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An examination of whether and how leader humility enhances leader personal career success

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Abstract

Humble leaders are traditionally thought to create a great deal of human and social capital, yet be overshadowed by self-promoting rivals for promotions. We propose that through informal career mentoring, humble leaders can improve their organizational status and promotability. We tested our model among a multisource sample of 610 leaders across 18 industries and 21 job functions who participated in a leader development program. Leader humility was reported by the focal leaders' peers, leader mentoring behavior was reported by the focal leaders' direct reports, leader status was reported by the focal leaders' immediate bosses, and leader promotability was reported by the focal leaders' superiors. Results generally confirmed that leader humility predicted leader mentoring behavior, which in turn predicted leader status, and ultimately higher leader promotability ratings. We discuss how our findings extend and enrich the literatures on leader humility and mentoring, showing how humble leaders can ascend organizational hierarchies.

KEYWORDS
human capital, leader humility, leader promotability, leadership, mentoring, status

1 | INTRODUCTION

Humble leaders, defined by their willingness to view themselves accurately, admit mistakes, appreciate others' strengths and contributions, and demonstrate teachability (Owens & Hekman, 2012), provide an array of benefits that increase the human and social capital of individual followers, teams, and entire organizations (Chiu et al., 2022; Rego et al., 2019, 2022). First, at the follower level, humble leaders enhance psychological freedom, self-expansion, task performance, job engagement, authenticity, and job satisfaction, while also fostering a similar sense of humility in their followers (Mao et al., 2019; Oc et al., 2020; Ou et al., 2017; Owens et al., 2013). At the team level, humble leaders contribute to a team promotion focus, improved team performance and psychological safety within teams, fueling creativity, and voice behavior among team members (Hu et al., 2018; Owens & Hekman, 2016; Rego et al., 2019, 2021). Finally, at the organizational level, humble leadership enhances overall employee engagement and reduces turnover, leading to a more stable and motivated workforce (Ou et al., 2014; Ou et al., 2017). Humble leadership has also been shown to be distinct from other leadership styles such as transformational, charismatic, authentic, servant, and ethical leadership (Owens et al., 2011).

Although leader humility benefits followers, teams and organizations (Lee et al., 2019; Li et al., 2021; Ma et al., 2020), conventional wisdom is that humility fails to help leaders themselves advance in their own careers (Collins, 2001; Pfeffer, 2015) and this may have negative implications for human resource management (HRM) practices. Indeed, non-humble leaders tend to enjoy tremendous career success as they have high levels of pay (Spurk et al., 2016), organizational rank (Anderson et al., 2012), job security (O'Reilly III

et al., 2014), and even job satisfaction (Wille et al., 2013). Certainly one does not have to look far to find a non-humble, self-promoting, controlling, and dominating CEO, which is perhaps why some writers believe that humble leaders remain rare at the highest organizational levels (e.g., Chamorro-Premuzic, 2020; Collins, 2001). As Collins (2001, p. 75) concludes about this situation, "boards of directors frequently operate under the false belief that a larger-than-life, egocentric leader is required to make a company great, which is why humble leaders rarely appear at the top of our institutions." Pfeff (2015, p. 69) echoes this sentiment in his book on power, as he suggests that "humility is exceptionally rare in CEOs, and [humility] may not be such a good thing for getting to the top, or staying there."

It is easy to imagine why humble leaders may have greater difficulty attaining and maintaining positions of organizational power. For example, a hallmark of leader humility is disclosing weaknesses, which makes such disclosers highly vulnerable to being attacked, undermined and delegitimized by rivals (Gibson et al., 2018). This problem could be made worse by humble leaders publicly appreciating their rivals' strengths, which could raise rivals' status in the eyes of important decision makers (Blader & Yu, 2017). Finally, leader humility involves modeling teachability, whereby leaders "eagerly and publicly engage in the messy process of growing" (Owens & Hekman, 2012, p. 801), and such a public, messy growth process might further expose humble leaders to attack and thereby hinder their career prospects.

Thus, it is reasonable to assume that humble leaders face a promotability disadvantage compared to their less humble counterparts and this could negatively impact humble leaders' career management (Baruch, 2006). However, grounded in human capital theory (Becker, 1964; Schultz, 1961), we focus on understanding how humble leaders might capture some of the human capital value they create and gain career success in terms of increased promotability. The core tenets of human capital theory are that leaders and individuals can create human capital in themselves and their employees through "investments" that improve health, longevity and tenure, or boost knowledge and skills via on-the-job training, formal education, and informal training programs (Becker, 1964; Schultz, 1961). However, one of the main downsides of human capital is that it is portable, as the employee, rather than the organization, owns the human capital (Sweetland, 1996), which is one reason why it is challenging for leaders and organizations to capture their human capital investments (Gathmann & Schönberg, 2010; van der Meer-Kooistra & Zijlstra, 2001). We assert that humble leaders, by engaging in informal career mentoring behaviors, can elevate their own organizational status. Humble leaders provide career support and guidance to protégés through mentoring (Kram, 1985) and this, in turn, can lead to capturing the human capital value they generate via enhanced promotability ratings. This also has implications on HRM practices which take human capital into consideration.

The purpose of our research is to examine how humble leaders can overcome the prevailing notions of humility as a career disadvantage and advance their own careers. We suggest that humble leaders naturally engage in behaviors that put them on a status, rather than dominance, track upward (Cheng, 2020; Cheng et al., 2013). Specifically, we propose that informal career mentoring helps humble leaders gain status, which, in turn, enhances their promotability. By drawing from theories of leader humility (Ou et al., 2017; Owens & Hekman, 2012) in conjunction with human capital theory (Becker, 1964; Schultz, 1961), we enrich the body of work on leader humility by focusing on how humility affects leader career outcomes. We show that when leaders display humble behavior in mentoring relationships, they enhance their own status and promotability.

In addition, we contribute to the mentoring literature (Allen et al., 2004, 2017; Ragins & Cotton, 1999; also see Haggard et al., 2011 for a review) by identifying a novel antecedent of informal career mentoring—leader humility. Mentoring has been linked to several trait and relational predictors, including career rewards, gender, previous mentoring experience, openness to experience, and the desire to mentor others (Allen, 2003; Allen & Eby, 2004; Aryee et al., 1996; Bozionelos, 2004; Fagenson-Eland et al., 1997), yet research on which types of leaders are inclined to mentor is sparse (Ghosh & Reio, 2013). Thus, identifying a leadership predictor of mentoring is novel and implies that there may be other leadership traits, behaviors and styles that may also foster mentoring behavior. In so doing, we help show how informal career mentoring can benefit mentors themselves. Specifically, we propose that by seeking to advance protégés' careers, humble leader mentors boost their own career prospects, and, perhaps more importantly, uncover the mechanism for this effect—increased mentor status. Indeed, authors of a mentoring meta-analysis concluded that, "research is needed to determine how providing mentoring impacts a mentor's career" (Ghosh & Reio, 2013, p. 106).

2 | TOWARD A THEORY OF HOW HUMBLE LEADERS GAIN PROMOTABILITY

We begin by laying out our theoretical arguments regarding whether and how humility affects leaders' promotability within organizations. We follow most organizational humility researchers by focusing on how leaders express humility's interpersonal and observable properties (Owens et al., 2013), while acknowledging other various conceptualizations of humility (Davis et al., 2011; Leary et al., 2017; Lee & Ashton, 2004). For example, some of these other approaches view humility as a personality trait (Ashton & Lee, 2008), a low level of narcissism (Crowe et al., 2019), or a non-entitlement belief (Banker & Leary, 2020). Moreover, expressed leader humility is distinct from related constructs such as transformational (Bass, 1985; Bass & Avolio, 1994), servant (Greenleaf & Spears, 2002; Van Dierendonck, 2011), paradoxical (Zhang et al., 2015), and Level 5 leadership (Collins, 2001). Transformational leadership involves charismatic leaders inspiring and guiding change in tandem with group members (Bass, 1985), whereas servant leadership centers on the prioritization of follower development for its own sake (Ehrhart, 2004). Paradoxical leadership denotes the balance and simultaneous expression of opposite behaviors, such as combining self-centeredness with other-centeredness (Zhang et al., 2015), whereas Level 5 leadership involves the co-expression of "humility and fierce resolve" (Collins, 2001, p. 136).

In contrast, humble leadership accentuates incremental growth and feedback receptivity over charismatic vision-casting, differentiating it from transformational leadership (Ou et al., 2014, 2017; Owens & Hekman, 2012). Transformational leadership also involves channeling transcendence into a strong vision that is typically top down from a charismatic leader (Bass & Riggio, 2006). In contrast, humility is more about channeling transcendence into admitting mistakes and shortcomings, appreciating follower strengths and contributions, and being teachable (Owens & Hekman, 2012). Unlike servant leadership, humility legitimizes uncertainty, fosters psychological freedom, and encourages leader–follower role reversals (Ou et al., 2017; Owens & Hekman, 2012). Despite parallels with paradoxical and Level 5 leadership, humble leadership uniquely promotes transparency in leaders' developmental processes, continuous adaptation, organizational fluidity, and the enhancement of leader–follower psychological freedom (Owens & Hekman, 2012).

2.1 | Human capital theory

Leader humility tends to be conceptualized as a construct that fosters growth in human capital. Indeed, Rego et al. (2019, p. 1030) suggested that leader humility "helps build followers' human capital," and "enhances social capital through shaping positive networks in teams" (Chiu et al., 2022, p. 522), and "helps employees develop greater psychological capital, thereby making them more able to improvise" (Rego et al., 2022, p. 115). Human capital theory, as proposed by Becker (1964), emphasizes the importance of investing in employees' skills, knowledge, and abilities to increase their value and productivity. HR practices that focus on leader humility and fostering mentoring relationships can enhance employees' human capital by promoting learning, skill development, and professional growth. As employees' human capital increases, they are more likely to achieve career success and contribute to the overall performance of the organization (Wright & McMahan, 2011).

We suggest that humble leaders can capture some of the human capital value they create by engaging in informal career mentoring, which then boosts their status (i.e., they become more prestigious, respected, and prominent; Djurdjevic et al., 2017), and ultimately their promotability. Some leaders take a dominance track to the top, characterized by inflicting costs on others, but we suggest humble leaders naturally take a status track to the top, which involves benefitting others. As noted above, conventional wisdom and research show that dominant and coercive behaviors are effective at helping individuals be selected for leadership positions and gaining higher salaries (Anderson & Kilduff, 2009; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Notwithstanding the career benefits of being a domineering leader, humble leadership could be another pathway that leads to higher organizational levels.

Mentoring involves a developmental relationship in which the mentor, who is usually a senior and experienced person, provides support for protégés' personal and career growth and development (Kram, 1985). Although most organizations have formal mentoring programs (e.g., 84 % of Fortune 500 companies; Cantalupo, 2022), we focus on arguably the most consequential and effective type of mentoring—informal mentoring—which is not only more beneficial than formal mentoring to protégés (Eby et al., 2013; Ragins & Cotton, 1999) but also these benefits likely accrue to mentors (Ghosh & Reio, 2013). Indeed, in their informal mentoring review, Janssen et al. (2016, p. 499) note that informal mentoring relationships are "more intense" for both parties, and Liu et al. (2021, p. 280) note that "mentor motives [such as those driven by leader humility] are best observed" in informal mentoring relationships. Thus, we target informal mentoring because it is likely the most consequential and beneficial type of mentoring for both protégés and mentors (Eby et al., 2013; Ragins & Cotton, 1999). In an informal career mentoring relationship, mentors and protégés mutually identify with and select each other, and the relationship is based on perceived competence and interpersonal comfort, and mentors provide protégés with guidance and career support (Ragins & Cotton, 1999). Likewise, we focus on the career/instrumental function of mentoring (rather than psychosocial or role modeling functions; Kram, 1985) because career outcomes such as promotions and promotability are some of the most commonly studied and consequential mentoring outcomes (Eby et al., 2013). Although leaders (direct supervisors) may not be mentors of their subordinates, they often are, as one study showed that 47 % of protégés in informal mentoring relationships reported their direct supervisor was their mentor (Ragins et al., 2017). Finally, we follow most research and focus on mentoring benefits (Eby et al., 2013; Ghosh & Reio, 2013), while acknowledging that if individuals endure in negative mentoring relationships, mentors and protégés will tend become less effective at work due to ego depletion (Hu et al., 2021; Wu et al., 2019).

Humble leaders gravitate toward mentoring behavior because humble leaders naturally tend to "legitimize follower growth and development" (Owens & Hekman, 2012, p. 802), and are motivated to "share power with others" (Ou et al., 2014, p. 40). Helping others develop and grow by giving away power and advice via informal mentoring relationships is a natural expression of humble leadership. Likewise, humble leaders tend to foster psychologically safe, and open environments characterized by authentic workplace relationships and a collective promotion focus (Lehmann et al., 2022; Oc et al., 2020; Owens & Hekman, 2016; Wang et al., 2018), and such supportive contexts are critical for informal mentoring relationships to thrive (Robotham et al., 2022). Furthermore, humble leaders identify and appreciate the strengths of their followers, without feeling threatened or intimidated (Ou et al., 2017). They focus on harnessing and developing these strengths (Wang et al., 2018), which is an attribute vital for a protégé's career progression (Scandura & Williams, 2004). Additionally, because humble leaders desire to participate in "mutually developmental relationships" with those in their sphere of influence, humble leaders may also be more likely to engage in mentoring relationships at work (Owens & Hekman, 2012, p. 810).

Taken together, leader humility naturally fosters informal mentoring relationships that serve to boost protégés' careers because humble leaders tend to support followers' personal and career growth. Indeed,

Owens and Hekman (2012) noted that in a sample of 17 executives rated by their direct reports, the item "Demonstrates personal humility" was strongly correlated with "Takes time to develop and mentor his/her staff," $r = 0.70$, $p < 0.05$, suggesting that leader humility and leader mentoring behavior are related, yet distinct constructs. Accordingly, humble leaders will naturally tend to engage in informal mentoring behaviors that serve a career or an instrumental function for protégés.

> **Hypothesis 1.** Leader humility will be positively associated with leader informal career mentoring behavior.

Next, we reason that informal career mentoring enhances leader status within an organization, regardless of whether the leader is viewed through the eyes of subordinates, peers, or bosses. Status reflects one's standing in an organization (Djurdjevic et al., 2017) due to one's social worth (i.e., respect; Rogers & Ashforth, 2017), as well as due to the attention (i.e., prominence; Anderson et al., 2001) and deference received from others (i.e., prestige; Anderson & Kilduff, 2009; Cheng et al., 2013; Henrich & Gil-White, 2001). Perceived status results from one's overall stock of human capital as individuals with high levels of knowledge, skills, and abilities (i.e., high human capital) and with elite networks (e.g., protégés who possess high human capital) tend to enjoy higher organizational status (Rogers & Ashforth, 2017).

Mentoring has been shown to enhance human capital attributes of both protégés (Kammeyer-Mueller & Judge, 2008) and mentors (Ghosh & Reio, 2013). For example, mentoring is positively correlated with the job skills attribute of human capital for both protégés (Allen et al., 2004; Kammeyer-Mueller & Judge, 2008) and mentors (Eby et al., 2006; Ghosh & Reio, 2013; Seibert et al., 2001). Mentoring relationships boost human capital for both parties because they are two-way learning experiences where both individuals are constantly reviewing, explaining, and learning new things from each other (Lankau & Scandura, 2002; Mullen & Noe, 1999; Wanberg et al., 2003). Such continuous learning and improvement boosts mentor human capital (Neeley & Reiche, 2022), and thus the gestalt overall assessment of this human capital in terms of their social worth, or perceived status (Kirchmeyer, 2005). Likewise, skilled and thus high status protégés reflect well on their mentors (Ghosh & Reio, 2013), further enhancing mentor status.

Additionally, mentoring boosts leader status in their boss's eyes by enhancing leader social capital, because mentoring enhances the size and human capability of the individuals within a mentor's social network (Hezlett & Gibson, 2007). Indeed, mentoring has shown to be positively correlated with social capital (Hooker et al., 2003), as measured by the number of contacts workers had at higher organizational levels (Seibert et al., 2001), and in terms of having a wider range of professional and political contacts within the organization (Palgi & Moore, 2004). In conclusion, mentoring enhances the human and social capital of both protégés and mentors, which enhances leader status in the eyes of important individuals within the organization, including the leader's boss.

> **Hypothesis 2.** The positive influence of leader humility on leader status will be mediated through leader informal mentoring behavior.

High status leaders tend to be selected for promotion because status is "self-reinforcing" as status typically begets even more status in the form of increased pay and promotions (Magee & Galinsky, 2008, p. 351). Compared to their low status counterparts, high status individuals tend to have more social support and tend have better access to prestigious groups and lucrative business opportunities (Podolny & Phillips, 1996; Van der Vegt et al., 2006). High status individuals are also more insulated from mistakes as they tend to be given the benefit of the doubt if they violate expectations, whereas low status individuals typically face severe consequences for even minor norm deviations (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). For this reason, lower status individuals must spend more cognitive energy on self-monitoring and attending to self (rather than task), which interferes with task execution and prevents such low status individuals from performing to the best of their abilities (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Marr & Thau, 2014; Wallace et al., 2005). Thus, it is not surprising that in the workplace, high status employees tend to perform better than low status employees (Marr & Thau, 2014), and therefore should be viewed as more promotable than their lower status counterparts.

Not only do high status individuals tend to perform better, but also such individuals are typically chosen for leadership positions and promotions because they tend to have more influence over groups (Evans et al., 2019), and receive more help and commitment from other group members than their lower status counterparts (Van der Vegt et al., 2006). Executives tend to fill leadership positions with high status individuals (Ellemers et al., 2004) who are thought to have a better chance of improving team survival than low status individuals (Cialdini et al., 1976; Graffin et al., 2008). Moreover, high status leaders can motivate followers to be intrinsically motivated to deliver more than is required (Hays & Bendersky, 2015), making such high status leaders organizationally valuable and thus more promotable (Cheng et al., 2013; Flynn et al., 2006; Thye, 2000). Taken together with the logic supporting our first two hypotheses, we conceptualize humility as a growth-oriented type of leadership, and that helping others grow via mentoring ultimately helps humble leaders' own status, which boosts their promotability.

> **Hypothesis 3.** The positive influence of leader humility on leader promotability ratings will be mediated through the two-stage mediated process of leader informal mentoring behavior and leader status.

Our conceptual model is presented in Figure 1. We tested our hypotheses with a sample of leaders spanning multiple industries and organizations.

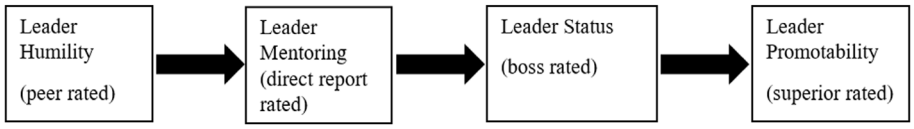

FIGURE 1 Conceptual model of how leader humility predicts leader promotability through mentoring and status.

TABLE 1 Rating source of study variables.

Variable	Rating source
Leader promotability	Superior
Leader status	Boss
Leader informal career mentoring	Direct report
Leader humility	Peer
Leader integrity (control)	Boss
Leader communication ability (control)	Boss
Demographics (controls)	Self

3 | METHODS

3.1 | Participants

Participants were an entire calendar year cohort of 610 leaders across 18 industries who participated in an intensive week-long leader development program in the United States.[i] In our sample, 240 of the leaders (39.3%) worked in industries where fewer than 25 % of enrolled leaders were women (e.g., construction and mining, energy, banking), whereas the other 60.7 % worked in industries that had more than 25 % women enrolled in the program (healthcare, education, nonprofit). According to administrators of the program, roughly one-third of the participants were enrolled to remediate some leadership issue or concern, another third were enrolled as a type of reward for being good corporate citizens and as providing a break to the participants, and a final third were sponsored because they had high advancement potential. On average the focal leaders were 64.92% male and 79.84% white with an average age of 43.22, $SD = 7.53$. They also occupied different organizational levels (3.28% first level, 34.26% middle level, 35.74% upper middle level, 25.25% executive level, and 1.48% top level), and were employed in organizations of various sizes (6.72% in small-sized organizations with 1–99 employees; 58.36% in mid-sized organizations with 100 to 4999 employees; and 34.92% in large-sized organizations with 5000 to over 10,000 employees). The leaders worked in 21 different job functions, with 100% of the administrative services enrollees being women, and only 3 % of engineering, architecture, and design enrollees being women.

Data were collected from the focal leader's followers, peers, bosses and superiors as part of a leadership development program. The leader mentoring variable was reported by the focal leader's direct followers (direct reports), the leader status variable was reported by the focal leader's immediate bosses (one level above the focal leader), the leader promotability variable was reported by the focal leader's superiors (bosses more than one level above the focal leader), and the leader humility variable was reported by the focal leader's immediate workplace peers (leaders at the same level as the focal leader). Table 1 shows the rating source of each variable. We also had direct report ratings of leader humility (and Table 5 shows that our results were nearly identical when we used these ratings in our analysis), but by asking peers to rate humility, we avoid common method bias with follower ratings of mentoring. Followers are the most theoretically relevant source of leader mentoring behavior because they are the main recipients of such developmental behaviors. Likewise, we asked bosses and superiors to rate leader status and promotability because they determine career outcomes such as pay raises and promotion decisions based on their judgments of the leaders under them. That said, we had all the sources rate each construct and Table 5 shows that the results were even stronger when we used a single source (e.g., all follower ratings, all boss ratings or all peer ratings) for all the constructs in our model. In total, 1093 superiors, 610 bosses, 1764 peers, and 1937 followers rated the focal leaders. All ratings from direct reports, superiors, bosses, and peers were collected simultaneously, 2 weeks prior to the commencement of the week-long leader development program. The uniform data collection timeframe ensures that all raters evaluate the leader at the same moment, avoiding potential biases from varying contextual events that could otherwise occur at different times.

3.2 | Measures

3.2.1 | Leader promotability

We measured leader promotability using Gentry and Sosik's (2010) scale. An average of 1.79 superiors were asked to rate the promotability of the leader with the following four items: "How effectively would this person handle being promoted one or more levels?," "How would you rate this person's performance in his/her present job?," "Where would you place this person as a leader relative to other leaders in similar roles?," and "How would you rate this person's overall effectiveness in the organization?" (1 = among the worst, 5 = among the best). Cronbach's alpha was 0.92. We averaged the superior ratings to create the promotability score for each leader. There was an acceptable level of agreement between raters (F statistic for ANOVA = 3.02, $p < 0.01$; ICC(1) = 0.41, ICC(2) = 0.67, mean $r_{wg(j)} = 0.86$. An ICC(2) lower than 0.70; Kozlowski & Klein, 2000) may indicate lower power in detecting relationships concerning Level 2 variables and could result in a more conservative test of the hypotheses, but this does not prevent aggregation (Bliese, 2000).

3.2.2 | Leader status

We used the three highest loading items on Cheng et al.' (2010) status scale and applied them to a leadership context to capture this variable. The focal leader's boss rated the degree to which their leader had high status with the following three items: "influences others without using formal authority," "is good at promoting an idea or vision; persuading," and "is able to inspire, motivate people, sparks others to action" (1 = to a very little extent, 5 = to a very great extent). Cronbach's alpha was 0.78.

3.2.3 | Leader informal career mentoring

We measured leader mentoring behaviors using a shortened Gentry et al.' (2008) mentoring scale. We asked the focal leader's followers to rate the leader on four items: "coaches employees in how to meet expectations," "develops employees by providing challenge and opportunity," "actively promotes his/her direct reports to senior management," "provides prompt feedback, both positive and negative," (1 = to a very little extent, 5 = to a very great extent). On average 3.18 followers rated each leader, and we averaged the follower ratings to create the mentoring score for each leader. The F statistic for ANOVA = 2.15, $p < 0.01$; ICC(1) was 0.25, ICC(2) was 0.54, mean $r_{wg(j)}$ was 0.75 (Bliese, 2000; James et al., 1984). While it is possible that some informal mentors in our study might also be formal mentors, informal mentoring is often more influential, and both types generally have effects in the same direction (Eby et al., 2013; Ragins & Cotton, 1999). Therefore, any overlap between informal and formal mentoring roles is unlikely to significantly impact our results. Cronbach's alpha was 0.89. We recruited an independent sample of 97 master workers[ii] on MTurk who rated the mentoring items and found that the shortened four-item scale had a very high correlation with the original scale ($r = 0.97$).

3.2.4 | Leader humility

We measured the degree to which the leader displayed leader humility by using six items on a five-point scale, adapted from Owens et al.'s (2013) leader humility scale. The items captured the three dimensions of leader humility, which are admitting mistakes and limitations (measured with our first two items), appreciating others' strengths and contributions (measured with our third and fourth items), and modeling teachability (measured with our fifth and sixth items): "sorts out his/her strengths and weaknesses fairly accurately (i.e., knows him/herself)," "does an honest self-assessment," "finds and attracts highly talented and productive people," "is arrogant (e.g., devalues the contribution of others)" (reverse coded), "seeks corrective feedback to improve him/herself," and "resists learning from his/her mistakes" (reverse coded), (1 = to a very little extent, 5 = to a very great extent). On average 2.89 peers were asked to rate each leader, and we averaged the peer ratings to create the leader humility score for each leader. The F statistic for ANOVA was 2.49, $p < 0.01$; ICC(1) was 0.31, ICC(2) was 0.60, mean $r_{wg(j)}$ was 0.86, indicating an acceptable level of agreement between raters (Bliese, 2000; James et al., 1984). Cronbach's alpha was 0.88.

To examine convergent validity of our humility scale, we recruited two independent samples on MTurk. The first sample consisted of 151 master workers who were asked to rate a leader in their job using our leader humility scale and two other measures of humility (Ou et al., 2014; Owens et al., 2013), on a scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Results showed that our scale correlated highly with Owens and colleagues' scale, $r = 0.92$, and Ou and colleagues' scale, $r = 0.88$. All three scales were reliable (alphas were 0.91 for our scale, 0.95 for Owens and colleagues' scale, and 0.94 for Ou and colleagues' scale). The second sample consisted of 136 workers who were asked to rate a leader in their job on a number of variables including leader humility, servant leadership, and several criterion measures. Results showed that consistent with previous studies (Owens & Hekman, 2016), our leader humility scale was related to but distinct from servant leadership, $r = 0.60$, and made an incremental contribution to the prediction of variables such as procedural justice ($\Delta R^2 = 0.29$, $p < 0.01$), proactive innovative behaviors ($\Delta R^2 = 0.18$, $p < 0.01$), and issue selling ($\Delta R^2 = 0.04$, $p < 0.01$) above and beyond servant leadership, but not volunteering ($\Delta R^2 = 0.00$, n.s.).[iii]

3.2.5 | Control variables

Because women tend to be perceived as more communal than men (Eagly & Steffen, 1984) and may thus tend to be viewed as engaging in more mentoring behaviors, we controlled for focal *leader gender*. Because age affects the quality and content of mentoring (Finkelstein et al., 2003) as well as perceived status (Fiske et al., 2002), we controlled for focal *leader age*. Because higher level leaders could have more mentoring opportunities and more status (Kram, 1985), we controlled for focal *leaders' organizational level*. Because leaders who learn from others rather than simply control them is thought to be more normative for leaders in smaller organizations (Egri & Herman, 2000), we controlled for *organizational size* as measured by the number of employees in the organization. Because nonwhite leaders may tend to be subjected to racial biases and thus be viewed as lower status and less desirable as mentors (Rosette et al., 2008), we controlled for focal *leader race*. To account for whether our model is robust even in highly competitive and male-dominated contexts, we controlled for industry % women, which is the percentage of women for each industry as reported by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2023). This variable ranged from 82% women (pharmaceutical) to 4% (energy and extraction). We also controlled for two variables that directly influence leader performance—namely, *leader integrity* (Simons, 2002), and *leader communication ability* (Locke, 1991). Indeed the corrected meta-analytic correlation between these constructs and leader performance is 0.29 for leader integrity, and 0.25 for leader communication ability (Hoffman et al., 2011). We used a single-item measure to capture

leader integrity and bosses rated the leader, (1 = to a very little extent, 5 = to a very great extent): "Recognizes ethical dilemmas when they occur." We used three boss rated items to capture leader communication ability, (1 = to a very little extent, 5 = to a very great extent): "Expresses ideas fluently and eloquently," "Clearly articulates even the most complex concepts," "Prevents unpleasant surprises by communicating important information." Coefficient alpha was 0.70.[iv]

3.2.6 | Analyses

Our hypotheses were tested using mediated regressions and the indirect effects in the models were assessed by creating 5000 bootstrap samples with the PROCESS models (Hayes, 2017; MacKinnon et al., 2004).

4 | RESULTS

Descriptive statistics, correlations, and reliabilities are shown in Table 2.

4.1 | Confirmatory factor analyses

We performed confirmatory factor analysis using Mplus (Muthén & Muthén, 2017) with maximum likelihood estimation to assess the discriminant validity of our four constructs of humility, mentoring, status and promotability. Results indicated a good fit of the four-factor model ($\chi^2 = 295.68$, $df = 113$, $p < 0.01$; CFI = 0.97, RMSEA = 0.05, SRMR = 0.04). We also constructed other nested models which consisted of one to three factors to compare the fit of these models with that of the four-factor model (one-factor model combining all variables: $\chi^2 = 3516.92$, $df = 119$, $p < 0.01$; CFI = 0.44, RMSEA = 0.22, SRMR = 0.18; two-factor model with humility and mentoring combined as one factor, and status and promotability combined as another factor: $\chi^2 = 2077.72$, $df = 118$, $p < 0.01$; CFI = 0.68, RMSEA = 0.17, SRMR = 0.15; three-factor model with humility and mentoring combined as one factor, and status and promotability as two separate factors: $\chi^2 = 1672.79$, $df = 116$, $p < 0.01$; CFI = 0.74, RMSEA = 0.15, SRMR = 0.13; three-factor model with mentoring and status combined as one factor, and humility and promotability as two separate factors: $\chi^2 = 838.39$, $df = 116$, $p < 0.01$; CFI = 0.88, RMSEA = 0.10, SRMR = 0.10; three-factor model with status and promotability combined as one factor, and humility and mentoring as two separate factors: $\chi^2 = 708.55$, $df = 116$, $p < 0.01$; CFI = 0.90, RMSEA = 0.09, SRMR = 0.08). The chi-square difference tests showed that there was significant improvement in fit when these nested models were compared with our four-factor model ($\Delta\chi^2 = 412.87–3221.24$, $p < 0.01$).

4.2 | Hypotheses testing

Table 3 shows the regression results without any controls and Table 4 shows the regression results with all controls included. Hypothesis 1 suggested that leader humility is related to leader informal mentoring behavior. In Model 1 of Table 3 leader humility positively predicted leader informal mentoring, $\beta = 0.23$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < 0.001$. Likewise in Model 2 of Table 4, leader humility positively predicted leader informal mentoring, $\beta = 0.23$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < 0.001$, supporting Hypothesis 1. Hypothesis 2 suggested that leader humility is related to leader status through informal mentoring. In Model 2 of Table 3, leader humility positively predicted leader status, $\beta = 0.27$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < 0.001$, and Model 3 shows that informal mentoring was positively related to leader status, $\beta = 0.22$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < 0.001$. However, when informal mentoring was entered, the coefficient of leader humility on status dropped, $\beta = 0.22$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < 0.001$. Similarly, in Model 4 of Table 4, leader humility positively predicted leader status,

TABLE 2 Means, standard deviations, correlations, and reliabilities.

		M	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1.	Leader promotability	3.74	0.73	(0.92)										
2.	Leader status	3.70	0.75	0.41	(0.78)									
3.	Leader informal career mentoring	3.91	0.67	0.31	0.27	(0.89)								
4.	Leader humility	3.93	0.59	0.29	0.27	0.23	(0.88)							
5.	Leader communication	3.91	0.64	0.29	0.56	0.13	0.12	(0.70)						
6.	Leader integrity	4.33	0.64	0.11	0.29	0.03	0.16	0.35	~					
7.	Industry % women	0.45	0.21	0.05	0.06	0.00	0.11	0.04	0.09	~				
8.	Size of organization	3.18	1.28	0.01	−0.01	0.06	0.05	−0.04	0.05	0.03	~			
9.	White	0.80	0.40	0.05	−0.04	−0.01	0.00	−0.02	−0.04	−0.12	0.05	~		
10.	Age	43.22	7.53	−0.09	−0.06	−0.04	0.08	−0.08	0.08	−0.04	−0.06	0.06	~	
11.	Female	0.35	0.48	0.03	0.06	0.02	0.11	0.03	0.11	0.27	0.02	0.04	0.04	~
12.	Organizational level	2.87	0.88	−0.03	−0.03	−0.05	−0.03	−0.04	0.08	0.04	−0.05	0.00	0.04	0.04

Note: $N = 610$. Reliabilities are in parentheses. All correlations larger than 0.08 are significant at $p < 0.05$.

TABLE 3 Regression results: Effects of leader humility on leader promotability through mentoring and status (without controls).

	Leader mentoring	Leader status		Leader promotability		
Variables	**Model 1**	**Model 2**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**	**Model 5**	**Model 6**
Leader humility	0.23*** (0.04)	0.27*** (0.04)	0.22*** (0.04)	0.29*** (0.04)	0.23*** (0.04)	0.16*** (0.04)
Leader informal career mentoring			0.22*** (0.04)		0.26*** (0.04)	0.19*** (0.04)
Leader status						0.32*** (0.04)
R^2	0.05	0.07	0.12	0.09	0.15	0.24
ΔR^2			0.05***		0.06***	0.09***

Note: $N = 610$. Standardized coefficients are presented for ease of interpretation. Standard errors are in parentheses.
***$p < 0.001$.

$\beta = 0.20$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < 0.001$, and Model 5 shows that informal mentoring was positively related to leader status, $\beta = 0.17$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < 0.001$. However, when informal mentoring was entered, the coefficient of leader humility on status dropped, $\beta = 0.16$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < 0.001$. Together, these results suggest an indirect effect of leader humility on leader status, regardless of whether controls are included in the model. This indirect effect was further assessed using the bootstrapping procedure in the PROCESS Model 4 macro by creating 5000 bootstrap samples (Hayes, 2017; MacKinnon et al., 2004). The indirect effect of leader humility on leader status was 0.05, $SE = 0.01$, $p < 0.05$, and the 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals for the indirect effect did not include zero (0.02, 0.08), supporting Hypothesis 2.

Hypothesis 3 suggested that there was an indirect effect of leader humility on leader promotability through the two-stage mediated process of informal mentoring and status. Model 4 of Table 3 shows that leader humility was positively related to leader promotability, $\beta = 0.29$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < 0.001$. The coefficient dropped when informal mentoring was entered into Model 5, $\beta = 0.23$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < 0.001$, and informal mentoring was positively related to leader promotability, $\beta = 0.26$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < 0.001$. When leader status was also entered into Model 6, the coefficient of leader humility further dropped, $\beta = 0.16$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < 0.001$, and the coefficient of informal mentoring also dropped, $\beta = 0.19$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < 0.001$. Leader status was positively related to leader promotability, $\beta = 0.32$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < 0.001$. Similarly, Model 7 of Table 4 shows that leader humility was positively related to leader promotability, $\beta = 0.27$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < 0.001$. The coefficient dropped when informal mentoring was entered into Model 8, $\beta = 0.22$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < 0.001$, and informal mentoring was positively related to leader promotability, $\beta = 0.23$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < 0.001$. When leader status was also entered into Model 9, the coefficient of leader humility further dropped, $\beta = 0.18$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < 0.001$, and the coefficient of informal mentoring also dropped, $\beta = 0.19$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < 0.001$. Leader status was positively related to leader promotability, $\beta = 0.26$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < 0.001$. The indirect effect in the models was further assessed by creating 5000 bootstrap samples and PROCESS Model 6 (Hayes, 2017; MacKinnon et al., 2004). Table 5 shows that the indirect effect of leader humility on leader promotability through leader informal mentoring and then leader status was 0.02, $SE = 0.01$, $p < 0.05$, and the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for the indirect effect did not include zero (0.01, 0.03). Importantly, Table 5 shows that the results are even stronger when using only one source (e.g., all constructs reported by bosses, or all constructs reported by direct reports, etc.), and the results are weaker, such that the 95% confidence interval includes zero, when the mediators are flipped (e.g., when leader status predict mentoring). Taken together, these results provide strong support for Hypothesis 3.

5 | DISCUSSION

The conventional wisdom is that dominant leadership is a path to attain higher organizational positions (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2020; Collins, 2001; Pfeffer, 2015). Adopting a human capital perspective, a main contribution of our study is to provide one explanation why and how humble leaders can gain status and promotability within organizations. Specifically, we argued and showed that humble leaders naturally tend to take a status route to the top. Our findings demonstrate that by helping followers grow via informal career mentoring, humble leaders can begin to reap some of the human and social capital benefits of their humility and ascend organizational hierarchies.

Although dominance is the "default" strategy for attaining organizational rank (Bai, 2017, p. 205), it is a precarious route (Redhead et al., 2019), as domineering individuals tend to be disliked and removed from power if they make even minor mistakes (Kakkar et al., 2020). Even Machiavelli himself, whose name is synonymous with the dominance strategy, finished his life tortured, imprisoned and then exiled (Strauss, 1958). Certainly, however, the status route to power is not without risk, particularly if one engages in humble behaviors that benefit the team but undermine the leader's perceived competence (Owens & Hekman, 2012; Zapata & Hayes-Jones, 2019). We found that individuals can successfully navigate the status route to power by engaging in mentoring behavior. Our theory and findings suggest that to the extent humble leaders engage in informal career mentoring, they will tend to gain status and ultimately secure a position of power within organizations. Thus, our human capital model helps prescribe a behavioral path—mentoring—that humble, and perhaps even non-humble, individuals can take to benefit others as well as themselves. This finding is somewhat counter-intuitive because it appears that humble leaders gain status from being publicly

TABLE 4 Regression results: Effects of leader humility on leader promotability through mentoring and status (with controls).

	Leader mentoring		Leader status			Leader promotability				
Variables	**Model 1**	**Model 2**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**	**Model 5**	**Model 6**	**Model 7**	**Model 8**	**Model 9**
Organizational level	−0.04 (0.04)	−0.03 (0.04)	−0.02 (0.03)	−0.01 (0.03)	−0.01 (0.03)	−0.02 (0.04)	−0.01 (0.04)	0.00 (0.04)	0.00 (0.04)
Female	0.02 (0.04)	0.01 (0.04)	0.03 (0.04)	0.01 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)	0.01 (0.04)	−0.02 (0.04)	−0.02 (0.04)	−0.02 (0.04)
Age	−0.03 (0.04)	−0.05 (0.04)	−0.02 (0.03)	−0.04 (0.03)	−0.03 (0.03)	−0.07 (0.04)	−0.09* (0.04)	−0.08* (0.04)	−0.07 (0.04)
White	−0.01 (0.04)	−0.02 (0.04)	−0.03 (0.03)	−0.03 (0.03)	−0.02 (0.03)	0.06 (0.04)	0.06 (0.04)	0.07 (0.04)	0.07* (0.04)
Size of organization	0.06 (0.04)	0.05 (0.04)	0.01 (0.03)	0.00 (0.03)	−0.01 (0.03)	0.01 (0.04)	0.00 (0.04)	−0.02 (0.04)	−0.01 (0.04)
Industry % women	−0.01 (0.04)	−0.03 (0.04)	0.02 (0.04)	0.01 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)	0.04 (0.04)	0.02 (0.04)	0.03 (0.04)	0.03 (0.04)
Leader integrity	−0.02 (0.04)	−0.04 (0.04)	0.11** (0.04)	0.09* (0.04)	0.10** (0.04)	0.02 (0.04)	−0.02 (0.04)	−0.01 (0.04)	−0.03 (0.04)
Leader communication	0.13** (0.04)	0.11** (0.04)	0.52*** (0.04)	0.50*** (0.04)	0.48*** (0.03)	0.28*** (0.04)	0.26*** (0.04)	0.23*** (0.04)	0.11* (0.04)
Leader humility		0.23*** (0.04)		0.20*** (0.03)	0.16*** (0.03)		0.27*** (0.04)	0.22*** (0.04)	0.18*** (0.04)
Leader informal career mentoring					0.17*** (0.03)			0.23*** (0.04)	0.19*** (0.04)
Leader status									0.26*** (0.04)
R^2	0.02	0.07	0.33	0.36	0.39	0.10	0.16	0.21	0.25
ΔR^2		0.05***		0.03***	0.03***		0.06***	0.05***	0.04***

Note: $N = 610$. Standardized coefficients are presented for ease of interpretation. Standard errors are in parentheses.
***$p < 0.001$. **$p < 0.01$. *$p < 0.05$.

vulnerable, and by caring about and developing those less powerful than themselves in their mentoring relationships.

We also contribute to the mentoring literature by identifying leader humility as an important antecedent of mentoring behavior. Existing research on mentoring has emphasized individual traits such as race, gender, values, and goal orientations (Kram, 1985; Liu et al., 2015), and relational attributes like mentor-protégé similarity and conflict (Eby et al., 2013; Hu et al., 2021; Ragins & Cotton, 1999) as principal determinants of formal and informal mentoring behavior and effectiveness. Indeed, there is still limited literature on what types of leaders are willing and able to mentor others (Ghosh & Reio, 2013). Our study contributes to this research by showing that leaders who are other-centered, focused on "modeling how to grow" (Owens & Hekman, 2012, p. 787), and in other words are humble, naturally tend to mentor others in organizational contexts. Thus, our findings and model help extend and enrich this impressive body of work regarding mentoring antecedents, by introducing leader humility as a novel predictor of successful mentoring, extending beyond traditional trait and relational factors. This emphasis on leader humility offers both theoretical and practical insights for researchers and practitioners to cultivate mentoring. Specifically, by uncovering leader humility as a type of leadership that predicts informal mentoring behavior, we introduce the possibility that other important leadership behaviors and attributes may also influence mentoring behavior and effectiveness.

We also contribute to the highly consequential conversation regarding whether mentoring "matters" for mentors' career progression (Allen et al., 2017). Humility and mentoring are similar in the sense that both constructs are traditionally thought to require self-sacrifice (Aryee et al., 1996; Owens & Hekman, 2012). Our findings suggest that humble leaders can gain status and career benefit via mentoring. Thus, we respond to the calls for more research on understanding what mentoring does for mentors (Allen et al., 2017; Gentry & Sosik, 2010; Haggard et al., 2011) by suggesting that mentoring may indeed advance mentors' careers by enhancing their status.

By identifying humble leader mentoring behavior as an antecedent of leader status, our study also contributes to research on workplace status (Djurdjevic et al., 2017). Some workplace status measures focus on the prestige and respect dimensions of status (e.g., Anderson et al., 2012; Diekmann et al., 2007) and others emphasize the prominence dimension (e.g., Anderson et al., 2012), while others emphasize all three of these aspects of status (Djurdjevic et al., 2017). We suggested that by engaging in mentoring behavior, humble leaders enhanced leader status, and future research could examine whether humble leader mentoring behavior enhances some underlying status dimensions more than others. Likewise, we agree with Djurdjevic et al. (2017, p. 1141) that future research could build on these findings and identify "whether employees with high status mentors enjoy greater career success than their colleagues with low status mentors."

Our study has several methodological strengths. For one, we made use of multisource data from superiors, bosses, peers and subordinates of leaders in a variety of organizations in different industries. When comparing the accuracy of supervisor, peer, follower and

TABLE 5 Regression results: Effects of leader humility on leader promotability through mentoring and status.

Indirect paths	Indirect effect *b*	Bootstrapped standard error	Indirect effects (bias corrected and accelerated 95% confidence interval)
1. Leader Humility (peer rated) → Leader Mentoring (direct report rated) → Leader Status (boss rated) → Leader Promotability (superior rated)	**0.02**	**0.01**	**(95% CI: 0.01, 0.03)**
2. Leader Humility (direct report rated) → Leader Mentoring (peer rated) → Leader Status (boss rated) → Leader Promotability (superior rated)	0.02	0.01	(95% CI: 0.01, 0.03)
3. Leader Humility → Leader Mentoring → Leader Status → Leader Promotability (all constructs direct report rated)	0.18	0.03	(95% CI: 0.13, 0.24)
4. Leader Humility → Leader Mentoring → Leader Status → Leader Promotability (all constructs peer rated)	0.16	0.02	(95% CI: 0.12, 0.21)
5. Leader Humility → Leader Mentoring → Leader Status → Leader Promotability (all constructs boss rated)	0.13	0.02	(95% CI: 0.09, 0.17)
6. Leader Humility → Leader Mentoring → Leader Status → Leader Promotability (all constructs superior rated)	0.15	0.02	(95% CI: 0.10, 0.19)
7. Leader Humility (peer rated) → Leader Status (boss rated) → Leader Mentoring (direct report rated) → Leader Promotability (superior rated)	0.01	0.01	(95% CI: 0.00,0.01)
8. Leader Promotability (superior rated) → Leader Status (boss rated) → Leader Mentoring (direct report rated) → Leader Humility (peer rated)	0.01	0.01	(95% CI: 0.00, 0.01)

Note: Bootstrapped results are based on 5000 samples using PROCESS Model 6 (serial mediation; see Preacher & Hayes, 2008) and contain the following control variables: Organization Level, Female, Age, White, Size of Organization, Industry % women, Leader integrity, and Leader communication. However, and as reported in the results section, the results are nearly identical without any control variables.

self-ratings, supervisor ratings are least contaminated by halo and leniency biases, followed by peer ratings, and then follower ratings (Dunning et al., 2003; Ng et al., 2011). For this reason, our conceptual model starts with peer and follower ratings, then boss ratings, and ends with superior ratings. For another, with this design, we minimized concerns regarding common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003), as our mediating mechanisms are rated by followers and bosses, which are more accurate than self-ratings (Harris & Schaubroeck, 1988). Another strength of our study is that we used multiple ratings of leader characteristics (an average of 1.79 superior raters, 2.89 peer raters and 3.18 follower raters per leader attribute), which increases the reliability of our measures (LeBreton & Senter, 2008).

5.1 | Limitations and future research directions

Despite its contributions, our study has some limitations that point the way for further exploration. We did not measure the actual promotion of leaders in terms of the change in leaders' job positions. However, our approach used ratings from individuals who had a higher organizational position than the focal leader—individuals who decided on the leaders' promotions. Just as informal mentoring is more beneficial to protégés' careers than formal mentoring (Eby et al., 2013; Ragins & Cotton, 1999), we also expect informal and formal mentoring could offer different benefits to mentors' careers. While informal mentoring relationships are more intense and thus may have more benefits for protégés and mentors in terms of learning (Janssen et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2021), formal mentoring programs may also offer a status boost to mentors. Future research could test how the type of mentoring relationship (formal vs. informal) moderates the influence of mentoring on humble leaders' career advancement.

Similarly, we focused on the instrumental function of informal mentoring, and did not examine how psychosocial support or role-modeling functions of mentoring might affect leader status and promotability. In psychosocial mentoring, mentors show acceptance to their protégés, provide counseling, maintain friendship with protégés, and increase protégés' confidence (Eby & Robertson, 2020; Ghosh & Reio, 2013; Kram, 1985). In role-modeling, mentors act as a role model to the protégés (Kram, 1985). Although we believe humble mentors who not only provide career advice, but also provide psychosocial and role modeling would be viewed even more favorably by followers, peers, and bosses, we cannot be certain based on our results. Thus, future research may benefit by examining whether and how humble leaders may have increased enhancement of their status through engaging in psychosocial mentoring and role-modeling.

Likewise, future research can examine other conditions or characteristics which help humble leaders gain greater career success. For example, similar demographics between a humble mentor and a protégé (e.g., both being nonbinary, or people of color; Ragins et al., 2017) may yield more career benefits to humble mentors (and protégés) because such relationships may foster greater relational investments. In line with potential demographic concerns, we acknowledge that our sample is primarily male (65%), white (80%), and midcareer and midlife (average age is 43 years), and thus the findings of our research may not generalize to more diverse populations of leaders. That said, we included a "industry % women" control variable in our analyses, which demonstrates the robustness of our conceptual model, regardless of whether the industry is highly male-dominated or more gender balanced.

While our findings and theory supporting our conceptual linkages suggest that humble leaders can advance their status and careers via mentoring, it is possible that leaders who have a great deal of status are more sought out as mentors. However, the 95 % confidence interval included zero when our mediators were flipped or we ran our full model in reverse (promotability → status → mentoring → leader humility), suggesting the direction of our conceptual model is more plausible. That said, when we entered leader humility as the last step in our hierarchical regression model (after mentoring and status), leader humility still explained an additional 2.5 % of variance in promotability. That suggests that there are other mechanisms, such as general helpfulness, through which leader humility influences promotability, which we encourage researchers to further investigate. Although traditionally mentors are usually senior members in organizations who provide support for the more junior protégés (Kram, 1985), mentoring does not only occur in this kind of vertical relationship. It can occur among peers (Eby et al., 2013), or can be part of a developmental network consisting of multiple relationships among various individuals (Higgins & Kram, 2001).

Humble leaders may tend to promote more customized, rather than turnkey, diversity initiatives, and this could be another avenue for future research. Indeed, Raffaelli and Glynn (2014) inductively generated a typology of corporate social responsibility initiatives (of which diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives may be considered one type) based on initiative customization level, rather than whether the initiative was designed to create radical versus incremental change. They found that leaders who worked in organizations with strong identities and strong local ties tended to engage in "built to order" and tailored practices that utilized employees' unique skills, whereas more cosmopolitan leaders who had more cross-industry ties tended to implement "off the shelf" and turnkey initiatives that simply mimicked other companies and required little customization. Future research could investigate whether humble leaders who tend to engage in mentoring may be more attuned to their local ecosystems and more aware of their coworkers' unique skills and may therefore be more likely to implement customized, tailored diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives, and less likely to implement "off the shelf" turnkey ones (see also Marsh II, 2021).

5.2 | Implications for HRM

Our study has several implications for HRM theories and practices. In terms of training and development, our model and results suggest that organizations can offer leadership training programs and workshops or seminars that emphasize leader humility. Our study shows that humble leaders can reap the human and social capital-boosting benefits of humility and gain enhanced career success in organizations. Although some lay theories of leader humility suggest humble leaders are "weak" (Tucker, 2015; Weidman et al., 2018), humble leaders may actually be seen as courageous in the sense that they are willing to vulnerably expose their shortcomings in mentoring relationships, and thereby ultimately enhance their status and promotability. Therefore, training leaders to be humble would be beneficial for the leaders' job and career. The training programs can focus on teaching leaders how to be more self-aware, make good use of praise when leading, listen actively, and be open to feedback and learning. There are also other ways in which HR managers can foster leader humility. For example, Lehmann et al. (2023) found that training managers to listen fostered greater humility in both the person who was talking and the person who was listening. Likewise, Wang et al. (2018) found that a growth mindset and a strong relational identity positively predicted leader humility. Other research has found that growth mindset interventions do seem to be effective at fostering a growth mindset (e.g., teach leaders that "the brain is like a muscle"; Burnette et al., 2023, p. 3), which should, in turn, foster leader humility.

In terms of performance appraisal theories and practices, humility can be considered in both developmental and evaluative purposes (Boswell & Boudreau, 2002). In developmental performance appraisal, constructive feedback on leaders' humble behaviors can be given. For example, if 360-degree feedback is used (Taylor, 2011), leaders can make self-reports on their own humble behaviors, and their followers, peers, and bosses can also report on their observations of such behaviors. As for evaluative purpose, humility can be incorporated as a key metric in performance evaluations. For example, evaluators can assess the leaders' ability to self-reflect, recognize others' contributions, and accept feedback. The results of performance appraisal may also be tied to recognition and reward so that leaders who exhibit humility are acknowledged and recognized, thereby encouraging other leaders to follow suit and promoting a learning culture in the organization. Similarly, in recruitment and selection, humility can be included as one of the criteria when assessing candidates for leadership positions.

Our study also has implications regarding HR research and practices regarding mentoring. Organizations can provide more support for mentoring as a form of both leader and employee development. They can also encourage humble leaders to engage in mentoring. Although some may argue that positive leader behaviors such as taking care of others, telling the truth, and showing modesty and honesty do not help leaders become successful (Collins, 2001; Pfeffer, 2015), our findings imply that managers who lead with humility, or a more ground-up approach to leadership, can use mentoring to gain status and promotability, and they do not need to sacrifice their own personal careers for their followers. Organizations should therefore emphasize that mentoring can facilitate

humble leaders' growth and advance their careers through status. The results of our study would also motivate humble leaders themselves to invest more time and effort in mentoring others because this is a way to expand their status and grow as a leader.

Additionally, if organizations encourage leader humility and mentoring, they may naturally become learning organizations (Senge, 1990). Humble mentors' protégés may tend to imitate their humble mentor's humility via mentoring (Ghosh, 2014; Kram, 1985), and because leader humility tends to spread "contagiously" from humble leaders to followers (Owens & Hekman, 2016, p. 1088). Thus, organizations employing such humble mentoring leaders may tend to become more oriented to learning over time. Such an organization-wide learning culture may be like Owens and Hekman (2012, p. 808) conjecture that leader humility "may provide the 'disequilibrium' or 'shock to the system' needed for an organization to stay in a continuous change state (Swift & West, 1998)." In such a culture, people may continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together (Bass, 2000; Senge, 2017).

6 | CONCLUSION

Building on human capital theory, we sought to understand how humble leaders could capture some of the human capital value that they create, in terms of gaining promotability within organizational hierarchies. Consistent with past research, we found that humble leaders naturally tended to engage in in more informal mentoring behavior that served a career/instrumental function for protégés. We then reasoned and found that such mentoring behavior enhanced humble leaders' organizational status, which allowed humble leaders to be viewed by their superiors as more promotable. We call on future studies to build on these findings and further explore other career outcomes of humble leaders, as well as other types of leadership that promote mentoring.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest associated with this research.

DATA AVAILABLITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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ENDNOTES

[i] The "curriculum" for this program was simply guiding leaders through 360-degree feedback.

[ii] According to Amazon FAQ, "A Master Worker is a top Worker of the MTurk marketplace that has been granted the Mechanical Turk Masters Qualification. These Workers have consistently demonstrated a high degree of success in performing a wide range of tasks across a large number of Requesters."

[iii] Previous studies show evidence that leader humility is conceptually and empirically distinct from measures of the Big Five, modesty, narcissism, honesty-humility, self-efficacy, learning goal-orientation, and core self-evaluation (Owens et al., 2013) and from transformational, charismatic, authentic, servant and ethical forms of leadership (reported in Owens et al., 2011, and also Owens & Hekman, 2016).

[iv] Table 3 shows that the results are largely unchanged when we ran the analyses without controls.

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