

## How does leader humility affect micro and small enterprises' organizational agility and marketing performance?

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Research paper  
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### Abstract

This study investigates how leader humility enhances organizational agility by creating a learning climate in micro and small enterprises (MSEs). Using data from 219 MSEs in Jakarta, we test a mediation model to understand better how humble leadership influences organizational adaptability. The results confirm that leader humility significantly strengthens the learning climate (supporting hypothesis H1) and improves organizational agility (H2). The results established a positive relationship between learning climate and agility (H3), partially mediating the relationship between humility and agility (H4), accounting for 30% of the overall effect. This study makes three key contributions: (1) it demonstrates the dual impact of humility on agility through both direct and mediated pathways in MSE contexts; (2) it validates the learning climate as an important, though partial, mediator; and (3) it reveals how informal learning dynamics in MSEs enhance these effects. Moreover, this research expands the leadership literature by empirically testing an integrated humility-learning-agility framework in Indonesia's often-overlooked MSE sector, where flexible leadership is vital for survival.

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## Abstrak

Studi ini menyelidiki bagaimana kerendahan hati pemimpin meningkatkan kelincahan organisasi dengan menciptakan iklim pembelajaran di usaha mikro dan kecil (UMK). Dengan menggunakan data dari 219 UKM di Jakarta, kami menguji model mediasi untuk lebih memahami bagaimana kepemimpinan yang rendah hati memengaruhi kemampuan beradaptasi organisasi. Hasilnya menegaskan bahwa kerendahan hati pemimpin secara signifikan memperkuat iklim pembelajaran (mendukung hipotesis H1) dan meningkatkan kelincahan organisasi (H2). Hasilnya menetapkan hubungan positif antara iklim pembelajaran dan kelincahan (H3), yang sebagian memediasi hubungan antara kerendahan hati dan kelincahan (H4), yang mencakup 30% dari keseluruhan efek. Studi ini memberikan tiga kontribusi utama: (1) menunjukkan dampak ganda kerendahan hati pada kelincahan melalui jalur langsung dan termediasi dalam konteks UKM; (2) memvalidasi iklim pembelajaran sebagai mediator yang penting, meskipun parsial; dan (3) mengungkapkan bagaimana dinamika pembelajaran informal di UKM meningkatkan efek ini. Lebih jauh lagi, penelitian ini memperluas literatur kepemimpinan dengan menguji secara empiris kerangka kerja kerendahan hati-belajar-kelelincahan yang terintegrasi di sektor UKM Indonesia yang sering diabaikan, di mana kepemimpinan yang fleksibel sangat penting untuk bertahan hidup.

**Kata kunci:** Kerendahan hati pemimpin, iklim pembelajaran, kelincahan organisasi, usaha mikro dan kecil, analisis mediasi

## Introduction

Currently, the world is facing the problem of economic decline after the COVID-19 pandemic and the conflict in Europe. As a result, economic and business conditions have become increasingly uncertain, causing uncertainty. This condition is called VUCA, an abbreviation describing unstable, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world conditions. The fast-paced changes in the business environment require organizations to respond quickly to new challenges and opportunities. Agility allows for swift decision-making and adaptation to volatile conditions (Eilers et al., 2022; Yikilmaz, 2023). In addition, in uncertain environments, where future events are unpredictable, agility helps organizations remain flexible and responsive, enabling them to pivot strategies as new information becomes available (Mahalakshmi et al., 2024; Yikilmaz, 2023). In other words, agility enables organizations to anticipate and respond to market changes, maintaining a competitive edge. This situation involves developing dynamic capabilities such as speed, flexibility, and resilience (Böhnke et al., 2017; Makudza et al., 2023).

Organizational agility has become increasingly critical for survival, making it a compelling study area—particularly in the recent situation. Since a high level of competitive and conflict dynamics, business entities must enhance their agility by improving responsiveness, competency, and proactiveness (Mahalakshmi et al., 2024; Yikilmaz, 2023). Agility enables better decision-making by fostering an organization to adopt a learning and adaptation culture, essential in a VUCA, an environment where traditional models often prove too rigid or slow (Karak et al., 2024; Nishimoto, 2021). Furthermore, agility cultivates an environment conducive to innovation. By promoting creative problem-solving and the integration of emerging technologies, organizations can transform VUCA challenges into strategic opportunities (Karak et al., 2024; Opdebeeck, 2017).

Leadership has been widely recognized as a critical driver of organizational agility, with existing studies predominantly focusing on transformational and agile leadership models (Akkaya & Tabak, 2020; Uyun, 2019). However, this study explores humble leadership as an alternative model to explain organizational agility. The choice of humble leadership is motivated

by several key considerations. First, while leader humility generally yields positive outcomes, excessive humility can result in diminishing returns. High humility may inadvertently foster followers' pride, leading to psychological entitlement and reduced organizational citizenship behavior (Bahmannia et al., 2023).

Additionally, when humility is perceived as extreme, it can create complacency, weakening employees' motivation to adapt proactively—thereby hindering agility (Bahmannia et al., 2023). Second, the effects of humble leadership depend heavily on subordinates' perceptions. If employees interpret a leader's humility as self-serving, it may increase psychological entitlement and workplace deviance, ultimately undermining agility (Qin et al., 2020). Conversely, when humility is perceived as genuine, it strengthens leader-member exchange (LMX). It reduces counterproductive behaviors, thereby fostering a more agile organization. By examining humble leadership in this context, this study provides a nuanced understanding of how leadership behaviors—and their interpretations—shape organizational agility.

## **Theoretical framework and hypotheses**

Leader humility refers to a leader's ability to lead an organization that recognizes the strengths of its subordinates, is willing to acknowledge their limitations, and remains open to learning, including toward subordinates (Liborius & Kiewitz, 2022; Owens & Hekman, 2012). Researchers identified several traits of humble leaders, including demonstrating a commitment to self-growth to their subordinates, recognizing their followers' developmental hurdles, and fostering relationships and performance through various identity links. As a result, humble leaders contribute to improved team dynamics and overall organizational effectiveness (Owens & Hekman, 2012).

Humble leadership promotes psychological safety and open communication, creating a dynamic learning environment that allows teams to excel in knowledge-driven workplaces (Achmadi et al., 2022; Qian et al., 2022; Suryani et al., 2022). By demonstrating openness and approachability, humble leaders foster a team culture where exploratory learning is encouraged, creating opportunities for experimentation and intellectual risk-taking. This sense of psychological safety is essential; when employees trust that vulnerability will not be punished, they are much more likely to seek constructive feedback and pursue self-directed learning initiatives (Qian et al., 2022; Suryani et al., 2022). A leader's authenticity is a trusted catalyst, facilitating stronger informal learning practices as team members share insights naturally during their daily work. As a result, this culture normalizes collaborative knowledge-sharing, turning everyday interactions into valuable learning opportunities and reinforcing a collective growth mindset (Hadmar et al., 2022; Rigolizzo et al., 2022). Through these interconnected mechanisms, humble leadership systematically transforms interpersonal safety into enhanced organizational learning capability.

### **H1: Leader humility is positively related to learning climate**

Humble leadership promotes a culture of learning and adaptability by encouraging openness to new ideas while respecting established practices. This balance effectively manages both stability and change. Humble leaders create psychologically safe environments where employees feel empowered to ask questions, collaborate, and experiment without fear of judgment. Such an atmosphere fosters team reflexivity, or the collective ability to reflect on and adjust strategies, which enhances an organization's flexibility in dynamic business environments (Bahmannia et al., 2023; Lei et al., 2021; Qin et al., 2020; Rego et al., 2017).

**H2: Leader humility is positively related to organizational agility**

A robust organizational learning climate—marked by psychological safety, experimentation, and systematic knowledge sharing—is a key driver of agility in dynamic business environments. When organizations prioritize openness and continuous learning, they cultivate the adaptive capacity to respond effectively to market shifts and disruptions (Rafi et al., 2022; Salhi, 2024; Zainal et al., 2020). This learning-agility link is further strengthened by intentional knowledge management systems, which ensure critical insights are captured, distributed, and applied efficiently. By combining cultural elements (like tolerance for trial-and-error) with structural enablers (such as knowledge repositories and transfer protocols), companies create a virtuous cycle where learning accelerates responsiveness, and agile practices generate new knowledge—ultimately sustaining competitive advantage (Homayoun et al., 2024; Rafi et al., 2022; Suryani et al., 2021).

**H3: Learning climate is positively related to organizational agility**

A strong organizational learning culture cultivates learning agility—the capacity to extract insights from experience and effectively apply them to novel challenges. This adaptive competence enables workforces to respond to dynamic business conditions with speed and innovation, making it a critical driver of sustained competitiveness. Importantly, learning agility serves as the key mechanism through which learning cultures translate into superior performance (Nayak et al., 2025). Organizations transform cultural investments into tangible operational results by developing employees' ability to assimilate new knowledge and pivot strategies rapidly. Therefore, most agile firms function as integrated learning systems, where cultural norms of continuous improvement directly fuel individual adaptability and collective business outcomes (Tripathi, 2024; Tripathi & Kalia, 2024).

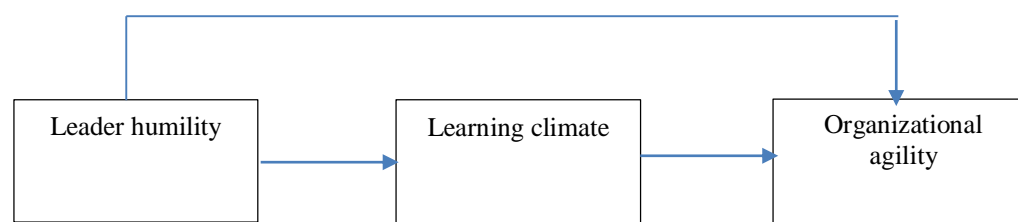


Figure 1. Research model

Organic knowledge exchange through workplace social networks is a vital catalyst for organizational agility. Informal learning—emerging naturally through daily interactions, mentorship, and collaborative problem-solving—enables rapid knowledge diffusion that formal systems often cannot match (Boerma et al., 2024). These unstructured learning channels create an adaptive advantage by allowing employees to share tacit insights, troubleshoot emerging challenges in real time, and collectively develop situational responses without bureaucratic delays. Crucially, well-developed social networks amplify this effect by establishing trust-based connections that bypass formal hierarchies, fostering an environment where best practices circulate freely, and collective intelligence develops organically. This dynamic knowledge ecosystem transforms everyday workplace interactions into a continuous learning engine,

equipping organizations with the contextual responsiveness needed to navigate volatile business landscapes. Hence, a humble leader is crucial in fostering a learning environment that promotes agility. Leaders who facilitate participative decision-making and appreciate contributions from diverse professionals contribute to building an agile organization.

**H4:** Learning climate mediate the link between leader humility and organizational agility

## **Methods**

A convenience technique was used to determine the sample, where the field team conducted a preliminary survey to obtain permission from business owners domiciled in Jakarta and two surrounding cities. Data was collected at two time points. First, the business owner filled out a paper-pencil questionnaire; next, we randomly selected 1 to 2 employees and asked for contact information to complete the online questionnaire at different times. This separation of time and different sources is intended to minimize common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2012). Of this total, 224 MSE owners responded about their levels of entrepreneurial orientation, digital marketing adoption, and marketing performance, and 271 employees responded to organizational agility. After eliminating the cases with the unmatched owner–employee sets 219 unique one-to-one matched sets of the owners–employees' ratings were used for hypothesis testing of our research model.

Of the 219 matched reports, 63% owners were male, and 37% were female. Most of these owners were over 45 years old (56.6%). Regarding MSE characteristics, 43.8% of the businesses were in the food and restaurant sector, 31% were in the trade and retail sector, and 32.4% were in the service sector. Most MSEs had been operating for over ten years (52.1%) and had fewer than five employees (55.7%). Based on the characteristics of MSEs in this study, it is clear that most businesses are micro businesses (with 2-5 employees) in the food and small restaurant sector.

## **Measurement**

The study utilized validated multi-item scales to assess key constructs, employing a 5-point Likert format (1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree"). Leader humility was measured using Owens' (2012) 9-item scale, which includes items such as "My supervisor acknowledges when others have more knowledge." This instrument has been extensively validated in Asian organizational contexts (Achmadi et al., 2022; Hadmar et al., 2022; Suryani et al., 2022). Organizational agility was evaluated using a 6-item adaptation of Bhatti et al.'s (2021) framework, which assesses responsive adaptation capabilities (Bhatti et al., 2021). Marketing performance was measured through five objective indicators: sales volume/value growth, customer base expansion, competitive pricing, and complaint frequency. Organizational learning capability was assessed using an adapted version of Jerez-Gómez et al.'s (2005) scale, comprising three core dimensions: (1) managerial commitment (3 items), measuring leadership support for learning initiatives; (2) openness and experimentation (4 items), capturing tolerance for risk-taking and iterative improvement; and (3) systems thinking (4 items), evaluating holistic understanding of organizational interdependencies (Jerez-Gómez et al., 2005). These were assessed through scales completed by owners, which combined operational metrics with perceptual ratings. All scales demonstrated compatibility across respondents, with employee-rated measures of leadership and agility complementing owner-assessed performance outcomes. This approach helped mitigate common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2012).

**Table 1.**  
*Characteristics of respondents and organization in this study*

	Counts	% of Total
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	138	63.0 %
Female	81	37.0 %
<b>Owner age</b>		
< 35 yrs	27	12.3 %
35 - 45 yrs	68	31.1 %
> 45 yrs	124	56.6 %
<b>Business type</b>		
Food & Restaurant	96	43.8 %
Retail	52	23.7 %
Service	71	32.4 %
<b>Firm size</b>		
< 5 Employees	122	55.7 %
5 - 10 Employees	77	35.2 %
> 10 Employees	20	9.1 %
<b>Firm age</b>		
< 5 yrs	61	27.9 %
5 - 10 yrs	44	20.1 %
> 10 yrs	114	52.1 %

### **Data analysis procedure**

The data analysis proceeded in two sequential phases to thoroughly examine measurement quality and theoretical relationships. First, comprehensive psychometric testing evaluated all constructs for reliability (internal consistency, composite reliability) and validity (convergent, discriminant). Second, hypothesis testing employed structural equation modeling (SEM), which was selected for its suitability to this study's context and data characteristics (Hair et al., 2019; Hendryadi et al., 2025).

### **Results and discussion**

The analyses confirmed that all constructs met the established validity and reliability criteria. Specifically: (1) the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values ranged from 0.51 to 0.58, exceeding the 0.50 benchmark and demonstrating adequate convergent validity; (2) Cronbach's alpha coefficients for all scales were above 0.70, indicating acceptable internal consistency (Hair et al., 2019; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). These results validate the robustness of the measurement instrument for future structural analysis (Table 2).

The results demonstrate a strong, statistically significant positive relationship between leader humility and learning climate ( $\beta = 0.49$ ,  $p < .001$ ). These results indicate that leaders who exhibit humility—by showing openness to feedback, acknowledging their limitations, and empowering others—tend to create a work environment where employees feel safe to learn,



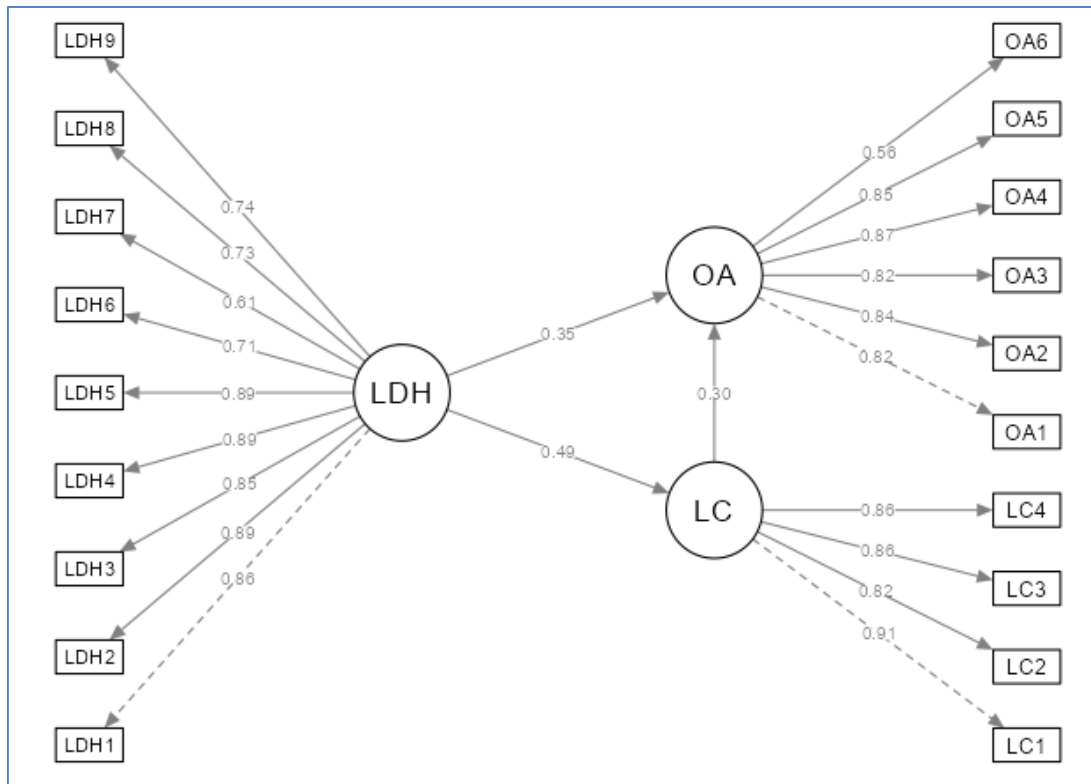
experiment, and share knowledge. The 95% confidence interval (0.38 to 0.61) confirms that this effect is robust and unlikely to be zero, highlighting humble leadership as a key factor in fostering a learning culture within organizations. This finding aligns with prior research, suggesting that leaders' humility helps reduce the fear of failure and encourages continuous improvement (Table 3).

Additionally, the results reveal a significant positive relationship between learning climate and organizational agility ( $\beta = 0.30$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This finding suggests that when organizations develop an environment that promotes knowledge-sharing, experimentation, and continuous learning, they become more adaptable and responsive to change. The 95% confidence interval (0.18 to 0.42) confirms that this effect is reliable, although slightly weaker than the relationship with leader humility. These results imply that while a strong learning climate enhances agility, other factors—such as leadership and available resources—also likely play important roles. This finding supports theories suggesting that learning-oriented cultures facilitate faster innovation and adaptation to market changes.

**Table 2.**

*Measurement model analysis results*

Latent	Observed	$\beta$	SE	$\alpha$	AVE
LDH	LDH1	0.856	0.00	0.94	0.64
	LDH2	0.888	0.05		
	LDH3	0.847	0.05		
	LDH4	0.889	0.05		
	LDH5	0.887	0.05		
	LDH6	0.708	0.05		
	LDH7	0.608	0.06		
	LDH8	0.726	0.06		
	LDH9	0.744	0.06		
LC	LC1	0.915	0.00	0.92	0.75
	LC2	0.823	0.05		
	LC3	0.862	0.04		
	LC4	0.856	0.05		
OA	OA1	0.824	0.00	0.91	0.66
	OA2	0.836	0.06		
	OA3	0.824	0.06		
	OA4	0.871	0.06		
	OA5	0.855	0.06		
	OA6	0.559	0.06		



**Figure 2.**  
*Structural model results*

The analysis shows a significant direct relationship between leader humility and organizational agility ( $\beta = 0.35$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This finding indicates that humble leaders significantly contribute to an organization's ability to adapt and respond to change, even beyond their influence on the learning climate. The 95% confidence interval (0.23 to 0.47) confirms this is a robust, medium-sized effect. This results suggests that humble leaders enhance agility through various pathways—not only by fostering a learning climate (as shown in the first two hypotheses) but also by building trust, encouraging collaboration, and promoting flexible decision-making. This finding reinforces that leader humility is a critical, multifaceted driver of organizational adaptability in dynamic environments.

Finally, the results confirm a significant indirect effect of leader humility on organizational agility through learning climate ( $\beta = 0.15$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [0.08, 0.21]), indicating that humble leaders enhance organizational adaptability in part by fostering a culture of continuous learning. While the direct effect of humility on agility remains stronger ( $\beta = 0.35$ ), this mediation pathway explains approximately 30% of the total effect, demonstrating that learning climate acts as a meaningful – though not exclusive – mechanism linking leadership behavior to organizational outcomes. These findings suggest that organizations seeking to improve agility should cultivate humble leadership and supportive learning environments, as they work synergistically to enhance adaptive capacity. The tight confidence interval and high significance level ( $p < .001$ ) provide robust evidence for this mediated relationship within the proposed model.



**Table 3.**  
*Analysis of structural model*

	<i>Est</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>95% CI</i>		<i>p</i>
				<i>Lower</i>	<i>Upper</i>	
Leader humility --> Learning climate	0.50	0.06	0.49	0.38	0.61	<.001
Learning climate --> Organizational agility	0.30	0.06	0.30	0.18	0.42	<.001
Leader humility --> Organizational agility	0.35	0.06	0.35	0.23	0.47	<.001
LDH $\Rightarrow$ LC $\Rightarrow$ OA	0.15	0.03	0.15	0.08	0.21	<.001

## Discussion

The findings strongly support the positive relationship between leader humility and learning climate, confirming our initial hypothesis and aligning with the work of Achmadi et al. (2022) and Qian et al. (2022), who showed that humble leaders foster psychological safety, enabling employees to engage in knowledge-sharing and experimentation. The results indicate that leaders who are open to feedback and acknowledge their limitations create an environment conducive to continuous learning. Moreover, this finding supports Hadmar et al. (2022), who asserted that humble leadership transforms everyday interactions into learning opportunities. For practical application, organizations should prioritize humility in their leadership development programs, as it lays the foundation for cultivating learning-oriented cultures that drive innovation and improvement.

The results confirm that humble leaders directly enhance organizational agility. This finding supports Bahmannia et al. (2023), which discusses how humility facilitates adaptability. The analysis reveals that humble leaders contribute to agility through various pathways, including trust-building and collaborative decision-making, in addition to creating learning climates. This study is consistent with Rego et al. (2017), who emphasized that humble leadership fosters team reflexivity and strategic flexibility. Therefore, organizations should consider humility a critical leadership competency, especially for roles requiring adaptive responses to dynamic business environments. Leadership assessment and development programs should incorporate humility as a key evaluation criterion.

The study demonstrates that learning climate positively influences organizational agility, corroborating Rafi et al. (2022) on learning-oriented cultures. The findings suggest that environments promoting knowledge-sharing and experimentation enhance an organization's ability to respond to market changes, even though other factors, such as leadership and resources, play crucial roles. This study supports Zainal et al. (2020), who view learning cultures as drivers of innovation. To implement these ideas, companies should develop integrated knowledge management systems that combine cultural elements (e.g., tolerance for failure) with structural enablers (e.g., learning platforms) to enhance organizational agility systematically.

The analysis confirms that learning climate partially mediates leader humility and agility, explaining approximately 30% of the total effect; it supports Tripathi's (2024) conceptualization of learning agility as a bridge between leadership and performance while indicating other mediating mechanisms. The findings suggest humble leaders enhance adaptability partly by fostering learning cultures and contributing directly through other pathways. Accordingly, organizations should develop humble leadership and build robust learning infrastructures, including creating formal and informal learning channels, as suggested by Boerma et al. (2024), to maximize the agility benefits of humble leadership.

## **Practical Implications**

The findings of this study provide actionable insights for organizations, especially micro and small enterprises (MSEs), to enhance their adaptability and foster a learning culture through humble leadership. Organizations should incorporate humility development into their leadership training programs, focusing on openness to feedback, self-awareness, and team empowerment. This can be achieved through feedback culture workshops, coaching sessions, and reflective practices that promote continuous learning among leaders.

To create a strong learning environment, it is essential to cultivate spaces where knowledge-sharing and experimentation are actively encouraged. Companies can establish regular knowledge-sharing forums, conduct non-punitive failure analysis sessions, and implement reward systems for innovative contributions. Digital learning platforms facilitate the easy dissemination of knowledge throughout the organization.

Businesses must combine humble leadership with structured learning frameworks to enhance organizational agility. This involves forming cross-functional teams to promote collaboration, adopting agile methodologies in daily operations, and establishing formal training programs and informal peer-learning networks. Leadership assessment processes should include metrics for humility, employing tools like 360-degree feedback to identify and develop this crucial skill.

Since the learning climate only accounts for 30% of humility's impact on agility, organizations must also focus on building trust through transparency, collaborative decision-making practices, and dedicated resources for learning initiatives. For MSEs, practical implementation may include monthly leadership workshops on humble behaviors, designated "innovation time" for employee experimentation, and peer-learning systems with recognition incentives. These integrated approaches enable resource-constrained MSEs to develop the adaptive capacity needed to thrive in dynamic markets while fostering cultures of continuous improvement and innovation. The findings emphasize how humble leadership can provide a cost-effective, competitive advantage for small businesses operating in volatile environments.

## **Limitations**

This study has several limitations that offer opportunities for future research: the geographic focus on 219 Jakarta MSEs may limit generalizability across Indonesia's diverse regions; the cross-sectional design prevents causal inferences about how the humility-learning-agility relationships evolve; the exclusive focus on learning climate as a mediator overlooks other potential mechanisms like psychological safety or innovation culture; and self-report data risks common method bias. Future studies should expand to multi-regional MSE samples, employ longitudinal designs to track dynamic effects, examine additional mediators (e.g., trust, empowerment), incorporate mixed methods to capture contextual nuances and conduct cross-industry comparisons. These advancements would strengthen the theoretical understanding of how humble leadership operates in resource-constrained settings while providing more nuanced practical guidance for MSEs across different economic sectors and cultural contexts within emerging markets.

## **Conclusion**

This study demonstrates that leader humility significantly enhances organizational agility in micro and small enterprises (MSEs), directly and indirectly, by fostering a learning climate. Based on empirical evidence gathered from 219 enterprises in Jakarta, the research confirms that

humble leadership behaviors—such as openness to feedback and empowering team members—cultivate a learning environment that promotes organizational agility. Furthermore, the learning climate partially mediates this relationship, accounting for 30% of the effect. This finding highlights that humble leaders foster agility through additional pathways, including building trust and encouraging collaborative decision-making.

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