

# DOES MORTALITY SALIENCE LESSEN HUMILITY IN LEADERS?

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## ABSTRACT

Many authors have considered that humility, as a component of leadership (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011), is a potential predictor of business sustainability (Christensen et al., 2014) and of teams and organizations' performance (Ou et al.; Owens & Hekman, 2016; Owens et al., 2013; Rego et al., 2017). This research explores a possible antecedent of leaders' humility. Specifically, it seeks to show how mortality salience predicts leaders' humility through the mediation of fear. Three experimental studies (scenarios methodology; Aguinis & Bradley, 2014) were carried out. The first (n = 96) tested whether a scenario in which Steve Jobs' death is shown (control condition: death is not mentioned) increases mortality salience. The second (n = 429) and the third (n = 444) studies tested whether mortality salience predicts humility through fear. While the scenarios in the second study described Steve Jobs (experimental condition: as deceased; control: no mention of his death) and included photos of Jobs, the scenarios in the third study described a fictional leader for whom no photo was presented. Considering the limitations of leadership measures based on self-description, the variable humility was operationalized as identification with a leader described as humble. The main results are as follows: (a) mortality salience predicts humility through fear, the relationship between fear and humility being negative; (b) the predictive power of the model is low, although it is a little higher when the scenarios refer to Steve Jobs. Future studies are needed to test the model through (a) other ways of manipulating mortality salience, (b) considering moderating variables, and (c) measuring humility through hetero descriptions.

**Keywords:** mortality salience; fear; humility; leadership.

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