psychological safety and that they can deliberately work to structure a learning process. Leaders can create environments that foster learning by

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demonstrating behaviors that promote psychological safety. She cautions that autocratic behavior, inaccessibility, or a failure to acknowledge one's own vulnerability can all contribute to team members' reluctance to incur the interpersonal risks of learning behavior.

Thus, the literature provides strong conceptual and empirical corroboration for the present study's finding that enhanced employee engagement is a positive organizational outcome that is associated with leader humility, primarily through the leader's creating psychological safety.

Enhanced Organizational Performance

The organizational outcome associated with humble leadership in the present study is represented in the theoretical framework (shown in Table 1 on Page 139) under the topics of improved business results and increased customer satisfaction. Interestingly, the two most illustrative participant excerpts were gleaned from the interviews with two participants who had been humbled by their experiences of adversity. Their stories of having been humbled by adversity were captured in the section on enablers of humility discussed earlier. The participants spoke with a palpable level of passion and conviction as they shared how their humility had not only changed their lives but had also impacted their organizations' business results. Their explanation was that their experiences transformed their way of being, and by their *modeling the way,* others came to embrace what one participant called a *culture of serve*.

A male participant described *enhanced business results:*

> The result has been really quite astonishing in terms of business metrics, in terms of revenue growth, in terms of operating profit, in terms of return on capital, as compared to other divisions . . . Last year, of seven divisions within the

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organization, one of those divisions made budget and more, and the others all

failed to even reach budget . . . It was [his division] that made budget and has

repeatedly done so. We've had one year within last ten that I can remember where

we slipped, through a rather unique circumstance. But it manifests itself in all of

the normal business metrics of sales revenue growth, operating income growth,

return on capital . . . We were the best out of seven divisions.

Another male participant spoke about *increased customer satisfaction:*

It [a culture of serve] also manifests itself in customer interface. The organization

is seen in quite a different light in the marketplace, and we have had, unlike our

sister divisions, far less of a problem in creating the value-added customer

interface . . . I was sitting at my computer and up pops the message from the

regional manager. He's written it to this team that I've described to you—

technical, customer service. He said, 'I've just been in with customer x, and I have

to tell you that he's' absolutely delighted with the work that you did and the

results you sent in. It was more than a job well done!' And I sat there looking at

this email that he'd copied to me, on my screen, and I was troubled. It was a job

well done, but it was something more than that. As I was pondering it another

email popped up on my screen from the customer—the general manager at the

customer—who's never ever said a nice word to a supplier in his life. His position

is you beat up your suppliers to get the best out of them. And he wrote to me, and

he said, I just want to tell you. I've just had a meeting with your regional manager

here, and your team has done a magnificent job and a speedy job to help us out. I

want to thank you, and please thank them as well.'

The participant continues his story:

> And it suddenly hit me, and I walked into the technical department, and I gathered everybody together, and I said, 'I've just seen the memo from the regional manager telling you, 'A job well done!' I want to tell you that, but I also want to tell you it's a lot more than that as well. What you have done in serving each other has moved on to serving the customer in such a manner that you have moved him to write an email to me on a job well done. This man has never done such a thing in his life before. That's what you've done. The impact you had in serving each other has manifested itself in moving the customer.' Now that customer who used to be just so difficult is now far less so. Our relationship with him is significantly better than it's ever been. The day-to-day negotiations with him on different issues are much more equitable and a matter of partnership. So it's a manifestation of the way these people behave that brings that about.

The literature reveals broad agreement among scholars about the organizational benefits of humility. Collins (2001a, 2001b) found that humility, as captured in his characterization of Level 5 leaders, was a significant factor in the performance of companies that outranked their competition over an extended period of time. Collins's findings are well supported by Vera and Rodrigue-Lopez (2004), whose findings revealed that humility is a source of organizational competitive advantage. They propose that humility provides value to firms "through the processes of organizational learning, service, and the development of organizational resilience" (p. 396).

Goleman, et al. (2002) found that emotional intelligence is twice as important as cognitive skills in creating excellent performance at all levels of leadership. Self-

awareness and empathy, both widely acknowledged as elements of humility, are described as two of the five components of emotional intelligence that the most effective leaders demonstrate. In their empirical study of leader performance, Chatterjee and Hambrick (2007) found that humble CEOs are more likely to pursue incremental improvements and to exhibit performance that fluctuates less over time. Owens (2009) found that humility predicts individual performance beyond the common performance predictors of conscientiousness, general mental ability, and self-efficacy. His findings suggest that humility foster a level of persistence that enhances performance over the long term.

Thus, the literature offers compelling evidence that humility promotes enhanced individual and organizational performance and corroborates the present study's findings in this regard.

Enhanced Satisfaction, Credibility and Career Success for the Leader

Humility was found to also be associated with positive personal outcomes for the leader. Outcomes including enhanced personal satisfaction, enhanced credibility, and career success were identified in the data analysis and captured in the theoretical framework. Participants were overwhelmingly in agreement that their experiences of adversity had promoted positive outcomes in their lives. They spoke excitedly about their enhanced joy and satisfaction with their work, enhanced personal credibility, and career advancement as a result of their having been humbled.

A male participant described his *enhanced personal joy and satisfaction:*

> And now, that's all I preach is the importance of relationships because I have gone
>
> higher in four years here in [my organization] because of the relationships I have
>
> developed throughout my subordinates, my peers—and my superiors, probably

most of all. So they are able to see that potential in me. And my life is so much

easier. I'm such a happier person.

A female participant described her *enhanced credibility*:

Another thing that is key as a leader [is] being able to stand up and say when you

are wrong. That is such a key thing as a leader. I think your team will feel, 'Hey

she does make mistakes, but she can stand up and say to us she made a mistake.'

And they respect you more for that.

A male participant described the *satisfaction gleaned from his lessons learned:*

It's awesome because I get to start fresh, get to look back at all of that and I get to

say, 'Now I set precedent, now I behave in a certain way that I had no clue how to

behave twelve years ago. I hadn't lived it. You can intellectualize it, but I hadn't

lived it, hadn't seen and experienced the good things and the bad things that can

happen. And with that knowledge and that experience, all my behavior and

conversations are grounded in, 'Who owns this? Who gets the credit for this? And

this is not about [me]. [I] could leave tomorrow.'

The scholarly literature provides substantive corroboration with the present

study's findings on the personal outcomes humility promotes in the leader. Vera and

Rodriguez-Lopez (2004) suggest that humility may foster a leader's "pragmatic

acceptance of failure" (p. 400), and that humility may operate as a reminder to the leader

that failure is the price of learning.

The humble characteristic of having an accurate self-appraisal has been linked to

positive psychological adjustment (Exline and Geyer, 2004) and thus could partially

explain the enhanced joy and satisfaction described by the present study's participants.

Similarly, because the excessive self-focus that characterizes narcissism has been shown

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to be a risk factor for coronary heart disease (Worthington and Scherer, 2004), it is possible that humility may provide some kind of proactive heath benefit, perhaps through its influence in minimizing angry outbursts and in offering forgiveness to others.

Other research has shown humility to be positively associated with life satisfaction, gratitude, and self-esteem (Rowatt et al., 2006), and with emotional stability (Owens, 2009). Further, Tangney (2000) suggests that humility offers "relief from the burden of self-preoccupation and the imperative to defend the vulnerable self" (p. 75). The benefits of such psychological and emotional freedom might be realized in more positively directed energy, enhanced interpersonal relationships and enhanced personal wellbeing.

Consistent with the evidence from the literature presented above, the present study's findings reveal positive personal outcomes of humility as seen in increases in life satisfaction, gratitude for lessons learned, and enhanced positive self-regard among participants.

Follower Perceptions of a Participant's Humility

As another means of triangulating the present study's findings, selected follower observations were solicited from employees of one of the participants interviewed in the study. These followers were asked simply to comment on their experience of their leader's leadership style. The quotes are those of several direct reports and several indirect (one level down) reports. Their comments appear to corroborate a number of the findings from the primary participant interviews regarding humble leader attributes and actions, specifically: *valuing others, exercising right uses of power, empowering others, other-focus, being of service to a bigger mission, self-awareness, buffering, enabling*

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others, and resilience. Illustrative follower comments are presented below for "John" (not the individual's real name):

Observer #1:

> I've had a couple of bad bosses in my life, and John is not one of them. John a people person—he cares about the people who work for him; he supports me; I feel like I can talk with him. He's not a micromanager, especially compared to his predecessor. He's much more hands off.

Observer #2:

> John is such a good person—a gentleman. He's positive and he tries to elicit the best from people. He works with you and tries to accommodate everyone's basic interests to the extent they can be aligned with the mission.

Observer #3:

> John is looking at it [the work] from a top down approach. It gives you a good picture of how your work fits in. You don't have to defend every small task.

Observer #4:

> John has the leadership skills [that are] necessary to take this organization forward from a people standpoint . . . Morale has improved. He is more supportive of the teams. For example, he looks for win-win situations in meetings versus tearing down the staff. With that people are more willing to support him because they feel that he supports them.

Observer #5:

> He has gotten the group more engaged . . . John has empowered more people. John is…receptive to input. He weighs responses and is very fair . . . He listens,

he takes feedback and he provides feedback (constructive, based on his

experience of how projects can move forward).

Observer #6:

He asks thoughtful questions about the work I do . . . John brings a constructive

way of communicating. I've never felt attacked personally . . . He helps you

understand the big picture and then let's me do my work. When I screw up, he's

gentle with how he adjusts. He'll say, 'We'll off the plan.' . . . John is what a

leader should be.

Observer #7:

John looks more at how to get the job done using all the resources available as

opposed to doing a power play. He's . . . professional—he maintains his calm.

A Constructed Definition of Humility

Based on the assimilated findings and the author's triangulation of her findings

with the extant literature, a constructed definition of the phenomenon of humility is

proposed:

Humility can be defined as a personal trait that entails an appreciative

orientation rooted in a stable sense of self-worth, and is characterized by self-

awareness (of personal strengths and limitations), appreciation of others'

contributions, and transcendence of self (other-focus).

The findings gleaned from the interviews conducted by the author for the present

study appear to elaborate on previous research findings as well as offer new insights into

humble leader actions. The humble leader actions of valuing, empowering, engaging right

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uses of power, and buffering illuminated the grounded theory that emerged from the present study. It is shown below.

Statement of Grounded Theory

Humble leaders create psychological safety for followers to risk, learn, and perform. They create safety by blending the personal attributes of self-awareness, other-focus, and resilience with the actions of valuing, empowering, exercising right uses of power, and buffering.

The reader is reminded that the researcher's own history, values, and assumptions are a part of the study's emergent design (Charmaz, 2006), and can be considered a strength of the approach. As an organizational development consultant and leadership coach, the author has been privileged to work with many humble leaders in her nearly fifteen years as a practitioner in the organizational development field. She has witnessed the deep personal gratification and professional growth that people experience as followers of those who might be characterized as humble leaders as well as the deep, life-altering impact that adversity can have in shaping humility in leaders. The author was profoundly moved in her interactions with humble and humbled leaders in the course of her interviews. She experienced participants as speaking with courage, conviction, and most of all, heart. Some expressed doubt about whether or not their quiet leadership styles were the most impactful in their organizations—a not surprising reflection of their self-awareness and continuing openness to learning. In fact, the grounded theory that emerged from the present study was illuminated as a result of a conversation that the author had with a client who was not a participant in the study. During a coaching

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conversation, she described to the author her experience of having stepped into an acting role in her organizational division several months earlier. She pointed to her initial feelings of anxiety, self-doubt, and trepidation. She then explained how her division manager had provided much-needed encouragement, support for *making mistakes as part of learning,* and assurance that she was doing a good job. The author observed, "He makes it safe for you, doesn't he?" Without hesitation, she responded with a decisive and affirming, "Yes, he does." Several hours following this conversation, the author returned to the theoretical framework, and the emergent theory in the data was in full view. So, the author's own experience interacting with an actual client around her leader's creation of psychological safety during a time of vulnerability and uncertainty pointed the author right back to the data, specifically to what it revealed about the essence of humility and how it is enacted by leaders.

Peer and Member Comments

As stated in the Methods chapter, the author sought to triangulate the present study's findings with the extant literature. She also sought peer review and a member check with a participant who was interviewed for the study as additional methods of triangulation.

Three reviewers, all of whom hold PhDs in the same or similar discipline as the author's, and who are experienced organizational development practitioners, agreed to review the study's findings and offer their comments. The peer reviewers were asked to respond to the following questions:

- Do the framework, constructed definition of humility, and grounded theory align with your core sensibilities (representing your accrued knowledge and experience) about humility in leaders?

- Does the grounded theory explain how humility is enacted by leaders in varying contexts such that it has broad applicability?

- Do the framework, constructed definition, and grounded theory offer guidance for the practitioner community (of which you are a member)?

The reviewers were unanimous in their agreement that the framework, constructed definition of humility, and grounded theory align with their core sensibilities. They also generally concurred that the grounded theory offers a credible explanation for how humility is enacted by leaders in varying contexts, and that the framework, constructed definition, and grounded theory offer guidance for the practitioner community.

One reviewer commented:

> Your Theoretical Framework, Definition and Statement of the Theory are RIGHT ON in my experience and research. The theory does clearly show how humble leaders could create the environments where people can flourish, and enhanced employee engagement becomes more likely. I am excited to use the framework, constructed definition and grounded theory . . . as a guide for my work in organizations. As I read the dissertation, my mind was already going about who in my group of clients should see this first! Yes, they do align to my core sensibilities.

Another reviewer had the following comment:

> It definitely has broad applicability (could be used for coaches, parents, and many others).

Another reviewer agreed that the framework, definition, and theory offer guidance to practitioners but offered some words of caution about broad applicability:

> The best your research should claim . . . is that this research, while confined to a limited number of individuals interviewed, *adds to the body of knowledge and when aggregated with other similarly related research could imply broad applicability* (emphasis added).

The author also did a member check with one of the participants in the study. This was the same member for whom the author obtained observations from a number of first and second level reports. His comments are as follows:

> Absolutely! [the framework, definition and theory align] I was thinking about leaders I've worked with who I consider to be humble as well as those I consider to be non-humble. I think your findings are right on. I can't say what enabled humility in the leaders I've known, but I can say that your findings about the opposite actions—the actions of non-humble leaders are on the mark.
>
> I wholeheartedly ascribe to the theoretical framework. One thing that I am really impressed by with the humble leaders I know is the admission of not knowing. It's ok for the leader to say, 'I don't know: what do you think?' The outward actions speak volumes.

He also commented:

I agree that the grounded theory explains how humility is enacted. You have a

broad range of tools in the 'humility toolkit' that are applicable in a variety of

situations.

And he concluded by saying:

Absolutely! [the framework, definition, and theory offer guidance] I'm already

reflecting on my own behaviors. The tips you offer are right on point. You need

your people to approach the work with enthusiasm and be willing to go to the map

for you.

Chapter Summary

The richness of the lived experience of leaders, as revealed through in-depth

interviews, told a story about how humility is experienced and expressed in leaders.

Illustrative nuanced descriptions were presented as a means of inviting the reader into the

humble leader experience. The findings gleaned from 14 in-depth interviews with

organizational leaders representing a diverse mix of public and private sector

organizations in the United States and Canada were presented here for the reader's

critical evaluation. The findings were triangulated with the extant literature on humility,

narcissistic leadership, empowerment, employee engagement, emotional intelligence,

leadership crucibles, and psychological safety to assist the reader in determining the

credibility of the findings. Illustrative observations gleaned from interviews with 17 first

and second level followers of one of the participants were included as an additional lens

through which humility may be viewed by the reader as well as an alternate method of

triangulating the study's findings. A grounded theory that emerged from the interview

data and that explains how humility is enacted by leaders in organizations was proposed.

Table 1

HUMILITY THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Humble Leader Attributes	Humble Leader Actions	Humble Leader Enablers	Humble Leader Outcomes
Self-awareness awareness of strengths and limitations—accurate self-appraisal, openness to feedback and learning, healthy self-confidence, vulnerability	**Valuing Others** building relationships, valuing diverse perspectives, appreciating others, demonstrating individualized care and concern, guiding, speaking of others in appreciative and empathic ways	**Adversity** negative feedback, working with bad bosses, personal crises	**Enhanced Employee Engagement** employees making sacrifices, people sharing ownership of goals, cohesive and collaborative environment, increased trust in leader, people taking risks
Other-focus service orientation, a higher purpose, heightened sense of responsibility to others	**Empowering Others** building others' confidence, guiding and supporting learning, involving others, delegating responsibility, empowering others to act, enabling others to act by obtaining resources	**Developmental Experiences** stretch assignments, being fostered	**Enhanced Organizational Performance** improved business results, increased customer satisfaction
Resilience openness to risk and change, staying on purpose in the midst of adversity, letting go, staying true to one's self	**Engaging Right Uses of Power** communicating vision, engaging others' commitment, using authority with discretion, managing accountabilities, balancing personal ambition with organizational interests, acting with integrity		**Personal Outcomes** enhanced personal satisfaction, credibility and career success
	Buffering shielding employees, filtering upward and downward communication, over-communicating up, standing up to misuses of power, creating a soft landing for employees who fail, advocating		

CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

Introduction

This chapter summarizes the present study's background, research questions, approach, and findings. Informed by Charmaz's (2006) criteria for determining if a proposed theory qualifies as a theory, the author offers a critique of the study. She also reviews the study's limitations as well as its contributions to the scholarly and practitioner communities. It is the author's intent that her findings will provide a basis for further theory development and empirical testing. Moreover, it is her fervent wish that the findings will inform organizational development practitioners in their quest to enhance leadership effectiveness. In this vein, she offers recommendations for future research and identifies implications of the study's findings for organizational development practitioners. She concludes by reminding the reader of the leadership imperatives commanding our attention today and the possibilities for reconciling them.

Summary of Study Background, Approach and Findings

Humility is a complex phenomenon with a long, rich history. As a personal trait, it has been variously reviled and exalted in the religious, philosophical and scholarly literatures. Despite a call for greater humility in leaders over the past decade, generally more favorable impressions of it as a leadership trait, and research attempting to define and measure it, much of the literature on humility remains conceptual and speculative. As a result, there is still no clearly agreed-upon definition of humility. Moreover, despite the fact that humility can be placed in several contemporary theories of organizational

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leadership, there are gaps in knowledge of how it is operationalized within those leadership models. Most importantly, despite promising but still preliminary research, there is scant empirical evidence for how humility is *enacted* by organizational leaders, what *enables* its expression, and what individual and organizational *outcomes* it promotes. These are the gaps that the present study has addressed.

The central research question explored in this study was: *What explains humility in organizational leaders?* The related questions, which allowed the central question to be more fully explored, were:

1. What are the attributes of humility in leaders?

2. How is humility enacted by leaders?

3. What enables humility in leaders?

4. What are the individual and organizational outcomes that humility promotes?

Employing an interpretivist approach, the author analyzed contextually rich data from 14 in-depth interviews with mid-level and senior level leaders from a broad range of public and private sector organizations in the United States and Canada. She also incorporated data from 17 interviews with followers of one of the leaders who participated in the study. Her findings highlighted personal attributes, actions, enablers, and outcomes of humility. A grounded theory emerged from the data that explains how leaders enact humility in their leadership roles: *Humble leaders create psychological safety for followers to risk, learn, and perform. They create safety by blending the personal attributes of self-awareness, other-focus, and resilience with the actions of valuing, empowering, exercising right uses of power, and buffering.*

The study's findings were triangulated with the literatures on humility, narcissistic leadership, empowerment, employee engagement, emotional intelligence, leadership crucibles, and psychological safety to assist the reader in determining the credibility of the findings. Illustrative observations gleaned from interviews with 17 first and second level followers of one of the participants were included as an additional lens through which humility may be viewed by the reader as well as an alternate method of triangulating the study's findings.

As previously discussed, despite the fact that humility can be placed in the context of a number of contemporary leadership theories, questions about how humility might be operationalized in those theories have persisted. With those gaps in mind, the author proposes that the contextually rich findings and emergent grounded theory presented here touch on a range of factors that these theories address, namely: leader attributes and behaviors, leaders' underlying values and beliefs, individual and organizational outcomes, and follower perceptions.

Critique of the present Study's Findings

A topic of ongoing debate in grounded theory research is the determination of when a theory qualifies to be declared a theory (Charmaz, 2006). The reader is reminded that while the author makes that declaration, it is the reader of a grounded theory study, and the researchers who go on to test the theory, who ultimately decide if the theory has credibility. According to Charmaz, theory must have reach within, beyond, and between disciplines in order to achieve a wide ranging scope. She also argues that in order for a theory to have application it must provide an abstract understanding of the phenomenon of interest beyond individuals or micro situations.

It is the author's contention that the grounded theory presented here satisfies Charmaz's conditions. First, the theory proposes an explanation of how humility is enacted by leaders across a broad range of organizational contexts. Moreover, the author's findings were triangulated with various literatures on humility, narcissistic leadership, empowerment, employee engagement, emotional intelligence, leadership crucibles, and psychological safety, thus satisfying her criteria of *reach within, beyond, and between disciplines* for the purpose of achieving a wide-ranging scope. Finally, the theory proposed here provides an abstract understanding of the phenomenon of humility that extends beyond an understanding of its enactment in a single individual or in micro situations, thus satisfying Charmaz's criterion of broad application.

Limitations of the Study

The questions in this study were broad in nature and represented complex phenomena that are still in the early stages of scholarly investigation. While the qualitative paradigm and the grounded theory method in particular were deemed by the author and her advisors to be well suited to the questions explored in this study, there were nonetheless limitations that should be acknowledged. These limitations included: data collection via single participant interviews, the researcher's limited experience with qualitative research and the grounded theory method, and the potential for alternate interpretations of the study's findings.

Because the aforementioned limitations are essentially issues of quality or trustworthiness, the author employed five of Lincoln and Guba's (1985) methods of verification: *(1) rich, thick description; (2) clarification of researcher bias at the outset of*

the study; (3) peer debriefing; (4) member checks; and (5) triangulation in an attempt to mitigate them.

Additionally, the possibility of participant presentation or sense-making bias should be acknowledged as a limitation. The author attempted to mitigate this limitation by posing interview questions that did not directly refer to humility. She also probed and clarified participants' comments during and at the end of the interviews as a primary member checking method to ensure that her own biases hadn't eclipsed participants' intended contributions.

Contributions of the Study

This study contributes to the still preliminary but growing body of knowledge about humility in leaders and organizations. Specifically, the author sought to validate and extend the findings of other researchers whose theoretical and empirical investigations have focused on defining the construct of humility and elucidating its characteristics. The contextually rich descriptions provided by participants in the present study tell a story about how humility is expressed in leaders in contemporary organizations. Further, the assimilated findings and the grounded theory that explains how humility is enacted by organizational leaders are offered for review by the scholarly community with goal of contributing to the delineation of future inquiry into humble leadership. Finally, a contribution that is of upmost importance to the author is the guidance the study may offer to organizational development practitioners and executive coaches whose aim is to support enhanced leadership effectiveness.

The author contends that the assimilated findings and grounded theory presented here offer a substantive theoretical argument for a model of leadership that stands in stark

contrast to the larger-than-life celebrity leaders whose commanding personas dominated the media and much of the leadership literature in the 1980s and 1990s. She believes that the present study's findings have explicated a clear and compelling basis for humility in leadership and the positive individual, interpersonal, and organizational benefits it promotes. It is acknowledged that top-down leadership approaches may be appropriate—even preferred—in certain situations, but there are abundant reasons to believe that greater emphasis on bottom-up leadership approaches that showcase leader humility will reconcile some of the most pressing challenges in today's organizations.

The author also contends that, aside from the contributions to the developing body of research on the phenomenon of humility, the present study contributes to the developing body of literature on employee engagement, psychological safety, and follower empowerment. The assimilated findings presented here offer confirmation that the *quiet leadership* that humility represents is effective in eliminating many of the barriers to employee learning and performance, in particular by mitigating the risks associated with *failing on the way to learning and performing*. Moreover, she contends that quiet leadership is not the equivalent of silent or absent leadership. In this vein, the present study provides evidence that humble leaders act as *buffers* to protect followers from chaos and complexity and all manner of distress and distraction that prevent them from performing. They do so both privately and publicly, often summoning great courage and conviction in the process.

Further, while traditional organizational change models have emphasized top-down approaches to planning and executing strategic change (e.g., Conger, 2000; Kotter, 1996), increasingly, scholars have been advocating for more bottom-up approaches (e.g.,

Gagne, Estner, and Uckerman, 2000; Kouzes and Posner, 1993, 1999; Schein, 2009). The humble leader's openness to learning, coupled with a propensity for empowering others, represents a strategic platform for enacting more inclusive approaches to managing organizational change. Thus, the author contends that the present study's findings contribute to the developing understanding of managing change in contemporary organizational contexts defined by turbulence, complexity, and diversity.

Recommendations for future Research

In the interest of identifying topics that might represent a fruitful path for further investigative inquiry, possibilities for future research that extend beyond the scope of the present study are enumerated here. The present study did not specifically address the organizational situational factors or contingencies that might encourage the expression of humility in leaders, although a number of these factors are *implied* in the assimilated findings. The study also did not address follower or other stakeholder perceptions of the circumstances in which leader humility might be regarded favorably or unfavorably. Focused investigation into these areas could shape the directionality of leadership development programs, succession planning, and leadership role definition.

Further, even though the present study included both male and female participants of Caucasian, African American, and Hispanic backgrounds from the United States and Canada, the explication of gender-based or cultural differences related to humility that might be important in specific organizational leadership domains was beyond the scope of the study. Thus, future research should examine humility in the context of these differences. Additionally, the study's participants were all mid-level and senior level organizational leaders who had held several leadership roles. Future research should

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consider humility in emerging leaders or those who are newly appointed to leadership roles, particularly how it might be developmentally enabled or primed in young leaders well in advance of their promotion to higher level leadership roles.

The author presented evidence in her literature review that places humility within several contemporary leadership theories, including servant leadership, charismatic leadership, transformational leadership, and authentic leadership. It was acknowledged that there is still a gap in the understanding of how humility is operationalized in these different leadership models. Investigation into this area could lead to a richer understanding of humility in the context of prevailing leadership theories.

Some earlier studies (e.g., Elliott, 2010; Exline and Geyer, 2004; Owens, 2009; Rowatt et al., 2002) have tested the validity of humility scales. Future research could incorporate the findings from the present study to refine such scales, particularly in areas of more nuanced humble leader behavior.

Finally, despite the evidence presented here that adversity represents a basis for *humbling transformation* in leaders, an exciting line of inquiry would be to examine the potential for less traumatic developmental experiences for leaders at any level that are designed to shape humility within specific leadership domains.

Implications for Organizational Development Practice

Humility in leadership represents myriad implications for the practice of both internal and external organizational development consultants, coaches, and trainers. The argument has been made that leadership approaches must adapt to contemporary organizational realities that are being shaped by rapid change, technological complexity, generational and cultural diversity, globalization, unpredictability, and tenuous

employment relationships. Moreover, a spate of ethical breakdowns in the past decade has undermined trust among internal and external organizational stakeholders and rendered leaders suspect. The result has been a clarion call for more humility in leadership. This places both the challenge and the opportunity of bringing humility to the forefront in the hands of practitioners and the leaders they serve. The author has several observations about how the practitioner community might embrace this task.

First, organizational systems and structures send powerful messages to all organizational members, either positive or negative. For example, performance management systems can be decidedly bottom-up, inclusive, and autonomy supportive or they can be coercive, micro-managing, and demeaning. The practitioner community has an opportunity to intervene in systems such as performance management, hiring and selection, succession planning and development, leadership training, and many others to orient them in ways that enable leader humility in their execution. Further, developmental tools such as 360 degree feedback and behavioral style assessments frequently employed by organizational development practitioners represent non-traumatic ways to encourage leaders to examine their attitudes and behavior and make adjustments that enhance their capacity to express humility in their leadership roles.

The practitioner community can also assist organizations in the design of *failure tolerant* developmental experiences that shape humility in leaders. For example, leaders might be given stretch assignments that place them in new environments where their success depends on their actively soliciting the contributions of others and being *teachable*. This idea was showcased in one of the participant interviews for the present study. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, when leaders experience missteps that

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can be attributed to a coercive, non-inclusive style, soft landings and the availability of professional coaching or mentoring by humble mentors can support timely course corrections. How leaders themselves are treated when *they* experience failure will undoubtedly be echoed in how they treat others. This sentiment was clearly illuminated in one of the participant interviews for the present study.

Finally, organizational development practitioners can support the articulation and enactment of organizational values and commitments that speak to respect and inclusion of organizational members, transparency in communication, and *right uses of power*—at all levels of leadership. The reader is reminded that in his study of good to great companies, Collins (2001a) found that the most effective leaders don't start with vision and strategy. Instead, they attend to "people first, strategy second" (p. 71).

Implications for Organizational Leadership Practice

The findings from this study can inform the practices of leaders at all levels of the organization. Seasoned leaders and the more junior leaders who follow them have abundant opportunities to engage processes that can enable their humility. First, and perhaps most important is to seek out opportunities to work with humble mentors—internal or external mentors or coaches whose wisdom and experience can foster humble leadership best practices. By being open to learning, willing to admit vulnerabilities, and seeking help in areas of less developed competency, leaders can not only grow their capacity for humble leadership, they can also serve as role models of humility for followers. Such role modeling can foster, as one participant in the present study suggested, a *culture of serve* that enacts the behaviors of humility on a broad scale.

Second, leaders can take advantage of feedback in the form of behavioral assessments and 360 degree feedback well before the possibility of a serious misstep that could derail their careers. Feedback from assessments can provide early signals of the need to make adjustments in approaches to working with others. Armed with assessment findings, leaders can better calibrate their *internal compasses* to enable them to read and respond to important situational clues well in advance of their becoming problems.

Third, leaders who find themselves affected by adverse consequences of their enacting non-humble leadership can take inspiration from those who've preceded them and embrace the transformative potential of serious setbacks and missteps. Such experiences represent a clarion call to use adversity as a basis for self-reflection, values clarification, and inspired action. Setbacks don't have to be show stoppers if leaders are willing to admit their vulnerabilities and use their self-knowledge as the basis of seeking help from those around them. The Greek word for *crisis* is *opening*. In this vein, crisis born of personal adversity can be the portal to gifted contribution, as some of the participants in the present study so enthusiastically conveyed.

Finally, but perhaps most importantly, leaders who create a commitment to the creation and nurturing of *winning and inclusive workplaces* can take guidance from the humble leadership actions presented in this study. These actions can inspire organizational values that directly speak to respect, empowerment, and learning from failure. Indeed, as discussed earlier, the humble capacity to tolerate failure in oneself and in others may well represent a competitive advantage for the organization.

Conclusion

It is estimated that 30 to 50 percent of managers and executives derail. Their derailment isn't due to a lack of technical skill. They derail most often because they mismanage interpersonal relationships and they are unable or unwilling to change or adapt (Capretta, et al., 2008). It is quite clear from an abundance of evidence that organizational leadership, and leadership approaches in particular, are at a critical juncture. Traditional top-down approaches based on organizational paradigms originating in the Industrial Era must yield to alternative bottom-up approaches that respect—and effectively leverage—today's organizational realities. This study has provided a contextually rich picture of how humble leadership represents a compelling and powerfully positive response to reconciling one of the most important leadership imperatives of our time. Simply put: *humble leaders make it safe for others to risk, learn, and perform.*

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jan Austin is an organizational development consultant, author, and executive coach with more than twenty years' experience as a public sector organizational leader, and nearly fifteen years' experience as an organizational coaching and consulting professional serving leaders and teams in a variety of private and public sector organizations. She provides executive coaching and leadership programs on a broad range of topics such as strategic leadership skills, coaching skills for leaders and internal professional coaches, effective influence, strategic career planning, leadership presence, diversity and inclusion, and communication effectiveness.

In 1998 she directed the start-up and accreditation of Corporate Coach University, an international coaching school dedicated to training organizational coaches from the United States and abroad. She has been a faculty member with Coach University and Corporate Coach University since 1998 and a faculty member with the University of Texas at Dallas's Executive Coaching Training Program since 2010. In addition to her organizational work, Austin mentors individuals entering the coaching profession.

Austin's educational background includes a bachelor's degree in psychology, a master's degree in clinical psychology and a master's degree in public administration. She is a graduate of Coach University's program in personal coaching and Corporate Coach University's program in organizational coaching. She has held the designation of Master Certified Coach (MCC) by the International Coach Federation since 2001 and the designation of Board Certified Coach (BCC) by the Center for Credentialing and Education since 2011.