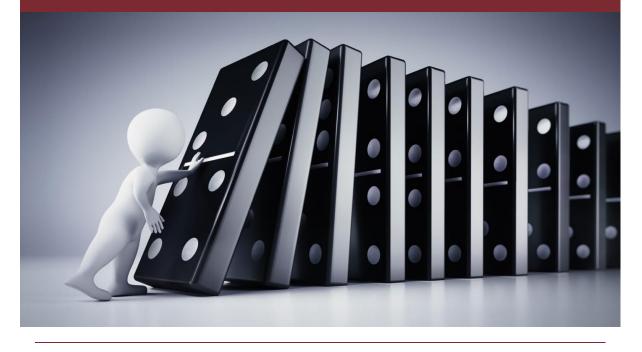**IOC** **IOC RESEARCH DOSE**

Institute of Coaching
McLean Hospital, a Harvard Medical School Affiliate

Guess how a leader's humility promotes positive outcomes?

No need to guess, in fact.

Our featured research article in the Journal of Positive Psychology (IOC members have journal access) comes to us from a team of authors in Pakistan. Bottom line? Their study validated a novel hypothesis: Humble leaders provide positive signals that lead to perceptions of a spiritual workplace which leads to ethical behaviors and positive emotions (empathy and gratitude) at work.

The authors start by reminding us that the term humility comes from the Latin word "humus" which means to have the earth under you, or to be on the ground. You will recall that in his seminal 2001 book, Good to Great, Jim

Collins proposed that great companies (defined by exceptional financial performance) are led by people who are truly humble along with having unbreakable wills. More recently leader humility has been related to improved individual outcomes (job satisfaction, loyalty, job performance) and group and organizational outcomes (team performance, innovation, cohesion of top management team). The positive outcomes have led to a call to develop increased leader humility. The authors note however:

"Even though results of examining the direct effects of leader humility on outcomes are abundant with promising findings, research on the primary processes through which leader humility shapes followers' behaviors remain sparse."

How then do humble leaders improve outcomes?

The authors cite some emerging research themes, including the effectiveness of task allocation, followers' psychological capital, psychological safety, personal sense of power, perspective-taking, and cognitive reappraisal. These findings fit with a framework called social information processing which proposes that employees' attitudes and behaviors are the outcomes of receiving and evaluating information in their social context. They adjust their opinions, actions, and emotions in accordance with their environment. Leaders provide influential social information because of their high status and frequent communication.

Other empirical research indicates that humble leaders have a down to earth view of themselves and others. They are not only open, accepting and admitting of their flaws, they acknowledge and identify others' strengths and weaknesses, making them fairer and more impartial in their judgment of others. In the case of ethical behavior, the social framework explains how followers of humble leaders learn to process uncertain and ambiguous information in an objective and impartial manner. Employees also observe a humble leader's giving nature, acknowledging mistakes and highlighting followers' strengths, which generates gratitude and improves empathy.

Going beyond current research, the authors suggest an additional mechanism - that humble leaders inspire workplace spirituality which then generates ethical behavior as well as gratitude and empathy.

Now, what is workplace spirituality?

Workplace spirituality occurs when employees develop an inner sense of

purpose, meaning, fulfillment and significance from their work. It acknowledges that individuals have an inner life that is nurtured when they sense their work as important and meaningful, appreciate the collective welfare, and develop personal values congruent with the organization's goals and values.

Since humble leaders believe they are not all-knowing or all-powerful, followers have psychological freedom, align with their inner drives, feeling free to share ideas and feedback which makes work more meaningful. Humble leaders also inspire followers to think beyond themselves and consider their colleagues, customers and society above themselves, which increases a sense of community and further enhances meaning.

The study

The hypothesis that humility improves workplace spirituality was tested by a time-lagged random sampling survey (three times, one month apart) of nine organizations in the telecom, industrial, and education sectors of two major cities in Pakistan (Islamabad and Lahore). Leader humility was measured first, workplace spirituality next a month later; then empathy, gratitude and ethical behavior were measured a month after that. The final sample of 286 (completed all three surveys) represented a 57% survey response rate - 62% male and 69% had master's degrees. The team used sophisticated mathematical modeling to ensure the measures were reliable and valid, and evaluate the mediation among the studied variables.

Research Conclusions

The study concludes that humble leaders:

1. Directly foster employee ethical behavior, gratitude, and empathy.
2. Play an important role in improving employee positive psychological resources and emotions.
3. Indirectly, as an underlying mechanism, improve employee ethical behavior, gratitude, and empathy by creating an environment of workplace spirituality.

A caveat? Pakistan has a more collectivist culture than other countries which may increase the impact of leader influences and increase the impact a humble leader can have on workplace spirituality, ethical behavior, gratitude and empathy.

Humility matters!

Be down to earth. View one's strengths and weaknesses objectively. Acknowledge mistakes. Highlight others' strengths. Be open and receptive, fair and impartial. Focus on giving to others. Value others' interests and contributions more than one's own. Encourage perspective-taking.

Takeaways for Coaches

1. Have a clear understanding of humility.
2. Cultivate humility as a coach or leader or both.
3. Describe workplace spirituality and the potential benefits of leader humility to your coaching clients.

"In the course of my life, I have often had to eat my words, and I must confess that I have always found it a wholesome diet."

-Winston Churchill

From the IOC Team.

Coach with science in mind.

Featured Article: Naseer, et al. (2019). *Understanding how leaders' humility promotes followers' emotions and ethical behaviors: Workplace spirituality as a mediator. Journal of Positive Psychology.*