

# Humble Leadership and Knowledge Hiding: Mediating role of Psychological Empowerment

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**Abstract:** Knowledge is vital for competitive advantage. Similarly, leadership style cannot be avoided in organizational success. Based on social exchange theory, this study explored the impact of humble leadership on knowledge hiding. Further, the mediating effect of psychological empowerment was also explored. Following the purposive sampling technique, 418 employees participated in the study. Primary data was collected in two waves to avoid common method variance. Structural equation modeling was used for the analysis. This study noted that humble leadership negatively influences knowledge-hiding behavior. In addition, psychological empowerment was noted to mediate the proposed relationship. This study advises that humble leadership, through psychological empowerment, mitigates knowledge-hiding behavior. Furthermore, it is recommended that managers create a favorable environment and empower employees to achieve the desired organizational goals. This study enriches the understanding of humble leadership by validating a theoretical model demonstrating its value and identifying the impact of psychological empowerment on knowledge-hiding behavior.

**Keywords:** Humble leadership, Knowledge-hiding behavior, Psychological Empowerment

**JEL Classification Codes:**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Knowledge is a desirable resource which boosts organizational effectiveness, and this resource is unavoidable (Caputo et al., 2019) and hiding knowledge from colleagues is challenging (Connelly et al., 2019). This concept not only hinders the sharing of information, teamwork, and creativity but results in adverse effects on both individuals and organizations. In ever-more-competitive marketplaces, knowledge is a vital tangible resource organizational sustainability (Kurniawanti et al., 2023). This distinctive intangible asset, which can be challenging to replicate, acts as the base for long-term distinctiveness (Shujahat et al., 2019; Grillo et al., 2018). Knowledge hiding is a concept that denotes the hiding of knowledge in an organization and such knowledge is owned by individuals (Connelly et al., 2012). Even with organizations' initiatives to promote knowledge-sharing procedures, employees still prefer to withhold knowledge, both directly and indirectly (Xiong et al., 2019). Upon experiencing knowledge hiding, the seekers are dissatisfied and tend to involve in adverse behaviors (Ali et al., 2020; Kumar et al., 2024).

Traditional leadership styles focus on power and influence on employees' behavior. Such a focus pays greater attention to rigid superior-subordinate management (Howell & Shamir, 2005). Further, such an approach hinders employees from being positive. Humble leadership emphasizes how employees impact the leadership process and show humility by being honest about their restrictions (Uhl-Bien, 2006). These leaders typically have a more neutral self-perception, are more respectful of others, and are more receptive to novel perspectives (Owens & Hekman, 2012). Such behavioral traits indicate that modest leaders value both their own and their subordinates' personal development, recognize their psychological sovereignty, and acknowledge their accomplishments and abilities.

Due to the serious consequences of information hiding, it is the managers' responsibility to take proactive steps to regulate knowledge in the workplace by considering the fundamental reasons for knowledge hiding (Anand & Hassan, 2019). However, it is crucial to support factors that minimize workers' knowledge-hiding tendencies, and among these factors, the most effective is the organization's administrative leadership (Men et al., 2020). However, the association between leadership style and knowledge-hiding received little focus. Despite multiple study streams demonstrating the significance of contextual factors in motivating or preventing employee from involving in such behavior (Abdillah et al., 2022). Thus, it is vital to determine how leadership influences workers' capacity to conceal their knowledge (Gerpott et al., 2020); and leadership style has a noteworthy impact in determining the subordinates' behavior (Inceoglu et al., 2018). Few studies investigated the impact of leadership styles on knowledge-hiding behavior, for example, ethical leadership (Koay et al., 2022), transformational leadership (Scuotto et al., 2022), Abusive leadership (Agarwal et al., 2022; Tufail et al., 2023), and servant leadership (Khan et al., 2023; Tufail et al., 2022) still, a gap exists and need to be investigated (Kumari et al., 2024).

Recently it has been called to test the underlying mechanism of psychological empowerment considering the different leadership styles (Islam et al., 2023). Psychological empowerment is the controlling feeling that individuals have over their jobs and is viewed as an internal motive to complete tasks successfully and efficiently (Spreitzer, 1995). It includes purpose and self-determination at the workplace and is the recognition to take initiative (Parker & Wu, 2014). It is assumed that humble leaders emphasize and acknowledge the initiatives by psychologically empowering their employees and thus employees will not be involved in deviant behavior i.e. knowledge hiding. The relationship between humble leadership and knowledge hiding is merely established (Hawamdeh, 2023); however, the mediating role of psychological empowerment is still missing. Identifying such underlying mechanisms will help in understanding the comprehension of the delicate relationship. Usually, psychologically empowered employees are not involved in negative behavior and thus knowledge hiding behavior may not occur. Similarly, humble leaders empower their employees which in turn engage in desired behavior.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. Humble leadership and knowledge hiding**

A dyadic social relationship of leader and follower is called leadership (Zhu et al., 2009). Humble leadership follows a bottom-up approach and is based on three main characteristics: listening, perceiving, and learning from mistakes (Zhou & Wu, 2018). It has also been concluded that humble leaders also follow transparency, are attentive to

feedback from followers, are approachable, acknowledge that followers may need help, and provide support to others; these factors contribute to the removal of a power gap (Jeung & Yoon, 2018). Indeed, humble leaders inspire employees to share knowledge and novel ideas in organizations, are more willing to assent to new ideas (Zhou & Wu, 2018), and mitigate negative behavior and knowledge hiding. It is believed that leadership plays important role in organization's knowledge process (Bavik et al., 2018), and the recognition of positive leadership style as a crucial factor in promoting knowledge sharing within organizations is growing (Le & Lei, 2019). Leadership styles both directly and indirectly influence the sharing or hiding of knowledge (Carmeli et al., 2013). Because hiding knowledge has negative effects on interpersonal relationships, leaders often expect followers to not hide knowledge within organizations (Connelly et al., 2012). Humble leadership style prevents employees from knowledge hiding (Zhong et al., 2023).

The most effective leaders are humble individuals who also have a greater probability of performing well in both groups and individually, and promote learning orientation, improve engagement, and negate negative behavior (Owens et al., 2013). Humble leaders respect the ideas of their employees, which increases their morale (Jeung and Yoon, 2018). When individuals find that their leaders are effective, they do not involve in negative behavior (Zhang & Zhou, 2014). Similarly, employees can be empowered by humble leaders who support their staff's strengths and skills and value their perspectives (Ali et al., 2020).

This study analyzed the link between employees' tendency to withhold knowledge and the humility of leaders via the Social Exchange Theory. As per this theory, individuals help each other in exchange hoping for uncertain future rewards (Blau, 1964). Social exchange gradually develops into mutually dependable, trusting collaborations as an outcome of the established reciprocity norm (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Thus, this study suggests leaders adopt employee-centric practices (appreciation, openness to learning) expecting favorable outcomes in the context of humble leadership utilizing SET. Humble leaders accept innovative ideas and sharing of knowledge (Owens et al., 2013) due to their self-awareness (Zhou & Wu, 2018). Consequently, considering the reciprocity norms of SET, learning knowledge from their superiors, employees could be more inclined to pass on that information to their peers as opposed to keeping it to themselves (Wu & Lee, 2017). Thus;

*H1: Humble leadership has a significant relationship with knowledge hiding.*

## **2.2. Humble leadership, Psychological empowerment and Knowledge hiding**

The psychological state of employees clarifies whether an employee experiences psychologically empowered or not (Islam et al., 2016). It has four basic characteristics: meaning, ability, impact, and determination (Spreitzer, 1995). Psychological empowerment considers the success of technology and social-based mechanisms that propose the transferring of knowledge (Amichai-Hamburger, 2008). They are proactive and perform their duty purposefully according to their abilities (Thomas, 1992). When an employee has such a feeling of purpose and meaning in the working environment, may not follow deviant behavior and they perform better than their colleagues (Liden et al., 2000). Similarly, Empowerment is related with the sharing of knowledge (Coakes et al., 2008) and promotes the decision-making process influencing how organizations manage and utilize their knowledge. Psychological empowerment and knowledge sharing relationship is well established (Kang et al., 2017) but not specifically with knowledge-hiding.

Humble leaders encourage knowledge and growth (Nielsen & Marrone, 2018). One must embrace humility to avoid the comparison-competitive reaction while interacting with others and acknowledge their efforts and attribution without being afraid of them. Experiencing positive exchanges with managers helps employees to feel psychologically empowered. Humble leaders have the characteristic of empowering employees psychologically (Owens et al., 2013). For instance, self-worth, respect, and Compassion are demonstrated by humble leaders towards their subordinates (Argandona, 2015), such attributions provide the impression that their determination is valuable and has an impact on desired organizational outcomes (Mallen et al., 2019) and are vastly acknowledged (Chen et al., 2018).

Self-determined employees tend to share knowledge (Hsu et al., 2007) rather than hide it. Psychological empowerment leads to effectiveness (Wang et al., 2011). More duties are taken by psychologically empowered employees (Nauman, 2011) and thus, may negate knowledge-hiding behavior. Considering the self-determination concept, humble leaders may empower employees psychologically (Owens et al., 2013). Humble leadership recognizes the influence of employees on the desired targets (Mallen et al., 2019), validates respect (Argandona, 2015), and the evaluation of their efforts and contribution to the organizational goals (Chen et al., 2018). Humble leaders support novel concepts and the sharing of knowledge (Jeung & Yoon, 2018), improve decision-making ability of employees (Joo et al., 2022), negating deviant behavior while psychological empowerment is a reaction to such support (Amundsen & Martinsen, 2014). A positive leadership style builds a trustworthy working environment through honest behavior, encouraging the importance of organizational goals and loyalty (Warrick, 2011). Working under such leadership, employees feel energetic, optimistic, proactive, and more committed to improving the working environment (Lan & Chong, 2015). Such an environment encourages positive behavior and disengages employees in negative behavior i.e. knowledge hiding (Alqatawenh, 2018; Ishaque et al., 2020). Humble leaders provide their followers the chance to see how their actions affect their organization and their status by recognizing their efforts and abilities and encouraging them to be open to learning from others (Chen et al., 2018). Such leadership style promotes genuine self-engagement at work (May et al., 2004). By doing so, it develops the sense of ownership and a belief that their actions have an impact on the results of their jobs. Therefore, those who follow humble leaders feel influential and empowered.

Psychological empowerment is a vital mediating variable in the leadership context, for example, empowering leadership (Kundu et al., 2019), sustainable leadership (Iqbal et al., 2020) but not knowledge hiding behavior as an outcome. However, the link between humble leadership and knowledge hiding via psychological empowerment is missing. Based on the social exchange theory, it is anticipated that leaders' behavior plays an important role in shaping the employees' behavior. Social Exchange theory identifies a social exchange connection is when both individuals help one other out with the hopes of obtaining unforeseen benefits in the future (Blau, 1964). Social exchange relationships eventually develop into relationships that are reliable and mutually dependable (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Therefore, based on SET this study assumes that humble leaders develop psychological ownership which further engages employees in productive behavior (i.e. work engagement). Thus, we anticipate that a humble leader enhances psychological empowerment that in turn lessens knowledge hiding behavior. Thus,

*H2: Humble leadership has a significant relationship with psychological empowerment.*

*H3: Psychological empowerment has a significant relationship with knowledge hiding.*

*H4: Psychological empowerment mediates the relationship between humble leadership and knowledge hiding.*

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

A wide range of IT-based projects have been initiated (Marchewka, 2016). The emergence and duration of the lifespan of technologies are relatively low due to high competition and the continual growth of existing IT companies, which frequently focus on innovations that have changed individual's choices in life (Grillitsch et al., 2019). Individuals demand and try new solutions for their needs, and IT organizations are trying to guarantee their products and overall project success. Thus, in the current growing era, leadership is essential in every IT-based project organization. We selected the prospective organizations in Islamabad due to the reason that it is the capital of Pakistan, and a wide range of IT based organizations are located here. We distributed 660 questionnaires among respondents by considering the item-response theory (Islam & Tariq, 2018), which suggests 20 respondents for every item of the questionnaire.

For data collection, project-based organizations were approached where the target respondents are engaged in projects. A purposive sampling technique was adopted which enabled the researchers to contact the prospective respondents (Tufail et al., 2019). Prior permission was granted, and respondents were approached. A time-lagged data collection approach was followed. We followed a survey design for data collection and adopted questionnaires were utilized. The data was collected with a break of 1 month. Before disseminating questionnaires, codes were assigned to each questionnaire to match and analyze the collected data. At time 1, data regarding demographic information and humble leadership was obtained. While in the second step data about psychological empowerment and knowledge hiding was recorded. Among the distributed 660 questionnaires, we received 481 questionnaires, which after scrutinizing for missing data were found 418, fit for analysis purposes.

The demographic analysis showed that among the received 418 questionnaires; 329 (78.70%) respondents were male and the rest 89 (20.30%) were female. 295 (70.57%) were married. Considering their age groups, most of the respondents (45.32%) were between 22-32 years of age. Regarding qualification, 303 (72.48%) of the sample size 16 years of education and 69(16.50%) of the participants obtained 18 years of education and 258 (61.72%) participants had more than 10 years of experience.

#### **3.1.Measures**

Scales were adopted from previous studies to collect primary data. Using a five-point Likert scale, all the constructs of the study were measured with a range of 1-5, where 1 denoted strongly disagree and 5 represented strongly agree. We utilized a nine-item scale of Owens et al. (2013) to record the responses regarding humble leadership, and the Cronbach alpha was 0.81. The sample item includes "Our leader admits it when he or she doesn't know how to do something". To assess the knowledge-hiding behavior, we adopted 12-item scales developed by Connelly et al., 2012), and the resulting Cronbach alpha was 0.87 and the sample item is "When my colleagues ask for information, I provide some other information in place of the information they want". To measure psychological empowerment, we adopted a 12-item scale developed by Spreitzer (1995) and 0.91 was noted as the Cronbach alpha

value of the construct and included sample item is “The work I do is meaningful to me”.

## 4. RESULTS & ANALYSIS

### 4.1. Validity analysis

For analysis purpose SEM and SPSS were used. According to Byrne (2010), before testing the study hypotheses, CFA needs to be conducted for adopted scales. One-factor and three-factor models were run to authenticate the distinctiveness of constructs. Results of the CFA in Table 1 display that the three-factors model was fit than the factor model: model:  $\chi^2/df = 1.97$ ; IFI = 0.93; TLI = 0.94 CFI = 0.93; RMSEA= 0.05. To further validate the confirmatory analysis and CMV issue, a single factor Harman’s test was conducted, where it resulted that a single factor contributed 39.21% in variance which was less than the threshold value of 0.50%.

**Table 1. Model Fit**

	x <sup>2</sup> /df	RMSEA	CFI	IFI	TLI
Three Factors (Hypothesized)	1.97	0.05	0.93	0.94	0.93
One factor (All items on a single factor)	4.71	0.09	0.88	0.87	0.89

### 4.2. Descriptive and correlations

The mean value for humble leadership (M=4.18), psychological empowerment (M=4.26) and Knowledge hiding (M=4.13) has been presented in Table 2. We observed an indirect correlation of humble leadership with knowledge hiding ( $r = -0.47$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and a direct correlation with psychological empowerment ( $r = 0.42$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Likewise, the psychological empowerment-knowledge hiding correlation was inverse ( $r = -0.54$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

**Table 2. Descriptive, Correlation, and reliability**

Variable	1	2	3	Mean	SD	$\alpha$
1 Humble Leadership	1			4.18	0.39	0.86
2 Knowledge Hiding	-0.47**	1		4.13	0.42	0.80
3 Psychological Empowerment	0.42**	-0.54**	1	4.26	0.41	0.84

\*\* $p < 0.01$ ; SD = standard deviation;  $\alpha$  = Cronbach’s alpha

### 4.3. Hypotheses Testing

To test the hypotheses (H1-H3), we followed the structural model at 5000 bootstraps with a 95% confidence interval. Results have been presented in Table 3 that displays that humble leadership negatively affects knowledge-hiding behavior ( $\beta = -0.19$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and directly influences psychological empowerment ( $\beta = 0.54$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Psychologically empowered employees inversely influence knowledge hiding ( $\beta = -0.47$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). These obtained results supported the proposed hypotheses.

Results for the mediating effect have been presented in Table 4. The total effect was -0.34, indicating the direct relationship was -0.19, and the indirect relationship was found -0.15. Similarly, the lower level (LL) and upper level (UL) did not contain zero, were in the same direction, and confirmed that humble leadership-knowledge hiding relationship is mediated via psychological empowerment.

**Table 3. Structural Model**

<b>Relationship</b>	<b><math>\beta</math></b>	<b>SE</b>	<b>Bootstraps at 95%</b>	
			<b>LL</b>	<b>UL</b>
Humble leadership → Knowledge Hiding	-0.19**	0.049	0.185	0.372
Humble leadership → Psychological Empowerment	0.54**	0.043	0.392	0.578
Psychological Empowerment → Knowledge Hiding	-0.47**	0.040	0.339	0.598

\*\*p < 0.01

**Table 4. Mediation Result**

<b>Relationship</b>	<b><math>\beta</math></b>	<b>SE</b>	<b>Bootstraps at 95%</b>	
			<b>LL</b>	<b>UL</b>
<b>Direct Effect</b>				
Humble leadership → Knowledge hiding	-0.19**	0.049	-0.185	-0.372
<b>Indirect effect</b>				
Humble leadership → Psychological empowerment → knowledge hiding	-0.15	0.066	-0.157	-0.164

\*\*p < 0.01

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The attitude and behavior of humble leaders towards their subordinates have been recently examined (Zheng & Ahmed, 2022) and especially in the domain of knowledge management (Al Hawamdeh & AL-edenat, 2022). In line with recent recommendations, our study examined the direct and indirect effect of humble leadership with knowledge-hiding behavior. Research in this domain is scarce (Anand et al., 2022). Working under humble leadership, employees do not hide their knowledge (Ayub et al., 2021). Employees are not inclined to hide knowledge and come up with novel ideas and discuss with teammates recognizing their administrators as humble (Zhou & Wu, 2018).

Adopting the humble leadership style empowers employees psychologically and they perform better. Having humble leadership is essential for organizational success, as it empowers the employees psychologically. Humble leaders may psychologically empower their followers by strengthening various parts of their self-worth (Owens et al., 2013). Humble leadership validates commitment, regard, and gratitude towards employees (Argandona, 2015), delivering employees a sense of significance and effect on corporate goals.

Our finding indicated that psychologically empowered employees are involved in positive behavior and negate negative behavior i.e. knowledge hiding. An interpersonal trustful environment promotes knowledge sharing through empowerment and collaboration (Wong, 2005). Empowered employees regard empowerment as a social recommendation from others, leading to enhanced cooperation and information sharing and providing information that could help others (Huang, 2012). Such behavior hinders employees from hiding knowledge.

Psychologically empowered employees are known for their commitment, adaptability, inner motivation, and satisfaction towards their responsibilities (Seibert et al., 2011), which result in effective outcomes opposing negative behavior. Psychological empowerment leads to increased responsibility and autonomy, which improves firm performance and customer satisfaction (Nauman, 2011). Through employee psychological empowerment, businesses and project managers may increase team members' understanding of project goals, processes, and responsibilities as well as social involvement and solving problems, ultimately leading to the desired outcomes (Ali et al., 2020). Humble

leadership focuses on positive psychological empowerment to prevent employees from knowledge hiding. The degree to which employees are psychologically empowered is related to the degree of desired outcomes (Wang et al., 2019). Thus, when employees are involved in the decision-making process, they will feel psychologically empowered and will share new ideas and information.

### **5.1.Theoretical implications**

Our study attempted to contribute to literature on the leadership domain. This study tried to fill the gap and explored the mediating role of psychological empowerment between humble leadership and knowledge hiding. Knowledge management is a complex process, and its exploration is vital in an organization (Endres & Chowdhury, 2022). Knowledge hiding is a prevailing behavior and is caused by leadership styles (Guo et al., 2021) and it was recommended to enrich the knowledge hiding literature by more empirical studies (Anand et al., 2022). Second, our study is a response to the recent call by Kumari et al., (2024) to explore leadership styles in relation with knowledge hiding, and further, the underlying mechanism of leadership style and knowledge hiding through psychological empowerment (Islam et al., 2023) because it has been recognized that leadership positions may only influence their staff's positive behavior by being empowered (Kim & Beehr, 2017).

### **5.2.Managerial implications**

Our study has a few practical implications. First, the managers may focus on knowledge-sharing behavior and may initiate steps to mitigate the knowledge-hiding behavior. Through knowledge, an organization may enjoy an advantage in markets. Similarly, leadership plays a critical role in enhancing novelty and better performance such that employees may share their ideas and knowledge. Employees who work in such a positive environment may believe that their company values them, and thus, they get the impression of being psychologically empowered and reciprocate not to hide knowledge. It is further suggested that while hiring, HR managers may pay attention to individual attributes, especially their behavior toward colleagues. This study revealed how humble leadership mitigate knowledge hiding behavior through psychological empowerment. To reduce workers' tendency to hide information, managers in organizations need to emphasize humble leadership significantly (Al Hawamdeh & AL-edenat, 2022).

The psychological needs of the employees may not be ignored by managers, rather it needs to be discussed, welcome new ideas, and participation in decision-making may be ensured. This may help in confirming and enhancing psychological empowerment and to diminution deviant behavior. Employees' proactive work behavior is influenced by psychological empowerment, which is a key mechanism of humble leadership. Managers may enhance employees' psychological empowerment by increasing their sense of purpose, self-determination, and sense of effect on desired organizational goals. Subordinate-based contingency factors significantly affect the efficacy of humble leadership. Humble leadership practices are more likely to improve followers' progressive behavior at work and psychological empowerment when employees identify more with the leader. Thus, to promote positive activities the leader needs to demonstrate honest concern for both work and personal matters which will reduce the negative behavior.

### **5.3.Limitations and recommendations**

Despite the novel contribution of this study, a few limitations were highlighted. First, this study followed a cross-sectional data collection procedure in different project-based organizations. Cross-sectional data may not precisely reveal how variables are dynamically interacting. Thus, it is suggested to follow the experimental or log-

tracking method in future studies for more precise results. Similarly, the population was drawn from project-based organizations where employees' knowledge and skills matter. It is assumed that employees may have competition for securing positions in upcoming projects if they share knowledge and new ideas. Knowledge is an essential aspect of all industries' innovation and progress (Nguyen et al., 2022). Further, permanent employees may not face the same issue; therefore, to replicate our model for generalizability, it would be vital to consider permanent employees. Second, we used only one leadership style, and we are not sure whether the other leadership styles, servant leadership and empowering leadership style may have the same results (Tariq et al., 2023). The third limitation of this study was that we did not consider the sub-dimension of knowledge hiding. Dimensions are important to be studied as sometimes due to sensitive information; specific information may not be shared with colleagues which would not be considered as knowledge hiding. Lastly, other psychological variables i.e. psychological contract breach may be considered as underlying mechanisms (Islam et al., 2023) to deepen the underlying mechanism between leadership styles and knowledge hiding.

#### **5.4. Conclusion**

To conclude, the results of our study confirmed that a humble leadership style and psychological empowerment can prevent employees from knowledge hiding. Additionally, through the incorporation of various theoretical perspectives, psychological empowerment has an indirect relationship between humble leadership and knowledge-hiding behavior. These findings highlight the need to formulate human resource strategies that combine psychological empowerment and humble leadership to prevent employees from deviant and negative behavior to improve organizational competitive edge.

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