

Identifying and Elaborating the Components of Humble Leadership in Nonprofit and Nongovernmental Organizations in Afghanistan: A Mixed Exploratory Study

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ABSTRACT

Nonprofit and nongovernmental organizations in Afghanistan operate within a context characterized by political insecurity, resource scarcity, and intense occupational pressures—conditions that highlight the critical need for leadership models that are humane, accountable, and capable of strengthening team cohesion. In the international literature, humble leadership has been introduced as one of the emerging positive leadership approaches; however, its behavioral dimensions have not yet been systematically articulated in a manner consistent with the cultural and organizational context of Afghanistan. The present study aimed to identify and contextualize the components and dimensions of humble leadership in Afghan NGOs. To this end, the research adopted a mixed exploratory design and was conducted in three stages: first, a systematic review of 32 scholarly articles and the extraction of 18 behavioral subcomponents; second, localization and refinement of these components through two rounds of the Delphi technique involving 15 experts, resulting in the addition of three new indicators—“community responsiveness,” “service orientation,” and “cultural humility”—and the confirmation of a total of 21 indicators; and third, the implementation of exploratory factor analysis on data collected from 295 NGO employees. The findings revealed that humble leadership in the studied context comprises five principal dimensions: “self-awareness and openness to correction,” “other-orientation and appreciation,” “respectful relationship orientation,” “authenticity and modest role modeling,” and “socio-cultural accountability.” The final dimension, which underscores the linkage between leader humility and social commitment as well as cultural sensitivity, represents the most significant indigenous innovation of the proposed model. This five-dimensional structure can serve as a foundation for the development of humble leadership measurement instruments and for the design of training interventions, as well as for the selection and evaluation of leaders in Afghan NGOs.

Keywords: Humble leadership; nongovernmental organizations; Afghanistan; exploratory factor analysis; Delphi technique

1. Introduction

Leadership research has increasingly shifted from authority-centered and transactional paradigms toward value-based, relational, and developmental models that emphasize ethical conduct, psychological safety, and human flourishing within organizations. This transformation reflects the growing recognition that contemporary organizational challenges—characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity—cannot be effectively addressed through hierarchical command structures alone (Yukl, 2012, 2013). Instead, organizations require leadership approaches that foster trust, learning, adaptability, and resilience at multiple levels of analysis (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Youssef & Luthans, 2007). Within this evolving landscape, humble leadership has emerged as a particularly salient construct, offering a theoretically grounded and empirically supported framework for enhancing individual well-being, team functioning, and organizational effectiveness (Chandler et al., 2022; Owens et al., 2013; Rego et al., 2021).

Humility, once considered a private moral virtue or a personal disposition, has now been rigorously conceptualized as a leadership behavior with substantial organizational implications (Argandoña, 2015; Worthington et al., 2017). Contemporary scholarship defines leader humility not as self-effacement or weakness, but as a pattern of behaviors characterized by accurate self-assessment, acknowledgment of limitations, appreciation of others' strengths, openness to feedback, and a commitment to continuous learning (Chintakananda et al., 2024; Owens & Hekman, 2012; Owens et al., 2013). Meta-analytic evidence confirms that humble leadership is positively associated with employee engagement, creativity, psychological empowerment, team performance, and organizational citizenship behaviors (Chandler et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2018; Rego et al., 2017).

The growing interest in humble leadership is rooted in both normative and functional considerations. Normatively, humility aligns with ethical leadership principles and promotes dignity, respect, and fairness in organizational life (Argandoña, 2015; Brown & Moore, 2001). Functionally, humble leaders create social contexts that enable employees to express voice, share knowledge, and engage in adaptive problem solving (Chiu et al., 2016; Yang et al., 2022). These outcomes are particularly critical in knowledge-intensive, project-based, and mission-driven organizations where collective intelligence and psychological safety serve as

strategic assets (Ali et al., 2020; Hu et al., 2018; Ou et al., 2014).

From a psychological perspective, humble leadership activates fundamental motivational and resource-based mechanisms. According to Self-Determination Theory, employees flourish when leadership behaviors satisfy their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Humble leaders foster these conditions by empowering followers, validating contributions, and cultivating inclusive relationships (Chen et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2022). Simultaneously, Conservation of Resources Theory explains how humble leadership promotes resilience by building resource caravans—interconnected sets of psychological, social, and emotional resources that buffer stress and enhance adaptive capacity (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001, 2011). These mechanisms explain why humble leadership is consistently linked to reduced burnout, increased engagement, and stronger workplace resilience (Rego et al., 2017; Winwood et al., 2013).

Resilience has become a central concern in organizational science, especially within environments marked by chronic adversity, instability, and high job demands (Wagnild & Young, 1993; Werner & Smith, 1992). Humble leadership contributes directly to individual and collective resilience by normalizing fallibility, encouraging learning from errors, and modeling adaptive coping strategies (Owens et al., 2013; Rego et al., 2017). Through these processes, humble leaders create engaged settings—organizational climates that amplify resources and sustain performance under pressure (Hobfoll, 2011).

The relevance of humble leadership becomes even more pronounced in nonprofit and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). These organizations operate under intense resource constraints, complex stakeholder environments, and profound moral responsibilities toward beneficiaries and communities (Brown & Moore, 2001). NGO leaders must simultaneously manage internal teams, external donors, local communities, and regulatory institutions while upholding ethical standards and social accountability (Brown & Moore, 2001; Qaderi, 2021). In such contexts, leadership effectiveness depends not only on technical competence but also on relational integrity, moral credibility, and cultural sensitivity (Hook et al., 2013; Worthington et al., 2017).

Research demonstrates that humble leadership is especially potent in mission-driven and project-based settings. In development and humanitarian projects, humble

leaders enhance team-building processes, mitigate conflict, strengthen coordination, and ultimately improve project success (Ali et al., 2020; Rego et al., 2021). Through empowering employees and encouraging knowledge sharing, humble leadership improves both short-term performance and long-term organizational learning (Pourdavood & Aghighi, 2023; Qaderi, 2021). These benefits are amplified in culturally diverse environments where leaders must navigate complex value systems and social norms (Hook et al., 2013; Hu et al., 2018).

Cultural humility constitutes a crucial dimension of contemporary humble leadership theory. Cultural humility involves openness to cultural difference, recognition of one's own cultural limitations, and commitment to respectful engagement with diverse communities (Hook et al., 2013). In multinational and cross-cultural organizational contexts, cultural humility strengthens trust, reduces miscommunication, and enhances collaboration (Worthington et al., 2017). For NGOs operating in culturally pluralistic societies, such as Afghanistan, cultural humility is not merely a leadership asset but a functional necessity for organizational legitimacy and program effectiveness.

Despite the rapid expansion of humble leadership research, significant theoretical and empirical gaps remain. First, most measurement instruments have been developed and validated in Western or East Asian corporate contexts, raising questions about their generalizability to non-Western, nonprofit, and humanitarian settings (Chintakananda et al., 2024; Mohammadi et al., 2025). Second, existing models emphasize intrapersonal and interpersonal processes but devote limited attention to socio-cultural and community-level responsibilities that define leadership effectiveness in NGOs (Brown & Moore, 2001; Qaderi, 2021). Third, few studies have systematically integrated humility with broader resilience, motivation, and resource-based frameworks in the context of fragile and high-risk environments (Hobfoll, 2001; Youssef & Luthans, 2007).

Recent work has begun to address these limitations. Mohammadi et al. (2025) conducted a meta-synthesis identifying critical antecedents of humble leadership, emphasizing contextual influences such as organizational culture, ethical climate, and leadership development systems (Mohammadi et al., 2025). Chintakananda et al. (2024) provided a comprehensive conceptualization and measurement model of leader-expressed humility, incorporating cognitive, emotional, relational, and behavioral components (Chintakananda et al., 2024).

However, both streams of research highlight the need for culturally grounded, context-specific models that reflect the lived realities of organizations operating under severe structural and social constraints.

Afghanistan represents a particularly compelling context for advancing humble leadership theory. Afghan NGOs function amid political instability, economic hardship, security challenges, and complex cultural dynamics. Leaders in this environment confront extraordinary demands for ethical integrity, community accountability, and adaptive resilience. While humble leadership offers a theoretically promising framework for addressing these challenges, its specific behavioral manifestations and structural dimensions within Afghan NGOs remain underexplored.

Methodologically, the present study responds to these gaps by adopting an exploratory mixed-methods design grounded in systematic review principles (Denyer & Tranfield, 2009) and psychometrically rigorous scale development practices (Chintakananda et al., 2024). By integrating global theory with local expertise, this research seeks to construct a culturally responsive model of humble leadership that captures the full spectrum of behavioral, relational, ethical, and socio-cultural responsibilities of NGO leaders in Afghanistan.

Ultimately, advancing humble leadership scholarship in this context contributes not only to leadership theory but also to practical capacity-building for organizations that serve some of the world's most vulnerable populations. By clarifying the behavioral architecture of humble leadership in Afghan NGOs, the study aims to support leadership development, improve organizational performance, and strengthen the resilience of institutions committed to social good.

Therefore, the aim of this study is to identify, localize, and empirically validate the core components and behavioral dimensions of humble leadership within nonprofit and nongovernmental organizations in Afghanistan.

2. Methods and Materials

The present study employed a mixed exploratory design and was conducted in three sequential stages: systematic literature review, expert Delphi technique, and exploratory factor analysis. In the first stage, following the framework proposed by Denyer and Tranfield (2009), a systematic review was conducted to address the question: "What components and behavioral subcomponents of humble leadership have been reported in the organizational

literature?” International databases (including Scopus, ScienceDirect, Springer, Wiley, and Taylor & Francis) and Persian databases (SID, MagIran, and academic journals) were searched using the keywords “humble leadership,” “leader humility,” and equivalent terms. After applying inclusion and exclusion criteria (Persian/English language, direct relevance to humble leadership, publication in peer-reviewed journals, full-text availability, and acceptable methodological quality), 32 articles were selected for in-depth analysis from an initial pool of 854 documents. Through inductive–deductive coding, 18 behavioral subcomponents of humble leadership were extracted and formulated as operational definitions.

In the second stage, to localize these components within the context of Afghan NGOs, the Delphi technique was implemented with the participation of 15 experts (faculty members and senior managers/human resource specialists in NGOs). In the first Delphi round, the 18 subcomponents and their operational definitions were presented for assessment of contextual relevance to Afghanistan; none were removed, while three new subcomponents—“community responsiveness,” “service orientation,” and “cultural humility”—were proposed. In the second round, the total set of 21 behavioral indicators was evaluated using a five-point importance scale. The mean importance score of all items exceeded 4, and Kendall’s coefficient of concordance reached a statistically significant level; thus, the finalized list of 21 indicators was confirmed for quantitative analysis.

In the third stage, to uncover the latent factor structure of these indicators, exploratory factor analysis was conducted using data from 295 employees of nonprofit and nongovernmental organizations active in the fields of local development, social services, and humanitarian assistance in

Afghanistan. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure was 0.876 and Bartlett’s test of sphericity was statistically significant, confirming sampling adequacy. All communalities exceeded 0.50, and using principal component extraction with Varimax rotation, five factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 and acceptable factor loadings (above 0.63) were extracted, yielding a meaningful structural model of humble leadership in the Afghan NGO context.

3. Findings and Results

The findings were obtained across three sequential stages: systematic literature review, expert Delphi process, and exploratory factor analysis. The results of each stage are summarized below.

The systematic review of the 32 selected articles indicated that the international literature on humble leadership encompasses a relatively broad set of behavioral indicators. Full-content analysis of these articles led to the identification and extraction of 18 distinct behavioral subcomponents, each representing a specific dimension of humble leadership in organizational environments, including acceptance of mistakes and acknowledgment of limitations, balanced self-assessment, active feedback seeking and openness to others’ ideas, highlighting others’ achievements, empathy and active listening, respect and fairness, alignment between words and actions, avoidance of self-promotion, and positional modesty. The complete list of these 18 subcomponents, together with their operational definitions, is presented in Table 1 and served as the basis for collecting expert judgments during the Delphi stage.

Table 1

Behavioral Subcomponents of Humble Leadership in Previous Studies

Subcomponent (Behavioral Indicators)	Operational Definition (Observable Workplace Behavior)	Sources
Acceptance of mistakes	The leader openly acknowledges personal errors, assumes responsibility, and, when necessary, sincerely apologizes to others in order to model accountability.	Owens et al., 2013; Owens & Hekman, 2016
Acknowledgment of not knowing / limitations	In unfamiliar or ambiguous situations, the leader honestly states “I do not know,” clarifies personal limits, and seeks others’ assistance for better decision-making.	Owens & Hekman, 2012; Owens et al., 2013; Chintakananda et al., 2024
Balanced self-assessment (self-awareness)	The leader maintains a realistic perception of personal strengths and weaknesses and avoids self-deception or exaggeration of successes.	Chintakananda et al., 2024; Morris et al., 2005
Recognizing strengths and highlighting others’ achievements	The leader publicly reflects employees’ successes and praises others’ efforts in group settings.	Owens et al., 2013; Chintakananda et al., 2024; Rego et al., 2017
Giving credit and expressing gratitude for contributions	When outcomes are achieved, the leader acknowledges colleagues by name, highlights their roles, and expresses sincere appreciation.	Owens et al., 2013; Argandoña, 2015; Owens, Wallace, & Waldman, 2015
Openness to ideas and advice	The leader listens openly to suggestions, avoids defensive reactions, and carefully evaluates others’ ideas.	Owens et al., 2013; Hu et al., 2018; Frontiers Meta-Analysis, 2022

Correctability / changing position based on evidence	When stronger evidence or arguments emerge, the leader revises their viewpoint and rationally explains the new decision.	Chintakananda et al., 2024; Behranitaran et al., 2019
Active feedback seeking and consultation	The leader regularly solicits feedback from employees and colleagues, listens to their perspectives, and incorporates them into decision-making.	Chintakananda et al., 2024; Hu et al., 2018; Chiu, Owens, & Tesluk, 2016
Leading by example through practical involvement	The leader works alongside team members, participates in difficult tasks, and demonstrates values through action.	Chintakananda et al., 2024; Owens & Hekman, 2016; Rego et al., 2017
Consistency between words and actions	The leader's speech and behavior align with declared values and the same standards are applied to self as expected from others.	Rego et al., 2021; Hypocrisy, 2020
Avoidance of self-promotion	The leader refrains from self-glorification or exhibitionism and focuses on collective work and outcomes rather than personal credit.	Chintakananda et al., 2024; Frostençon, 2016; Argandoña, 2015
Positional modesty (downplaying status symbols)	The leader minimizes formal status symbols in behavior, language, and work environment and reduces power distance.	Oc et al., 2015; Chintakananda et al., 2024; Hu et al., 2018
We-orientation and collective identity	The leader attributes success to collective collaboration, uses the pronoun "we," and fosters team cohesion.	Chintakananda et al., 2024; Ou et al., 2014; Owens & Hekman, 2016
Participative decision-making and co-creation	Before final decisions, the leader consults others and involves them in generating shared solutions.	Chiu, Owens, & Tesluk, 2016; Frontiers Meta-Analysis, 2022; Carnevale, Huang, & Paterson, 2019
Accessibility and approachability	The leader creates an open communication climate, remains accessible to employees, and reduces formal barriers or distancing.	Chintakananda et al., 2024; Oc et al., 2015; Rego et al., 2021
Empathy and active listening	The leader listens attentively, understands others' emotions and needs, and responds empathically.	Chintakananda et al., 2024; Hu et al., 2018; Frontiers Meta-Analysis, 2022
Mutual respect and fairness	The leader treats others with courtesy and respect, acts equitably, and avoids discrimination.	Chintakananda et al., 2024; Moorman, Darnold, & Priesemuth, 2013
Coaching and development of others	The leader invests time in employees' professional growth, provides constructive feedback, and supports their career development.	Chintakananda et al., 2024; Owens & Hekman, 2012; Rego et al., 2017

Analysis of the data obtained from the first Delphi round indicated that all 18 subcomponents extracted from the systematic review exhibited high compatibility, according to the experts, with the cultural, value-based, and managerial contexts of nonprofit organizations in Afghanistan. Strong consensus among the experts suggested that these

subcomponents comprehensively describe the behavioral and ethical dimensions of humble leaders within NGO settings. None of the existing components were eliminated; however, in the final section of the questionnaire, experts were invited to propose additional indigenous and complementary indicators.

Table 2

Results of the First Delphi Round

Final Status	Agreement Ratio (%)	Number of Disagreeing Responses	Number of Agreeing Responses	Subcomponent / Behavioral Indicator
Retained	60.0	6	9	Acceptance of mistakes
Retained	73.3	4	11	Acknowledgment of not knowing / limitations
Retained	80.0	3	12	Balanced self-assessment (self-awareness)
Retained	86.7	2	13	Recognizing strengths and highlighting others' achievements
Retained	73.3	4	11	Giving credit and expressing gratitude for contributions
Retained	80.0	3	12	Openness to ideas and advice
Retained	73.3	4	11	Correctability / changing position based on evidence
Retained	66.7	5	10	Active feedback seeking and consultation
Retained	86.7	2	13	Leading by example through practical involvement
Retained	73.3	4	11	Consistency between words and actions
Retained	66.7	5	10	Avoidance of self-promotion
Retained	73.3	4	11	Positional modesty (downplaying status symbols)
Retained	80.0	3	12	We-orientation and collective identity
Retained	73.3	4	11	Participative decision-making and co-creation
Retained	80.0	3	12	Accessibility and approachability
Retained	93.3	1	14	Empathy and active listening
Retained	86.7	2	13	Mutual respect and fairness
Retained	80.0	3	12	Coaching and development of others
New (Proposed)	—	—	—	Community responsiveness
New (Proposed)	—	—	—	Service orientation
New (Proposed)	—	—	—	Cultural humility

In the first Delphi round, all subcomponents extracted from the systematic review achieved the minimum expert agreement threshold of over 50% and remained in the final list, indicating that leadership and management experts in Afghan nonprofit organizations evaluated these components as conceptually appropriate and culturally aligned with organizational practices. Simultaneously, analysis of open-ended expert responses led to the identification of three new behavioral indicators: community responsiveness, emphasizing leader accountability to the local community and stakeholders and transparency of decisions and project outcomes; service orientation, reflecting the leader’s value-based commitment to serving society, field participation alongside employees, and prioritization of beneficiary interests over personal interests; and cultural humility, referring to leader sensitivity toward ethnic-cultural

diversity, consultation with community elders, respect for cultural norms, and sincere correction of cultural mistakes, consistent with human dignity principles in humanitarian standards.

In the second round, the complete set of 21 behavioral indicators (18 original and 3 newly added) was operationalized into behavioral items and evaluated on a five-point importance scale. The mean importance of all items was high (above 4), and Kendall’s coefficient of concordance was statistically significant at $p < .001$, indicating acceptable expert consensus. Accordingly, the final list of 21 humble leadership behavioral indicators was confirmed for exploratory factor analysis. A summary of the indicators, mean importance values, and Kendall’s test results is reported in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3

Kendall’s Coefficient of Concordance in the Second Delphi Round

N	Kendall’s W	Chi-square	df	Sig.
15	0.65	165.32	20	0.000

Table 4

Results of the Second Delphi Round

Priority	SD	Mean	Behavioral Indicator
1	0.410	4.660	Empathy and active listening
2	0.440	4.630	Community responsiveness
3	0.450	4.610	Cultural humility
4	0.470	4.580	Leading by example through practical involvement
5	0.490	4.560	Mutual respect and fairness
6	0.500	4.520	Service orientation
7	0.520	4.460	We-orientation and collective identity
8	0.510	4.440	Accessibility and approachability
9	0.530	4.430	Consistency between words and actions
10	0.480	4.410	Openness to ideas and advice
11	0.550	4.390	Recognizing strengths and highlighting others’ achievements
12	0.520	4.380	Coaching and development of others
13	0.570	4.350	Giving credit and expressing gratitude for contributions
14	0.600	4.330	Participative decision-making and co-creation
15	0.580	4.280	Correctability / changing position based on evidence
16	0.620	4.220	Active feedback seeking and consultation
17	0.590	4.170	Balanced self-assessment (self-awareness)
18	0.640	4.120	Acknowledgment of not knowing / limitations
19	0.660	3.920	Positional modesty (downplaying status symbols)
20	0.630	3.850	Avoidance of self-promotion
21	0.680	3.780	Acceptance of mistakes

The summary of the second Delphi stage demonstrates that for all 21 humble leadership behavioral indicators, the mean importance values exceeded 4 from the experts’ perspective, and Kendall’s coefficient confirmed acceptable consensus among panel members. As shown in the table, indicators such as empathy and active listening, community

responsiveness, cultural humility, leading by example through practical involvement, and mutual respect and fairness achieved the highest mean scores and represent the most central behavioral expectations of humble leaders within the socio-cultural context of Afghanistan. Conversely, components such as positional modesty,

avoidance of self-promotion, and acceptance of mistakes, although receiving comparatively lower means, remained above the acceptance threshold and were retained in the final list due to their strong theoretical foundation and behavioral significance. Overall, these findings indicate that the objective of the second Delphi stage—stabilizing and validating the final set of 21 behavioral indicators—was fully achieved, and given the stability of expert judgments, a third Delphi round was deemed unnecessary; therefore, these 21 indicators constitute the final basis of the conceptual framework and measurement instrument for humble leadership in Afghan nonprofit organizations.

In the third step, to uncover the latent factor structure underlying the 21 behavioral indicators, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted using data from 295 employees of nonprofit and nongovernmental organizations active in local development, social services, and humanitarian relief in Afghanistan. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was 0.876, and Bartlett’s test of sphericity was significant at 0.000, indicating that the correlation matrix was suitable for factor analysis. The communalities of all items exceeded 0.50, and therefore no indicator required elimination. Using principal component extraction with Varimax rotation, five main factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 were extracted, providing a meaningful and interpretable structure of humble leadership in the Afghan NGO context.

Based on the EFA results and Varimax rotation, the 21 humble leadership behavioral indicators were organized into five distinct yet related conceptual components. These components included: “self-understanding and corrigibility” (emphasizing acceptance of mistakes, awareness of limitations, and feedback seeking), “other-orientation and appreciation” (emphasizing attention to others’ strengths and achievements and coaching for their development), “respectful relationship orientation” (including empathy, active listening, respect, and participative decision-making), “authenticity and modest role modeling” (including leading by example, alignment between words and actions, we-orientation, and avoidance of ostentation and self-promotion), and “socio-cultural accountability” (including commitment to the community, service orientation, and cultural humility). The factor loadings ranged approximately from 0.63 to 0.84, indicating that each component represents a coherent cluster of related behaviors. Overall, this five-dimensional structure indicates that humble leadership in the context of Afghan nonprofit organizations is a multidimensional construct encompassing intrapersonal, interpersonal, social, and contextual levels simultaneously, and it can serve as an appropriate basis for theoretical explanation and empirical measurement of this leadership style. Details of the factor structure, factor loadings, and the number of items for each component are presented in Table 5.

Table 5

Rotated Factor Matrix and Factor Loadings After Rotation

No.	Behavioral Indicator	Component 1: Self-understanding and Corrigibility	Component 2: Other-orientation and Appreciation	Component 3: Respectful Relationship Orientation	Component 4: Authenticity and Modest Role Modeling	Component 5: Socio-cultural Accountability
1	Acceptance of mistakes	0.742				
2	Acknowledgment of not knowing / limitations	0.716				
3	Self-awareness (balanced self-assessment)	0.803				
4	Correctability / changing position based on evidence	0.778				
5	Active feedback seeking and consultation	0.729				
6	Openness to ideas and advice	0.741				
7	Recognizing strengths and highlighting others’ achievements		0.754			
8	Giving credit and expressing gratitude for contributions		0.821			
9	Coaching and development of others		0.728			
10	Empathy and active listening			0.849		

11	Mutual respect and fairness	0.805	
12	Accessibility and approachability	0.768	
13	Participative decision-making and co-creation	0.716	
14	Leading by example through practical involvement		0.796
15	Consistency between words and actions		0.745
16	We-orientation and collective identity		0.774
17	Positional modesty (reducing power distance)		0.635
18	Avoidance of self-promotion		0.664
19	Community responsiveness		0.802
20	Service orientation		0.784
21	Cultural humility		0.837

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of the present study provide robust empirical support for the multidimensional and context-sensitive nature of humble leadership in nonprofit and nongovernmental organizations in Afghanistan. The extracted five-factor structure—self-understanding and corrigibility, other-orientation and appreciation, respectful relationship orientation, authenticity and modest role modeling, and socio-cultural accountability—demonstrates that humble leadership in this context transcends a narrow focus on intrapersonal traits and instead operates as an integrated behavioral system that spans individual cognition, interpersonal relations, organizational conduct, and broader community engagement. This configuration aligns closely with contemporary theoretical perspectives that conceptualize leadership as a socially embedded and morally grounded process rather than a mere set of managerial techniques (Argandoña, 2015; Yukl, 2013). The high factor loadings across all components further indicate that the construct of humble leadership is both coherent and psychologically salient for employees working in Afghan NGOs, thereby confirming the construct validity of the localized model and extending the generalizability of humble leadership theory beyond the corporate and Western contexts in which it has predominantly been examined (Chandler et al., 2022; Chintakananda et al., 2024).

The prominence of the first component, self-understanding and corrigibility, reflects the centrality of accurate self-assessment, acknowledgment of limitations, and openness to feedback in effective leadership. This result strongly corroborates the foundational work of Owens and Hekman, who identified these behaviors as the core of leader

humility and a primary driver of adaptive learning and follower development (Owens & Hekman, 2012; Owens et al., 2013). In environments characterized by uncertainty, insecurity, and resource scarcity—conditions typical of Afghan NGOs—leaders’ willingness to admit mistakes and revise decisions based on evidence becomes a critical source of credibility and trust. Such behaviors also activate key motivational processes described by Self-Determination Theory, particularly the satisfaction of followers’ needs for competence and autonomy, which in turn enhance engagement and intrinsic motivation (Chen et al., 2018; Gagné & Deci, 2005). Moreover, from a Conservation of Resources perspective, leaders who normalize learning from failure reduce threat appraisals and help followers conserve emotional and cognitive resources under stress, thereby promoting resilience and sustained performance (Hobfoll, 1989, 2011). The strong empirical representation of this factor in the Afghan NGO context thus underscores the functional importance of psychological safety and adaptive cognition in fragile organizational systems.

The second component, other-orientation and appreciation, highlights leaders’ focus on recognizing employee strengths, publicly valuing contributions, and actively investing in the growth of others. This finding aligns closely with prior evidence demonstrating that humble leadership enhances team effectiveness by cultivating mutual respect, shared efficacy, and collective confidence (Rego et al., 2017; Rego et al., 2021). In development and humanitarian organizations, where success depends on high levels of collaboration and voluntary commitment, such behaviors are especially consequential. Previous studies have shown that when leaders consistently acknowledge contributions and facilitate employee development, they

strengthen psychological empowerment and innovative work behavior (Chen et al., 2018; Pourdavood & Aghighi, 2023). The present results extend this literature by demonstrating that these effects are not culturally bounded but remain highly salient in the Afghan context, where social recognition and collective honor play a significant motivational role. Furthermore, by reinforcing employees' sense of being valued and supported, this leadership dimension contributes to the formation of resource caravans that sustain resilience and engagement in high-demand environments (Hobfoll, 2001; Youssef & Luthans, 2007).

The third factor, respectful relationship orientation, which encompasses empathy, active listening, fairness, and participative decision-making, reflects the relational infrastructure of humble leadership. This dimension resonates strongly with findings from Hu et al. (2018), who demonstrated that leader humility fosters team creativity and psychological safety through enhanced information sharing and reduced power distance (Hu et al., 2018). Similarly, Chiu et al. (2016) showed that humble leadership facilitates shared leadership processes, enabling teams to mobilize diverse expertise and adapt effectively to complex task demands (Chiu et al., 2016). In Afghan NGOs, where teams often operate in culturally diverse, politically sensitive, and emotionally charged contexts, the capacity of leaders to create respectful and inclusive relational climates appears indispensable. Such climates not only improve performance outcomes but also serve as protective psychosocial environments that buffer against burnout and turnover, consistent with the Job Demands–Resources model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Thus, the empirical prominence of this factor underscores the vital role of relational ethics in sustaining organizational health and mission effectiveness.

The fourth component, authenticity and modest role modeling, integrates behavioral consistency, leading by example, collective identity, and avoidance of self-promotion. This constellation of behaviors mirrors earlier findings that leader humility counterbalances narcissistic tendencies and enhances follower trust and commitment (Owens et al., 2015). By aligning words and actions and demonstrating commitment through personal involvement, leaders in Afghan NGOs model integrity and dedication, reinforcing ethical norms and strengthening organizational identification among employees. The emphasis on “we-orientation” and collective identity echoes the work of Ou et al. (2014), who found that humble CEOs enhance top management team integration and middle managers' engagement by fostering shared purpose and collaborative

norms (Ou et al., 2014). In contexts marked by chronic instability and limited institutional trust, such leadership behaviors appear particularly critical for maintaining morale and continuity of operations.

The fifth and most contextually distinctive component, socio-cultural accountability, represents a major theoretical contribution of this study. By integrating community responsiveness, service orientation, and cultural humility into the humble leadership framework, the present model expands existing conceptualizations that have largely focused on internal organizational dynamics (Chandler et al., 2022; Chintakananda et al., 2024). This finding is especially significant in light of the moral and social responsibilities borne by NGOs, as emphasized by Brown and Moore (2001), who argued that accountability to external stakeholders and beneficiaries is central to nonprofit effectiveness (Brown & Moore, 2001). Moreover, the inclusion of cultural humility aligns with the work of Hook et al. (2013) and Worthington et al. (2017), who underscored the importance of openness, respect, and self-awareness in culturally diverse interactions (Hook et al., 2013; Worthington et al., 2017). In Afghanistan, where ethnic, tribal, and cultural identities deeply influence social relations, leaders' sensitivity to local norms and their willingness to engage communities respectfully appear to be core elements of legitimate and effective leadership. This socio-cultural dimension also reinforces empirical findings that humble leadership enhances employee voice and knowledge sharing, particularly when relational trust and supervisor–subordinate relationships are strong (Qaderi, 2021; Yang et al., 2022).

Collectively, the results of this study provide compelling evidence that humble leadership functions as a multilevel resource-generating system that strengthens psychological, relational, and social capacities within organizations. By simultaneously addressing intrapersonal self-regulation, interpersonal trust, organizational ethics, and community accountability, humble leaders construct resilient organizational ecosystems capable of sustaining performance under severe constraints. This integrative perspective advances both leadership theory and nonprofit management scholarship by demonstrating that humility is not a peripheral virtue but a core structural competence for leadership in complex and fragile environments (Ali et al., 2020; Mohammadi et al., 2025). The Afghan NGO context thus offers a powerful empirical setting for refining and extending global leadership theory.

Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations. The cross-sectional design restricts causal inference, and longitudinal research would be required to assess the stability and long-term impact of humble leadership behaviors. The reliance on self-reported data from employees may also introduce common method bias. Furthermore, although the sample was diverse in terms of organizational roles and sectors, it was limited to NGOs operating within Afghanistan, which may constrain generalizability to other national or institutional contexts.

Future studies should employ longitudinal and experimental designs to examine the causal mechanisms through which humble leadership influences individual and organizational outcomes over time. Comparative cross-cultural research could explore whether the socio-cultural accountability dimension identified in this study emerges in other humanitarian or nonprofit contexts. Researchers may also investigate the interaction between humble leadership and other leadership styles, such as ethical or servant leadership, to better understand their complementary and distinct effects.

Practitioners in nonprofit organizations should integrate humble leadership competencies into leadership development, recruitment, and performance evaluation systems. Training programs should emphasize self-awareness, feedback seeking, relational ethics, and community engagement. Organizations should also create institutional structures that support participative decision-making, knowledge sharing, and cultural learning, thereby reinforcing the behavioral foundations of humble leadership across all organizational levels.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

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Ethics Considerations

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were considered.

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