



The Cognitive Virtue in the Workplace: A Systematic Literature Review of Intellectual Humility and Organizational Outcomes

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Abstract: In an era characterized by rapid technological change, political polarization, and increasing organizational complexity, Intellectual Humility (IH), the recognition of the fallibility of one's own beliefs and the openness to others' perspectives, has emerged as a vital construct in organizational research. This systematic review synthesizes recent literature (2021–2026) to explore the conceptualization, measurement, and impact of IH on individual and organizational outcomes. Guided by theories such as Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, and the Self-Other Knowledge Asymmetry (SOKA) model, the review categorizes findings into four major themes: conceptual foundations and measurement, leadership and employee flourishing, conflict management and ethical conduct, and psychological safety and resilience. The findings indicate that IH is a robust predictor of job performance, thriving at work, and reduced interpersonal conflict. However, the review also highlights critical gaps, including a heavy reliance on self-report data, geographic concentration of samples, and a lack of longitudinal research. This review serves as a roadmap for future research aiming to integrate IH into leadership development and diversity initiatives.

Keywords: Career success, intellectual humility, workplace success, intellectual humility at workplace, organizational conflict management, thriving at work.

1. Introduction

Intellectual humility has been defined as “recognizing that a particular personal belief may be fallible, accompanied by an appropriate attentiveness to limitations in the evidentiary basis of that belief and to one's own limitations in obtaining and evaluating relevant information” (Leary et al., 2017). While traditionally a subject of philosophical inquiry, IH has recently garnered significant attention in Industrial-Organizational (IO) psychology and Organizational Behaviour (OB) due to its impact on learning and collaboration. Unlike general humility, which often focuses on modest self-presentation or interpersonal behaviours, IH is fundamentally epistemic; it concerns how individuals manage their own “intellectual blind spots” and respond to information that challenges their worldview (Porter & Schumann, 2018).

As organizations transition toward flatter structures and more collaborative team environments, the need for leaders and

employees who can acknowledge their limitations is paramount. The current review synthesizes 14 recent studies to provide a holistic overview of how IH functions as a “moral virtue” (Hendy, 2022) and a critical “job resource” (Gao et al., 2025) in diverse settings, ranging from Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in China to healthcare facilities in Egypt and entrepreneurial ventures in Pakistan. By examining these papers, this review aims to establish the current state of knowledge regarding IH and identify the theoretical and empirical gaps that remain.

2. Conceptual Foundations and Measurement of Intellectual Humility

A foundational challenge in the study of IH has been its conceptualization and subsequent measurement. Hendy (2022, 2024) provides a comprehensive framework by situating IH within a dynamic personality framework and the Self-Other Knowledge Asymmetry (SOKA) model. Hendy (2024) posits that IH is a multi-dimensional construct consisting of an intrapersonal spectrum—the internal awareness and redressing of one's own limitations—and an interpersonal spectrum, which involves valuing others' intellect and maintaining openness to feedback.

A. SOKA Model

The SOKA model is particularly relevant for understanding the “measurement gap” in IH research. Hendy (2022) argues that while individuals may be more accurate at reporting their internal cognitive states (intrapersonal IH), external observers are often better at assessing how that humility manifests in social interactions (interpersonal IH). This is evidenced by the low inter-rater agreement (averaging 0.19) between self-ratings and other-ratings observed in current research. Furthermore, Hendy (2024) distinguishes IH from the “Honesty-Humility” trait in the HEXACO model, suggesting that IH is a more specific cognitive virtue that acts as a “golden mean” between intellectual arrogance (overconfidence) and intellectual diffidence (servility).

The choice of measurement scales also significantly impacts research findings. Koetke et al. (2024) compared the

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Comprehensive Intellectual Humility Scale (CIHS) and the General IH Scale (GIHS), finding that the CIHS is a more reliable and stronger predictor of reduced negative conflict behaviours in the workplace. Ahmed (2025) utilized the 22-item CIHS to measure dimensions such as "Independence of Intellect and Ego" and "Openness to Revising One's Viewpoint," demonstrating the scale's robustness in non-Western contexts like Egypt.

3. Intellectual Humility in Leadership and Employee Flourishing

A significant portion of recent literature focuses on the role of Intellectual Humility Leadership (IHL). Research by Gao, Niu, and Yu (2025) and Niu and Gao (2024, 2025) utilizes the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) theory and the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) framework to explain how humble leaders catalyze employee performance.

A. Enhancing Thriving and Performance

In studies of 518 manager-subordinate dyads in Chinese SMEs, Gao *et al.* (2025) and Niu *et al.* (2025) found that IHL significantly enhances both "thriving at work" and overall job performance among "new-generation employees" (Millennials and Gen Z). The mechanism for this impact is primarily through the mediation of positive work attitudes. When leaders signal respect for others' viewpoints and acknowledge their own epistemic limitations, employees feel more valued and psychologically empowered to engage in their tasks.

B. The Role of Core Self-Evaluation (CSE)

An interesting boundary condition identified by (Niu and Gao, 2024) is the role of Core Self-Evaluation (CSE). Their research indicates that the positive impact of IHL on work performance is more pronounced for employees with low CSE. These employees, who may doubt their own competence, are more appreciative of and susceptible to a leader who demonstrates intellectual openness and support. Conversely, employees with high CSE already possess significant internal resources, making the "external resource" of an intellectually humble leader less critical for their performance, though still beneficial.

C. Contradictory Evidence in Gendered Leadership

Not all research finds a direct link between IH and leadership effectiveness. Clarke (2026), in a study of 344 female leaders in the United States, found no significant relationship between IH and "Implementation Leadership." Instead, the study highlighted the prevalence of Imposter Phenomenon and maladaptive perfectionism. Interestingly, Clarke (2026) found that leaders could be effective in their duties despite experiencing self-doubt, but IH did not serve as a significant moderator in this specific relationship. This suggests that the impact of IH may be context-dependent or influenced by other personality traits like adaptive perfectionism.

4. Conflict Management, Forgiveness, and Ethical Conduct

Intellectual humility serves as a powerful mitigator of dysfunctional workplace behaviours, particularly interpersonal conflict and narcissism.

A. Mitigating Destructive Conflict

Koetke *et al.* (2024) applied the framework of Wise Reasoning to show that IH is a reliable predictor of constructive conflict navigation. Individuals high in IH are more likely to engage in "positive informing" and "uniting" behaviours and less likely to engage in "attacking" or "evading" during disputes. This trend was consistent across both student and professional samples, suggesting that IH is a foundational trait for adaptive interpersonal relationships.

Similarly, Mukhtar *et al.* (2023) studied 600 university teachers in Pakistan and found that IH is a significant negative predictor of both interpersonal conflict and narcissism. Their regression analysis showed that IH accounted for 48% of the variation in interpersonal conflicts. They also found a notable gender difference: male teachers in their sample demonstrated significantly higher levels of IH than female teachers, though this did not translate to differences in conflict frequency.

B. Promoting Organizational Forgiveness and Ethics

Al-Abedi *et al.* (2021) explored the "evolutionary-epistemological" account of IH among educational leaders in Iraq. They established a statistically significant positive effect of IH on organizational forgiveness. By reducing intellectual arrogance and the "ego-involvement" in beliefs, humble leaders create an environment where mistakes are forgiven and replaced with benevolent constructive behaviours.

Furthermore, Iqbal *et al.* (2025) found that IH is crucial for proactive behaviour through the lens of ethical leadership. When leaders model IH, it fosters a culture of cognitive openness that encourages employees to take initiative without the fear of being penalized for challenging the status quo.

5. Resilience, Learning from Failure, and Psychological Safety

Beyond interpersonal dynamics, IH plays a vital role in individual psychological health and learning processes.

A. IH as a Mediator for Well-being

Ahmed (2025) conducted a study on 210 healthcare providers in Egypt, finding that IH fully mediates the relationship between psychological resilience and interpersonal conflict. This suggests that resilience alone is not enough to reduce workplace conflict; rather, it is the intellectual openness associated with resilience that allows healthcare workers to navigate high-stress environments without clashing with colleagues. Furthermore, IH was strongly correlated with psychological well-being ($\beta = 0.851$), acting as a buffer against the stressors of the medical field.

B. Learning from Entrepreneurial Failure

In the context of entrepreneurship, Iqbal *et al.* (2025) applied Attribution Theory and Social Cognitive Theory to 325

entrepreneurs in Pakistan who had experienced venture failure. They found that IH significantly improves an entrepreneur's Ability to Learn from Failure (ELF). By reducing overconfidence and encouraging the pursuit of feedback, IH allows failed entrepreneurs to correctly attribute causes of failure and develop the intention to re-enter the field. This learning process is further strengthened by high levels of resilience, which acts as a moderator between IH and the learning experience.

C. *The Bridge to Employee Voice*

Miner (2024) and Chintya *et al.* (2026) highlighted the role of Psychological Safety as a critical mediator. Miner (2024) demonstrated that IH positively predicts psychological safety, which in turn leads to increased "employee voice" (the willingness to speak up with suggestions or concerns). Chintya *et al.* (2026) added that this relationship is further influenced by perceptions of organizational justice. When employees perceive their workplace as fair and their leaders as intellectually humble, they feel safe to perform at their peak.

6. Critical Discussion: Limitations and the "Gap"

While the literature provides a compelling case for the benefits of IH, several critical limitations and "gaps" must be addressed to advance the field.

A. *The Measurement and Self-Report Trap*

A recurring limitation identified across almost all reviewed studies (Hendy 2024, Ahmed 2025, Clarke 2026, Koetke 2024) is the reliance on self-report measures. As Hendy (2022) notes, IH is susceptible to socially desirable responding; truly humble people might actually rate themselves *lower* on humility scales (the "humility paradox"). Future research must incorporate multi-source data (peer, subordinate, and supervisor ratings) to overcome common method variance.

B. *Geographic and Cultural Constraints*

Much of the current empirical evidence is geographically siloed. Studies are often restricted to specific regions such as China (Niu & Gao), Pakistan (Mukhtar, Iqbal), Iraq (Al-Abedi), Egypt (Ahmed), or the USA (Hendy, Clarke). There is a lack of cross-cultural comparative research that explores how the "virtue" of IH is perceived in individualistic versus collectivistic cultures. For instance, is IH viewed as a sign of weakness in some cultures, as suggested by the potential for "intellectual servility" (Hendy, 2024).

C. *The Lack of Longitudinal Data*

Most studies reviewed utilized cross-sectional designs (e.g., Mukhtar 2023, Ahmed 2025, Iqbal 2025). This prevents the establishment of definitive causality. We do not yet know if IH *leads* to better performance over time, or if successful performance provides individuals with the security to *become* more intellectually humble. Longitudinal studies are essential to track the development of IH throughout a career.

D. *The "Dark Side" of IH*

Hendy (2022, 2024) is one of the few authors to mention the

potential for "intellectual servility"—where excessive IH leads to a lack of confidence and increased stress, particularly among minority groups. This "dark side" is largely ignored in the broader empirical literature, which overwhelmingly treats IH as a purely positive trait.

7. Future Research Directions

Based on the synthesis of the 14 papers, future research may prioritize the following:

1. *Objective Behavioural Measures:* Moving beyond Likert scales to behavioural observations or experimental "wise reasoning" tasks.
2. *Diverse Mediators:* Exploring additional mediators such as organizational identification, intrinsic motivation (Niu & Gao, 2024), and emotional intelligence (Anjum *et al.*, 2025).
3. *Intervention Studies:* Testing whether IH can be *trained* through professional development programs, as suggested by Al-Abedi *et al.* (2021).
4. *Inclusion of Moderating Traits:* Investigating how IH interacts with other personality traits like "entrepreneurial passion" or "risk propensity" (Iqbal *et al.*, 2025).

8. Conclusion

Intellectual Humility is far more than a "nice-to-have" personality trait; it is a critical cognitive resource that drives thriving, performance, and ethical conduct in the modern workplace. By acknowledging their own fallibility, leaders and employees alike foster environments of psychological safety, resilience, and learning. However, as this review has shown, the field is currently at a crossroads. To move from "progress to plateau," researchers must move beyond self-reports and cross-sectional snapshots to embrace the complexity of IH across cultures and over time. Only then can organizations fully leverage this cognitive virtue to navigate the uncertainties of the 21st-century global economy.

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