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Leadership Humility in Expert-Dominated Project Teams

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Abstract

Expert-dominated project teams depend on specialized knowledge, yet the concentration of expertise and professional status can create interpersonal conditions in which technically valuable contributions are unevenly heard, challenged, or integrated. Formal project leaders face a distinctive challenge in such teams: they must coordinate specialists whose knowledge may exceed their own while preserving sufficient authority to maintain direction, accountability, and timely decision making. This study examines leadership humility as a potential mechanism for balancing these requirements. Leadership humility is conceptualized through accurate self-appraisal, acknowledgment of limitations, appreciation of others' strengths, and openness to learning. Existing research associates expressed leader humility with constructive team processes, collective psychological resources, shared leadership, information exchange, and team performance.

The present study extends this literature by focusing specifically on project teams characterized by strong expertise differentiation and status concentration. Because no primary organizational dataset was supplied, a simulation-based explanatory design was adopted. Synthetic scenarios representing varying levels of leader humility were evaluated through indices of psychological safety, expert voice, knowledge integration, status concentration, and project effectiveness. The simulated analysis shows knowledge-integration effectiveness increasing from 49 to 85 as the leadership-humility condition rises from 32 to 81, while project effectiveness increases from 56 to 87 and dysfunctional status concentration declines. The results are methodological illustrations rather than empirical estimates. The study argues that humility does not require leaders to surrender decision authority; instead, it can make authority more epistemically adaptive by helping leaders recognize where relevant knowledge resides, invite challenge, redistribute conversational space, and coordinate specialized expertise. The proposed framework offers a basis for future empirical studies of multidisciplinary engineering, technology, healthcare, research, consulting, and other knowledge-intensive project environments.

Keywords: leadership humility, expert teams, project teams, psychological safety, knowledge integration, professional status, employee voice, shared leadership

1. Introduction

Contemporary project work increasingly requires the coordination of specialized knowledge distributed across technical, professional, and functional boundaries. Software development, engineering, healthcare, scientific research, consulting, product development, and complex infrastructure projects

frequently depend on members who possess deep but differentiated expertise. Research on expertise coordination demonstrates that having knowledgeable individuals is insufficient by itself; teams must know where expertise is located, recognize when it is needed, and bring that expertise effectively into collective work. Faraj and Sproull demonstrated this principle in software-development teams, while Bunderson's research showed that the recognition and use of expertise can also be shaped by status processes.

The present article uses the term expert-dominated project team to describe a project setting in which a substantial share of decision influence is attached to members possessing scarce technical, professional, or domain-specific expertise. Expertise dominance is not inherently dysfunctional. Complex projects require legitimate expert influence because technical competence improves the quality of judgments that cannot be made through simple majority preference. The difficulty emerges when expertise becomes inseparable from status to such an extent that some perspectives receive disproportionate influence while other potentially useful knowledge is discounted. Bunderson's status-characteristics perspective indicates that perceptions of expertise can shape influence within work groups, illustrating why the social recognition of competence matters alongside actual competence.

Leadership is unusually demanding in these circumstances because a project leader may be responsible for integrating knowledge that no single individual, including the leader, fully possesses. Attempts to maintain authority by projecting complete certainty can therefore be counterproductive when relevant knowledge is distributed among specialists. Leader humility offers an alternative interpersonal approach. Owens, Johnson, and Mitchell conceptualized expressed humility through behaviors involving accurate self-view, appreciation of others' strengths and contributions, and teachability. Owens and Hekman's inductive research similarly identified humble leadership behaviors centered on acknowledging limitations, spotlighting follower strengths, and modeling openness to learning.

This orientation may become particularly valuable where status differences discourage voice. Nembhard and Edmondson's investigation of healthcare teams demonstrated that professional status was relevant to psychological safety and that leader inclusiveness could help create conditions in which contributions across professional boundaries became safer. Their study is especially pertinent to expert-dominated environments because it illustrates how leader behavior can moderate the social consequences of professional hierarchy. Research on leader humility likewise connects humble leadership with team performance, shared leadership, psychological capital, information sharing, and creativity.

Against this background, the present study investigates Leadership Humility in Expert-Dominated Project Teams. The central proposition is not that hierarchy or expertise should disappear. Rather, humble leadership may improve the team's ability to distinguish *authority* from *omniscience*. A leader can retain responsibility for priorities, coordination, conflict resolution, and final decisions while openly recognizing that substantive expertise is distributed throughout the team. The study develops this argument through a simulation-based framework examining whether higher leader humility can theoretically increase psychological safety, expert voice, knowledge integration, and project effectiveness while reducing dysfunctional status concentration.

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2. Objectives of the Study

2.1 To Examine Leadership Humility as an Expertise-Coordination Capability

The first objective is to conceptualize leadership humility as more than a desirable interpersonal virtue. In expert-dominated projects, humility may operate as an expertise-coordination capability because leaders who acknowledge the boundaries of their own knowledge have stronger incentives to identify where relevant expertise resides. Owens, Johnson, and Mitchell's research provides an established behavioral foundation for this interpretation by conceptualizing expressed humility through accurate self-assessment, appreciation of others, and openness to learning.

This capability becomes important when the formally appointed leader is not the most knowledgeable person for every technical question. Rather than treating this situation as a threat to authority, a humble leader can differentiate decision ownership from knowledge ownership. The objective is therefore to assess whether a leadership posture that publicly legitimizes distributed expertise can improve the team's capacity to mobilize specialist knowledge without producing decision paralysis.

2.2 To Assess Psychological Safety and Expert Voice Under Conditions of Status Difference

The second objective is to investigate the relationship between leader humility, psychological safety, and expert voice. Edmondson's foundational research established psychological safety as a team condition relevant to interpersonal learning behavior, while Nembhard and Edmondson demonstrated the importance of leader inclusiveness where professional-status differences exist. These ideas are particularly relevant to multidisciplinary project teams because technical disagreement can carry interpersonal and status consequences.

The study therefore treats expert voice as the willingness to contribute task-relevant knowledge, raise concerns, identify errors, question assumptions, and respectfully challenge higher-status specialists or leaders. Leadership humility is expected to strengthen voice by signaling that acknowledging uncertainty and revising one's position are legitimate rather than reputation-threatening behaviors.

2.3 To Develop a Model Linking Humility, Knowledge Integration, and Project Effectiveness

The third objective is to construct an analytically testable relationship between leadership humility and project effectiveness through knowledge integration. Faraj and Sproull's expertise-coordination research demonstrates that team effectiveness depends upon bringing appropriate expertise to bear on task problems. The present study extends that insight by examining whether leadership behavior can influence the social conditions through which expertise becomes available to the team.

The resulting framework is intended for subsequent empirical validation through multidisciplinary project surveys, longitudinal case studies, project-performance records, structured observations, or multilevel research designs. It is not intended to establish causal effect sizes from the simulated evidence presented here.

3. Review of Literature

3.1 Leadership Humility and Team Functioning

Owens and Hekman's inductive research provided an influential behavioral account of humble leadership, while Owens, Johnson, and Mitchell subsequently developed and tested expressed humility as an organizational construct. Their work distinguishes humility from weakness by emphasizing accurate self-awareness, recognition of others' capabilities, and teachability. Humility therefore does not require a leader to minimize competence artificially; it requires a realistic interpretation of personal competence relative to the knowledge available elsewhere in the team.

Subsequent empirical research connected leader humility to broader team processes. Owens and Hekman examined how humble leadership can influence team performance through social contagion and collective promotion focus. Chiu, Owens, and Tesluk linked leader humility with the initiation and utilization of shared leadership, while Rego and colleagues found relationships involving team psychological capital, task allocation, and performance. These studies provide a foundation for treating humility as relevant to collective coordination rather than merely leader-follower liking.

Research also indicates important boundary conditions. Humility is not automatically beneficial in every organizational circumstance, and its interpretation can depend on expectations, task demands, and social context. The present framework therefore does not assume that more humility invariably produces better outcomes. It treats humility as valuable when combined with decisiveness, role clarity, competence, and accountability.

3.2 Expertise, Status, and Psychological Safety

Expert teams face a fundamental coordination problem: relevant knowledge is distributed, yet members must determine whose expertise should influence a particular decision. Faraj and Sproull characterize expertise coordination through knowing where expertise is located, recognizing where it is needed, and bringing it to bear effectively. Their study of 69 software-development teams demonstrated the importance of expertise coordination for team performance.

Expertise, however, is socially interpreted. Bunderson's research demonstrates that the recognition and utilization of expertise can be understood through a status-characteristics perspective. This creates an important distinction between expertise possession and expertise influence. A member may possess relevant knowledge but have insufficient status to obtain attention, whereas a high-status specialist may receive influence beyond the domain in which that specialist is genuinely expert.

Psychological safety becomes crucial under these conditions. Edmondson's research links psychological safety with learning behavior in teams, and Nembhard and Edmondson specifically examined how leader inclusiveness and professional status influence psychological safety and improvement efforts in healthcare teams. The implication for project leadership is that inviting expertise cannot be limited to requesting input formally; leaders must also create conditions under which disagreement, uncertainty, and error reporting are interpersonally viable.

3.3 Humility, Information Sharing, and Collective Performance

Information sharing provides a direct mechanism through which humble leadership can influence expert-team effectiveness. Hu and colleagues examined leader humility in relation to team creativity and

identified team information sharing and psychological safety as important mechanisms, while also considering the role of power distance. Their findings are especially relevant to expert-dominated project teams because both information distribution and hierarchical distance affect whether specialized knowledge reaches collective decision processes.

Rego and colleagues similarly found that leader humility can support stronger team psychological resources and task-allocation effectiveness. Task allocation is particularly important where experts differ in specialization because project effectiveness depends not merely on having competent personnel but on aligning work with the expertise most appropriate to each problem.

Taken together, the literature suggests an unresolved research opportunity. Strong evidence exists concerning leader humility, psychological safety, expertise coordination, status, and team performance, but these streams are not always integrated around the specific problem of leadership in expert-dominated project teams. The present study addresses this intersection by proposing that humble leadership enables more accurate use of distributed expertise through psychological safety, voice, and reduced dysfunctional status concentration.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design and Simulation Context

A simulation-based explanatory research design was adopted because no real project-team dataset, organizational records, performance measurements, employee survey responses, or interview data were supplied. Accordingly, every quantitative value reported in the analysis is synthetic. The simulation is intended to represent theoretically coherent relationships suitable for subsequent empirical testing, not to estimate the behavior of an identified population.

The analytical setting represents multidisciplinary projects in which specialist expertise is unevenly distributed and some members possess higher professional or technical status than others. Five principal scenario conditions were constructed, ranging from comparatively low to high leader humility. An additional 10-scenario synthetic series was used exclusively for the graphical examination of the relationship between humility and knowledge-integration effectiveness.

4.2 Construct Operationalization

Leadership humility was operationalized conceptually through recognition of personal limits, appreciation of team-member strengths, openness to correction, and willingness to learn. This specification follows the behavioral foundation developed by Owens and colleagues. Psychological safety represents the perceived interpersonal feasibility of raising questions, acknowledging uncertainty, and challenging assumptions, consistent with the team-learning literature.

Knowledge integration represents the team's capacity to identify, combine, and apply differentiated specialist knowledge. Expert voice represents constructive task-related contribution and challenge from members regardless of status. Dysfunctional status concentration represents the degree to which influence remains attached to a restricted set of high-status actors beyond what task-relevant expertise would justify.

Table 1: Operationalization of the Simulation Framework

Construct	Analytical Meaning	Scale	Expected Relationship
Leadership Humility	Recognition of limits, appreciation of others' strengths, openness to correction, and learning orientation	0–100	Independent condition
Psychological Safety	Interpersonal safety for questions, disagreement, uncertainty, and error reporting	0–100	Positive
Expert Voice	Willingness to contribute or challenge using task-relevant specialized knowledge	0–100	Positive
Knowledge Integration	Effective identification, combination, and application of distributed expertise	0–100	Positive
Dysfunctional Status Concentration	Excessive concentration of decision influence in high-status members irrespective of task relevance	0–100	Negative
Project Effectiveness	Integrated indicator of decision quality, coordination, adaptability, and task execution	0–100	Positive

Source: Author-developed simulation framework informed by leader-humility, psychological-safety, expertise-coordination, and team-status research.

4.3 Analytical Procedure and Evaluation Logic

Five primary scenario conditions were generated using leader-humility index values of 32, 45, 57, 69, and 81. Corresponding synthetic values were assigned to psychological safety, expert voice, knowledge integration, status concentration, and project effectiveness. Values were constructed to reflect theoretically plausible but non-identical rates of change so that the model would not imply mechanical equivalence among the constructs.

The graph uses an expanded set of 10 simulated conditions ranging from 32 to 88 on leadership humility and from 49 to 90 on knowledge integration. A simple fitted trend line is included for visualization only. No hypothesis test, confidence interval, significance level, or population coefficient is reported because the observations are synthetic. Statistical inference from deliberately constructed data would incorrectly suggest empirical validation.

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5. Analysis

5.1 Changes in Team Conditions Across Leadership-Humility Scenarios

Dysfunctional status concentration is comparatively high in teams where specialized knowledge is present but conversational participation and decision-making influence remain concentrated among a limited number of high-status experts. This condition reflects an imbalance in which expertise contributes to team performance, yet status hierarchies restrict broader participation, knowledge sharing, and alternative perspectives. The model therefore suggests that humble leadership can support strong team performance while reducing the degree to which influence is monopolized by a small group of highly positioned experts. By encouraging openness, active listening, acknowledgment of others' contributions, and shared participation in decision-making, humble leadership can help teams use specialized knowledge more effectively while maintaining a more balanced distribution of influenc

Table 2: Simulated Outcomes in Expert-Dominated Project Teams

Leader Humility Index	Psychological Safety	Expert Voice	Knowledge Integration	Dysfunctional Status Concentration	Project Effectiveness
32	46	44	49	79	56
45	55	54	58	69	63
57	65	64	68	59	71
69	75	76	76	48	80
81	84	86	85	38	87

Note: All values are synthetic 0–100 indices and do not represent actual project teams or measured organizational effects.

5.2 Leadership Humility and Knowledge Integration

The graphical analysis uses 10 simulated team scenarios and demonstrates a strong upward pattern between leadership humility and knowledge-integration effectiveness. As the humility index increases from 32 to 88, knowledge integration increases from 49 to 90. The fitted trend should be interpreted as a visual representation of the simulation logic rather than an empirical regression estimate.

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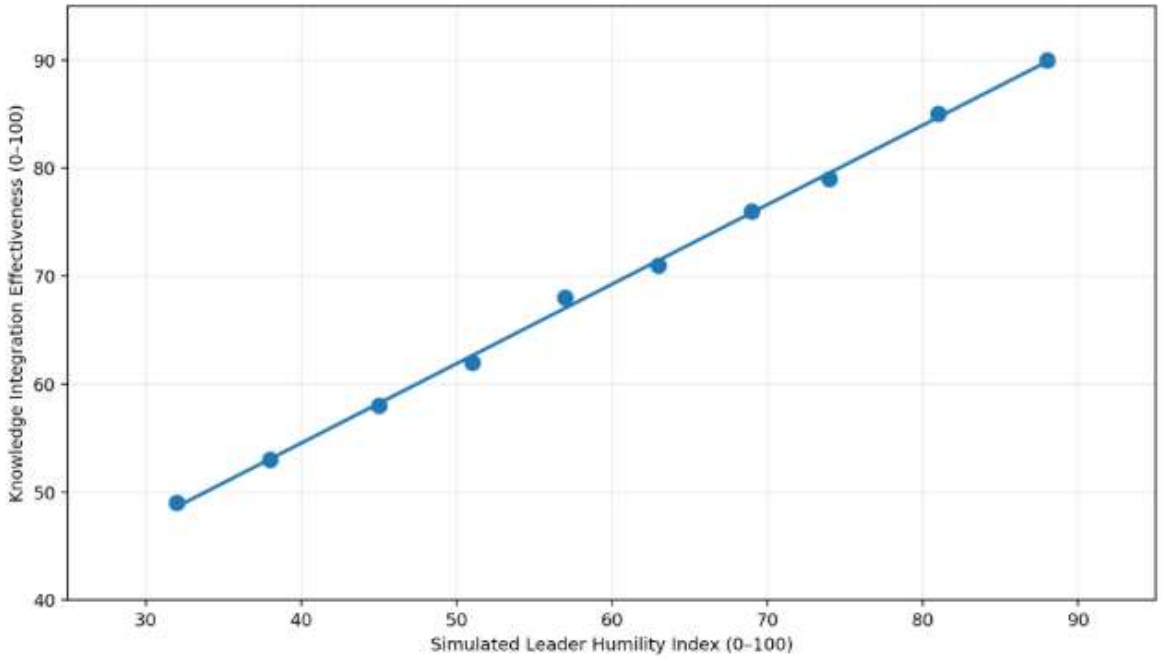
Graph 1: Simulated Relationship Between Leadership Humility and Knowledge Integration



The theoretical importance of this relationship is consistent with established research. Faraj and Sproull demonstrate that expertise must be coordinated rather than merely possessed, while research by Owens and colleagues shows that humble leaders recognize others' strengths and display openness to learning. Combining these perspectives suggests that humility may improve project decisions partly because it makes specialized knowledge easier to identify and legitimate.

5.3 Status Concentration and Project Effectiveness

The simulated decline in dysfunctional status concentration is particularly significant. The index falls from 79 to 38 across the primary scenarios while project effectiveness rises from 56 to 87. The model does not suggest elimination of expertise-based influence. Instead, it distinguishes legitimate expertise authority from status dominance that persists irrespective of the specific knowledge required for a decision.

This distinction is consistent with Bunderson's status-based analysis of expertise recognition. In a well-functioning expert team, influence should shift depending on the problem under consideration. The cybersecurity specialist may appropriately dominate a security decision, while the structural engineer, clinician, financial specialist, or user-experience expert should influence other decisions. Leadership humility can theoretically facilitate this dynamic redistribution because the leader is less dependent on presenting personal expertise as the basis of authority.

6. Discussion

6.1 Humility as Epistemic Strength Rather Than Leadership Weakness

The principal implication of the analysis is that leadership humility should not be confused with indecision, low confidence, or abdication of authority. Owens and Hekman's work identifies humble-leader behaviors that include recognizing limitations and spotlighting follower strengths, while Owens,

Johnson, and Mitchell demonstrate that expressed humility can be operationalized as a meaningful leadership construct. In knowledge-intensive projects, such behaviors can represent epistemic realism: the leader recognizes that no single person can possess every form of expertise needed by a complex project.

This distinction becomes especially important when leaders supervise highly credentialed specialists. An insecure response to expert status may encourage unnecessary micromanagement, defensive certainty, or the suppression of disagreement. A humble response allows the leader to preserve coordination authority without pretending to possess superior substantive knowledge in every domain.

The result is a different conception of leadership authority. Authority derives from the leader's capacity to organize expertise, maintain accountability, resolve trade-offs, and enable collective judgment rather than from being the most knowledgeable person in every technical conversation.

6.2 Psychological Safety and the Redistribution of Conversational Influence

The second implication concerns psychological safety. Edmondson's work establishes psychological safety as important for team learning, while Nembhard and Edmondson demonstrate that leader inclusiveness can be especially consequential under professional-status differences. Expert-dominated teams are therefore unlikely to benefit fully from their knowledge diversity when some members consistently conclude that questioning a senior expert is socially unsafe.

Leadership humility can alter these conversational expectations. A leader who admits uncertainty, invites correction, and publicly credits others provides behavioral evidence that not knowing everything is acceptable. This can reduce the reputational cost associated with asking questions or surfacing contradictory information. Hu and colleagues' research linking leader humility with psychological safety and information sharing provides additional support for this mechanism.

However, voice cannot be created through invitations alone. Leaders must demonstrate how dissent is treated after it occurs. If a leader asks for challenge but becomes defensive when challenged, the symbolic invitation can weaken rather than strengthen psychological safety. Humility must therefore be behaviorally consistent across routine and high-pressure project situations.

6.3 Knowledge Integration, Shared Leadership, and Project Governance

The third implication concerns the governance of expertise. Chiu, Owens, and Tesluk demonstrate that leader humility can help initiate and utilize shared leadership, suggesting that formal leadership and distributed influence do not have to be mutually exclusive. This is particularly relevant to project teams because leadership may need to shift temporarily toward whoever possesses the most task-relevant knowledge.

Shared influence does not imply unclear accountability. Formal project leaders can retain responsibility for scope, resource allocation, timelines, coordination, stakeholder communication, and final integration while allowing specialist leadership to emerge around particular technical problems. Humility can make this movement of influence less threatening because leadership is not treated as a scarce status resource that must be defended continually.

The sustainable governance principle is therefore authority without epistemic monopoly. Project leaders retain the authority necessary for coordinated execution while acknowledging that sound

decisions require knowledge originating throughout the team. This approach is consistent with expertise-coordination research and the wider evidence connecting humble leadership with information sharing, collective psychological resources, task allocation, and team performance.

7. Conclusion

Expert-dominated project teams present a leadership paradox. Their performance depends on powerful specialist expertise, yet the same expertise can create status structures that restrict participation, inhibit challenge, and prevent the team from integrating knowledge held by less influential members. The present study positions leadership humility as a mechanism for managing this paradox without weakening legitimate professional expertise or formal project accountability.

The study further suggests that humble project leadership is strongest when accompanied by competence and decisiveness. Humility without coordination can generate ambiguity, just as authority without humility can suppress knowledge. Effective expert-team leadership therefore requires a balanced model in which leaders establish clear objectives and decision rights while actively legitimizing correction, specialist influence, and the redistribution of conversational authority according to task-relevant expertise.

Future research should validate the framework in multidisciplinary engineering, technology, healthcare, scientific, consulting, and innovation projects. Longitudinal studies would be particularly valuable because humility and expert influence may change during a project's life cycle. Researchers should also test relevant boundary conditions, including leader competence, professional-status inequality, power distance, task interdependence, time pressure, project complexity, and the distribution of expertise. Such evidence would help determine when leadership humility becomes an advantage, when it becomes insufficient, and how organizations can design project governance that combines expert authority with psychologically safe knowledge integration.

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