

Humble leadership in development volunteer management in China: its impact on volunteers' job crafting and satisfaction

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to explore the impact of humble leadership on job crafting and job satisfaction among development volunteers, who contribute time and skills to support disadvantaged communities. Specifically, it examines how humble leaders motivate volunteers to actively adjust their work, leading to increased job satisfaction. This research fills a gap in understanding the role of humble leadership in development volunteer management.

Design/methodology/approach – This study utilized a quantitative research methodology with snowball sampling to collect data from 334 volunteers who participated in a development volunteering program in rural China. Four variables – humble leadership, job crafting, job satisfaction and volunteer role identity – were measured using translated scales. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, confirmatory factor analysis, correlation analysis, structural equation modeling and bootstrapping.

Findings – Humble leaders encouraged volunteers to shape their work, enhancing engagement and satisfaction. A stronger role identity strengthened the influence of humble leaders on job crafting, further increasing satisfaction. The findings suggest that humble leaders promote volunteers' long-term efficacy by recognizing their individual contributions and creating an open and supportive work environment.

Research limitations/implications – The study provides practical implications for volunteer management. Organizations may benefit from encouraging humble leadership and enhancing volunteers' role identity through training and selection. However, focusing on a single volunteering program in China may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future studies should explore contextual differences across regions.

Originality/value – This study highlights the importance of humble leadership in volunteer management, particularly in enhancing leadership's role in long-term mission-driven projects.

Keywords Humble leadership, Job satisfaction, Job crafting, Volunteer role identity, Development volunteers

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Development volunteers refer to the individuals who participate in volunteer services in underdeveloped communities for a long period of time, usually more than one year (Sherraden *et al.*, 2008). These volunteers are recruited, trained and deployed to work with organizations in disadvantaged communities, where they provide a wide range of services, such as program management, disaster response, information technology support and education (Howard and Burns, 2015; Zhang *et al.*, 2022). Due to long-term service, the leaders and leadership play an essential role in influencing volunteers' behaviors, including satisfaction, well-being, turnover and commitment (Chadwick *et al.*, 2022).

Existing literature has acknowledged the value of public leadership in volunteer management, with a particular focus on the impact of transformational leadership and servant leadership on volunteers' attitudes, satisfaction and organizational commitment (Dwyer *et al.*, 2013; Mejheirkouni, 2020; Karickal and Richardson, 2023). However, humble leadership, characterized by leaders' humility and humble behaviors, remains underexplored in the context of volunteer management, despite its value in public administration having been discussed (McClellan, 2020). For instance, humble leadership enhances organizational effectiveness through encouraging openness to diverse viewpoints and equips public leaders to



address complex public challenges (Yanow and Willmott, 1999). Human resource management literature also supports the benefit of leaders' humility in increasing public sector employees' performance and well-being (Wu and Zhou, 2023; Luu, 2021).

While humble leadership benefits public sector management, its application to volunteer management, especially in development programs, is rarely investigated. Filling the gap is important because development volunteers usually collaborate with public organizations to deliver professional services for community development (Lough and Matthew, 2014). Humble leadership is well-suited for development volunteer management because there is no formal employer-employee relationship and volunteers rely on their professional expertise and intrinsic motivation to make meaningful contributions to society (Tsai *et al.*, 2024; Wang *et al.*, 2018; Gist, 2020).

Additionally, development volunteers engage in long-term services and have day-to-day interactions with leaders, which is different from ordinary volunteers who participate in volunteering activities on a regular or irregular basis. And they usually work in disadvantaged situations with receiving limited financial subsidies (Sherraden *et al.*, 2008). Therefore, leaders who lead development volunteers have to motivate them without formal authorities and financial incentives and, at the same time, provide a supportive environment for them to leverage their professional expertise to support community development (Studer, 2016; Tsai *et al.*, 2024).

In this scenario, by demonstrating self-awareness, fostering psychological safety and creating an open and empowered work environment, humble leaders are crucial for development volunteer management. The prior research has identified the positive influence of leaders' humility in improving development projects' success through fostering organizational learning (Remy and Sané, 2024), but it only focuses on organizational-level outcomes and overlooks individual-level behaviors among volunteers. Development programs ultimately depend on volunteers' commitment and skill utilization, so the shift to volunteers' behaviors is necessary. Therefore, this study takes development volunteers' job crafting and satisfaction into account and examines the impact of humble leadership on development volunteers' proactive behaviors in crafting their jobs and their consequent satisfaction. In addition, considering the unique characteristics of development volunteers, this study tries to uncover how their volunteer role identity moderates these effects.

The volunteers included in this study are young individuals who participate in a government-initiated volunteer project called Guangdong College Graduates' Volunteer Service for Rural Revitalization (GCVR). It is a local volunteering initiative under the national College Graduate Volunteer Service in Western China Program, also called the Westward Project (*xibu jihua*), which aims to recruit young and educated volunteers to support education, healthcare and rural development in disadvantaged areas (Cheng, 2024). GCVR recruits college graduates as volunteers and deploys them to underdeveloped rural communities in Guangdong Province, where they serve for two to three years in support of rural revitalization efforts (Yuan, 2024). These volunteers have been placed in different grassroots-level government agencies, working alongside local officials or community workers. They provide a wide range of services, including administration, media and communication, financial services, e-commerce, agricultural technology promotion and environmental management.

Like state-sponsored development volunteering programs in Western contexts (e.g. AmeriCorps in the US, the European Solidarity Corps funded by EU, the Canada Service Corps and Volunteering for Development), GCVR aims to address societal challenges in disadvantaged communities and requires volunteers to make long-term and skill-based commitments while providing basic stipends or living support. However, unlike volunteers in these Western programs, who usually work with non-governmental organizations, GCVR volunteers work directly in public sector organizations, with public officials as their supervisors. Since its launch in 2021, GCVR has recruited and deployed over 10,000 volunteers to rural communities across Guangdong Province.

This study makes several contributions. First, it extends the literature on public leadership, particularly humble leadership, by discussing its application to the context of development

volunteer management. Second, it contributes to the literature on volunteer behaviors by exploring the role of humble leadership in shaping volunteers' job crafting and satisfaction. Third, this study benefits volunteering management practitioners, especially those who lead development volunteering programs, by highlighting the importance of humble leadership in volunteer management.

This article is organized as follows. First, research hypotheses are proposed based on literature review. Then, the article explains the research methods employed in the study, followed by the presentation of the research results. Finally, the findings are discussed, and the study concludes with contributions to the existing literature, implications for development volunteer management and suggestions for future studies.

Literature review and hypotheses

Humble leadership and development volunteer management

Prior research has emphasized the unique challenges of leading volunteers, especially in contexts lacking formal authority or financial incentives (De Clerck *et al.*, 2021). The concept of humble leadership is grounded in extensive research on humility and its impact on leadership. Owen and Hekman (2012) and Owens *et al.* (2013) identified the interpersonal characteristics of humble leaders, including a willingness to view themselves accurately, an appreciation for others' strengths and contributions and a demonstrated openness to learning. Unlike transactional leadership relying on reward-punishment exchanges (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985), or transformational leadership emphasizing inspiring and motivating volunteers through a combination of idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration (Bass, 1985; Bass and Riggio, 2006), humble leadership focuses on recognizing leaders' own limitations, acknowledging volunteers' expertise and contribution and fostering a learning environment (Kelemen *et al.*, 2023; Remy and Sane, 2024). These qualities make humble leadership suited to managing development volunteers.

Development volunteers refer to individuals who contribute their time and professional skills to support disadvantaged communities in developing countries or regions (Zhang *et al.*, 2022). Unlike ordinary volunteers who engage in short-term service, often a few hours within their local communities on a regular or occasional basis, development volunteers are usually placed in remote and underdeveloped areas and committed to a relatively longer period of time, from weeks to years, providing full-time professional services (Sherraden *et al.*, 2008). While prior research has explored development volunteer management in the context of international development, focusing on volunteers' motivations and experiences (Unstead-Joss, 2008; Howard and Burns, 2015; Schech, 2017; Tiessen *et al.*, 2021), relatively little attention has been paid to the role of leadership in managing development volunteers. In this context, where volunteers are expected to make long-term commitments to provide professional services, humble leadership is particularly relevant and effective.

Humble leadership and development volunteers' job satisfaction

Working in underdeveloped communities for long periods presents significant challenges for development volunteers (Trau, 2015). These challenges include poor working and living conditions, limited material incentives and the demands of long-term commitment (Zhang *et al.*, 2022). In such contexts, increasing volunteers' job satisfaction is crucial for host organizations to ensure sustained and effective engagement (Benevene *et al.*, 2020). Humble leadership can enhance development volunteers' job satisfaction through various mechanisms.

First, humble leaders create an open and inclusive work environment for volunteers by reducing power distance and encouraging volunteers to express their opinions and ideas (Owens *et al.*, 2013). This increases psychological safety (Walters and Diab, 2016), which is particularly important for development volunteers working in disadvantaged and challenging

situations. The sense of psychological safety helps enhance their satisfaction (Owens *et al.*, 2013). Second, humble leaders provide support by asking how they can help followers instead of direct intervention (Owens and Hekman, 2012), which makes volunteers feel that their voluntary contributions are recognized, valued and respected and then more satisfied with their jobs. Additionally, humble leaders encourage reflection and self-improvement (Ou *et al.*, 2017), which offers volunteers opportunities for personal growth and skill development. This is particularly meaningful for development volunteers because most of them seek career and personal growth through their engagement in development volunteering programs (Andresen and Gustschin, 2012; Fee and Gray, 2013).

Unlike employees in formal employment relationships, development volunteers work with host organizations in non-contractual roles and often face disadvantaged working conditions with minimal material incentives. In such contexts, humble leadership, through improving psychological safety, recognizing contributions and supporting personal growth, becomes a key determinant of their job satisfaction. Therefore, this study proposes:

H1. Humble leadership positively influences development volunteers' job satisfaction.

Mediating role of job crafting

Job crafting refers to employees' proactivity to modify or redesign their work through learning new skills, seeking growth opportunities and obtaining feedback (Bakker *et al.*, 2012). By doing so, they can change their task, relational and cognitive boundaries and ensure that their job content and work methods fit better with their interest and expertise, which can lead to increased efficacy and performance (Niessen *et al.*, 2016; Tims and Bakker, 2010).

In the development volunteer context, job crafting is particularly meaningful because, on the one hand, volunteer jobs are often less rigorously designed and more flexible compared to formal jobs (Walk and Peterson, 2023); on the other hand, development volunteers usually have specialized skills and bring their own ideas about how to contribute effectively (Hudson and Inkson, 2006). Moreover, given the challenging work conditions in remote and underdeveloped communities, job crafting allows volunteers to adapt their roles to overcome these obstacles.

While personal traits, such as proactive personalities and self-efficacy influence, job crafting behaviors (Roczniewska and Bakker, 2016), this study suggests the impact of humble leadership on volunteers' job crafting.

Two theories that can help explain the relationship. First, according to the conservation of resources theory, individuals strive to obtain, retain and protect valued resources (Hobfoll and Lilly, 1993). Through maintaining openness to feedback and recognizing volunteers' contributions, humble leaders can establish a resource support mechanism (Owens *et al.*, 2013). Within this supportive mechanism, volunteers can pursue different proactive resource gain strategies, including job crafting. In addition, humble leadership can create a democratic work environment, where volunteers are encouraged to express their thoughts and contribute to their full potential (Owens *et al.*, 2013). In the meanwhile, humble leaders are willing to admit their personal limitations and mistakes, which make it safer for volunteers to take initiative (Chen *et al.*, 2021). Such environments enhance volunteers' sense of self-determination, enabling them to take greater control over their work and proactively craft their roles (Hu *et al.*, 2020; Rego *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, this study proposes:

H2. Humble leadership is positively associated with volunteers' job crafting.

Previous research on work behaviors has argued that job crafting can increase individuals' job satisfaction (De Beer *et al.*, 2016). In the context of development volunteering, where volunteers work in challenging conditions and rely on intrinsic motivation, job crafting allows them to tailor their roles to better align with their skills, interests and the needs of the community, and it also enables them to overcome obstacles and find greater meaning in their

work, ultimately leading to higher job satisfaction. Combining the above discussion on the impact of humble leadership on followers' job crafting, this study suggests that job crafting acts as a mediator, transferring the positive impact of humble leadership into increased job satisfaction. Empirical studies support this argument. For instance, [Luu \(2021\)](#) provided evidence that job crafting mediates the relationship between humble leadership and employee well-being among public servants. Volunteers who feel supported and encouraged by their leaders are more likely to engage in job crafting. This engagement fosters a sense of control, autonomy and belonging, which are crucial for sustaining development volunteers' job satisfaction. Thus, the study proposes:

H3. Job crafting positively influences development volunteers' job satisfaction.

H4. Job crafting mediates the relationship between humble leadership and job satisfaction.

Volunteer role identity as a moderator

Development volunteers differ from ordinary volunteers, who usually provide services on a short-term, periodic or non-periodic basis. Development volunteers work with host organizations for extended periods, often one to two years, like full-time employees in terms of their time commitment and responsibilities ([Zhang et al., 2022](#)). However, unlike formal employees, development volunteers are placed in temporary roles and receive only minimal subsidies. This unique position might create identity confusion for development volunteers. Working in disadvantaged situations with day-to-day responsibilities and lacking financial compensation, the extent to which they identify themselves as volunteers influences how they approach their work. Therefore, this study takes volunteer role identity into account and intends to understand its moderating role.

Volunteer role identity refers to the extent to which volunteer individuals identify themselves as volunteers, especially when they have to balance multiple roles ([Thoits, 2012](#); [Grube and Piliavin, 2000](#)). A stronger volunteer role identity indicates that volunteers prioritize their volunteer role, which triggers intrinsic motivation towards voluntary contribution ([Piliavin et al., 2002](#); [Callero, 1985](#); [Charng et al., 1988](#)). Existing studies on volunteer behaviors have explored the impact of volunteer role identity on various aspects, including volunteer hours, continued volunteering, increased well-being and intentions to leave ([Grube and Piliavin, 2000](#); [Van Ingen and Wilson, 2017](#)).

In the context of development volunteering, volunteers are usually self-motivated to contribute their time and skills, even with limited financial subsidies. When they value and internalize their volunteer identity, the volunteer role becomes part of their self-concept. The internalized role drives them to perform their work better with responsibility and dedication towards their role ([Güntert and Wehner, 2015](#); [Bakker et al., 2012](#)). Therefore, they are more likely to engage in job crafting to proactively redesign their jobs to achieve a good person-job fit ([Kwok et al., 2018](#)). As discussed earlier, humble leadership creates a supportive and inclusive environment for development volunteers by lowering power distance, encouraging feedback and increasing psychological safety ([Owens and Hekman, 2012](#); [Owens et al., 2013](#); [Chen et al., 2018](#)). When volunteers strongly identify with their role as volunteers, their intrinsic motivation increases, allowing them to more effectively utilize the support and opportunities offered by humble leadership to adjust their tasks and skills to better match their interests and abilities. This enhanced motivation can significantly boost their satisfaction with long-term volunteer service commitment.

Therefore, we propose *Hypothesis 5*: Volunteer role identity amplifies the positive effect of humble leadership on job crafting. Furthermore, we propose *Hypothesis 6*: Volunteer role identity moderates the indirect relationship between humble leadership and volunteers' job satisfaction through job crafting. This means that the enhancement of job satisfaction due to humble leadership is more pronounced in volunteers with a strong role identity, as their

intrinsic motivation drives them to actively craft their jobs to better fit their personal and professional aspirations.

Research methods

Sample and data collection

The data for this study were collected from volunteers who participated in the GCVR program in China. From 2021 to 2023, the GCVR program deployed 10,000 volunteers across 12 prefecture-level cities in Guangdong Province, and these volunteers committed to long-term service, typically two to three years in underdeveloped rural communities. Since we were unable to obtain a complete volunteer list, we used a snowball sampling method. This non-probability sampling approach helps gain access to target individuals and also establish a trust network encouraging participation in the survey (Cohen and Arieli, 2011). We first designed the research questionnaire using *Wenjuanxing*, an online survey platform widely used in academic research in China (Mei and Brown, 2018). Based on the research team's personal networks, we initially contacted four local program coordinators in four prefecture-level cities that hosted GCVR volunteers. With their assistance, we directly reached out to 62 volunteers. After confirming that they had Internet access and were willing to participate, we sent them a quick-response code and a web link generated by the *Wenjuanxing* platform via WeChat and email. Upon completion, participants were invited to recommend other GCVR volunteers within their networks to join the survey.

Simultaneously, we searched for more GCVR volunteers through social media platforms, inviting them to participate and to further circulate the survey link. Although these volunteers were serving in rural areas, widespread Internet access in rural China made it feasible to conduct the survey entirely online. From December 2023 to February 2024, 363 volunteers from eight prefecture-level cities participated in the survey. While the GCVR program operates in 12 prefecture-level cities in Guangdong, our final sample covered 8 and was not evenly distributed due to the snowball sampling design. Nevertheless, the sample reflects geographically diverse, encompassing prefecture-level cities located in eastern, western and northern Guangdong, areas that are less economically developed compared to the Pearl River Delta region (e.g. Guangzhou and Shenzhen) and are key targets of the GCVR program.

To ensure data quality, we conducted several cleaning procedures. First, the *Wenjuanxing* platform helped prevent incomplete responses, as it required respondents to complete all items before submission. Second, we excluded respondents who finished the questionnaire in less than six minutes (less than one-third of the median completion time), as these were considered insufficiently attentive. Third, we removed respondents who provided identical answers to reverse-coded questions. The final sample for this study consisted of 334 volunteers.

Measurements

This research employed commonly used scales to measure the four key variables. Considering that the participants are volunteers serving in rural China and Chinese is their first language, we firstly translated these scales into Chinese. To ensure that the translated content accurately conveyed the original meaning, we then used the back-translation technique suggested by Brislin (1980). Specifically, one researcher translated the original scales into Chinese, and another researcher – who had not seen the original English version – translated them back into English. Then, we compared the two versions, discussing and resolving any differences. To further ensure content and face validity, we consulted two human resource management experts familiar with scale development and volunteer management. Based on their feedback, minor revisions were made before finalizing the survey items. All items were measured using 5-point Likert-type scales, with responses ranging from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 5 = “strongly agree.” We also set up two reverse questions in order to examine the reliability of the respondents' answers.

Humble leadership was measured using the nine-item scale by Owen *et al.* (2013). The sample items include “My leader often compliments others on their strengths.”

Job crafting was measured using the four-item scale developed by Leana *et al.* (2009). The sample item includes “changing work procedures that I find less efficient.”

Volunteer role identity was measured using the six-item scale developed by Chemers *et al.* (2011). We replaced “scientist” in the original text of the scale with “volunteer.” A sample item includes “In general, being a volunteer is an important part of my self-image.”

Job satisfaction was measured using the three-item scale developed by Liu *et al.* (2007). The sample item includes “Overall, I don’t like my job (reverse scoring).”

Lastly, consistent with previous literature (e.g. Ou *et al.*, 2017), we controlled for rural volunteers’ age, gender and education level.

Analysis procedures

This study used SPSS 20 and Mplus 8.3 to analyze research data. Since all the variables in this study were rated by the respondents at the same time, we firstly conducted a common method bias test and confirmatory factor analysis using Mplus 8.3. Specifically, we compared measurement models, examined the construct distinctiveness of the four variables and assessed measurement reliability and validity. We then used SPSS 20 to conduct descriptive analysis and correlation. Lastly, we used Mplus 8.3 to conduct the path analysis and used a parametric bootstrap with 10,000 resamples to test our mediation and moderated mediation hypotheses (Preacher *et al.*, 2010). This analysis used the parameters and the standard errors to estimate 95% bias-corrected bootstrapped confidence intervals. A review of correlations among antecedent variables suggested that multicollinearity was not a major concern, as confirmed by the variance inflation factor ranging from 1.52 to 1.80 (Hair *et al.*, 2019).

Results

Confirmatory factor analysis

We conducted a confirmatory factor analysis to examine the discriminant validity of the four variables (humble leadership, job crafting, job satisfaction and volunteer role identity). The results shown in Table 1 indicated that the baseline four-factor model provided a fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 404.49$, $df = 203$, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.055, standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) = 0.050, comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.94 and Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) = 0.93). These fit indices fall within widely accepted thresholds (e.g. $\chi^2/df < 3$, RMSEA and SRMR < 0.08, CFI and TLI > 0.90; Bentler and Bonett, 1980; Bentler, 1990; Hu and Bentler, 1999; McDonald and Ho, 2002; Kline, 2005). Then, we compared the baseline four-factor model to a series of nested three-factor models and a one-factor model. As shown in Table 1, the fit indices supported the baseline four-factor model

Table 1. Comparison of measurement models

Models	χ^2	df	$\Delta \chi^2$	χ^2/df	RMSEA	SRMR	CFI	TLI
4-factor model HL JC JS VRI	404.49	203		1.99	0.055	0.050	0.94	0.93
3-factor model HL + JC JS VRI	727.41	206	322.92**	3.53	0.087	0.067	0.86	0.84
3-factor model 2 JC + VRI HL JS	783.29	206	378.80**	3.80	0.092	0.066	0.84	0.82
3-factor model 3 JC + JS HL VRI	755.18	206	350.69**	3.67	0.089	0.078	0.85	0.83
1-factor model	1343.32	209	937.83**	6.42	0.127	0.090	0.69	0.65
HL + JC + JS + VRI								

Note(s): HL = humble leadership, JC = job crafting, JS = job satisfaction, VRI = volunteer role identity and “+” means combined variables; ** $p < 0.01$

Source(s): Authors’ own work

better than the competition models, providing evidence for the construct distinctiveness of variables, indicating discriminant validity and the fit indices supported the baseline four-factor model better than the one-factor model, providing evidence that there was no potential issue regarding common method bias, which was deemed insignificant with respect to the study's data (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2012).

As presented in Table 2, convergent validity was supported by average variance extracted value and composite reliability (Fornell and Larcker, 1981; Lam, 2012). Additionally, Cronbach's alpha confirmed the internal consistency reliability. One item in the volunteer role identity scale (Item 6: "I am a volunteer") had a factor loading slightly below 0.40. However, we retained this item due to its theoretical significance as a core self-categorization indicator in role identity research (Chemers *et al.*, 2011). Sensitivity analyses also showed that removing this item resulted in only minimal improvements in model fit ($\Delta CFI = 0.005$, $\Delta TLI = 0.005$ and $\Delta RMSEA = 0.001$).

Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis

According to statistics, the majority of respondents (61.08%) were male. In terms of age, the data show that volunteers are relatively young, with 67.37% of the respondents being the age of 18–22. Regarding education level, half of respondents hold a junior college degree, while another half have completed a bachelor's degree or higher, indicating that a considerable portion have a higher education background and are mostly recent graduates.

Table 2. Measurement properties

Constructs	Std. Loadings	AVE	CR	α
<i>Humble leadership</i>		0.53	0.91	0.91
1. My leader actively seeks feedback from subordinates, even critical feedback	0.71			
2. My leader candidly admits when they do not know how to do something	0.70			
3. My leader acknowledges that subordinates may be more skilled or knowledgeable than themselves	0.70			
4. My leader recognizes the strengths of subordinates	0.74			
5. My leader frequently praises the strengths of subordinates	0.77			
6. My leader appreciates the unique contributions of subordinates	0.80			
7. My leader is willing to learn from subordinates	0.74			
8. My leader is open to the ideas of subordinates	0.69			
9. My leader is willing to accept suggestions from subordinates	0.69			
<i>Job crafting</i>		0.62	0.87	0.86
1. Introduce new approaches to improve my work	0.80			
2. Change minor work procedures that I think are not productive	0.74			
3. Change the way you do your job to make it easier to yourself	0.82			
4. Rearrange equipment or furniture in the play areas of your classroom	0.78			
<i>Volunteer role identity</i>		0.46	0.83	0.79
1. In general, being a volunteer is an important part of my self-image	0.62			
2. I have a strong sense of belonging to the organization of volunteer	0.66			
3. Being a volunteer is an important reflection of who I am	0.84			
4. I have come to think of myself as a "volunteer"	0.80			
5. I feel like I belong in the field of volunteer	0.67			
6. I am a volunteer	0.39			
<i>Job satisfaction</i>		0.61	0.82	0.80
1. I do not like my current job (R)	0.59			
2. I am satisfied with my current job	0.87			
3. I like working here	0.85			

Note(s): AVE = Average variance extracted; CR = Composite reliability; α = Cronbach's alpha
Source(s): Authors' own work

We conducted a descriptive analysis of the four scales used in this study. Table 3 summarizes the descriptive statistics. We conducted a correlation analysis to examine the existence of significant relationships between the variables in the hypotheses and the demographic factors of gender, age, and education. The means, standard deviations and correlations among all variables are presented in Table 3. Humble leadership is positively related to job crafting ($r = 0.57, p < 0.01$), job satisfaction ($r = 0.41, p < 0.01$) and role identity ($r = 0.57, p < 0.01$). Job crafting is positively related to role identity ($r = 0.45, p < 0.01$) and job satisfaction ($r = 0.34, p < 0.01$). Role identity is positively related to job satisfaction ($r = 0.30, p < 0.01$). These results provide preliminary support for the hypothesized relationships.

Hypotheses test

First, we tested the main effect of humble leadership on volunteers' job satisfaction. As shown in Model 2 of Table 4, the result indicates that humble leadership has a positive and significant influence on job satisfaction ($b = 0.30, SE = 0.06, p < 0.001$). Therefore, hypothesis 1 is supported. Next, we tested the mediating effect of job crafting in the relationship between humble leadership and job satisfaction. As shown in Model 1 of Table 4, humble leadership is positively related to job crafting ($b = 0.63, SE = 0.06, p < 0.001$), and job crafting is positively related to job satisfaction ($b = 0.12, SE = 0.06, p < 0.05$). The results of the indirect effect suggest that job crafting mediates the relationship between humble leadership and job satisfaction ($\rho = 0.08, SE = 0.03, 95\%$ confidence interval (CI) [0.02, 0.15]). Thus, hypothesis 2, hypothesis 3 and hypothesis 4 are supported.

As presented in Table 4, we incorporated volunteer role identity into Model 3 as a moderator and introduced an interaction effect of humble leadership and volunteer role identity. The results demonstrate a significant positive interaction effect on job crafting ($b = 0.23, SE = 0.11, p < 0.05$). A simple slope test was then conducted, and the plot in Figure 1 illustrates that humble leadership is positively associated with job crafting when volunteer role identity is high ($\rho = 0.60, SE = 0.10, 95\%$ CI [0.43, 0.82]). This association remains significant even when volunteer role identity is low ($\rho = 0.35, SE = 0.11, 95\%$ CI [0.13, 0.57]). These findings support hypothesis 5, indicating that volunteer role identity moderates the relationship between humble leadership and volunteers' job crafting, such that higher levels of volunteer role identity amplify the positive impact of humble leadership on job crafting.

Lastly, under conditions of higher levels of job crafting, the indirect effect between humble leadership and volunteer job satisfaction is significant ($\rho = 0.07, SE = 0.03, 95\%$ CI [0.02,

Table 3. Descriptive statistics and correlations

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Age	2.34	0.50							
2. Gender	0.61	0.49	0.05						
3. Education	1.52	0.55	0.24**	0.11*					
4. Humble leadership	4.13	0.50	-0.01	-0.08	-0.07				
5. Job crafting	4.19	0.56	0.00	0.01	-0.10	0.57**			
6. Volunteer role identity	4.11	0.54	0.00	-0.05	-0.11	0.57**	0.45**		
7. Job satisfaction	4.13	0.47	0.01	-0.04	-0.09	0.41**	0.34**	0.30**	

Note(s): Age (1 = 18–21 years; 2 = 22–25 years; 3 = above 26 years), gender (1 = male; 0 = female), education (1 = senior secondary school or specialized secondary school; 2 = junior college degree; 3 = bachelor's degree; 4 = master's degree or doctor's degree); *M* = Mean; *SD* = standard deviation; *N* = 334; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Source(s): Authors' own work

Table 4. Unstandardized coefficient and standard error of moderated mediation path analysis

Independent variables	Simple mediation model		Moderate mediation model	
	Model 1 Job crafting <i>b</i> (<i>SE</i>)	Model 2 Job satisfaction <i>b</i> (<i>SE</i>)	Model 3 Job crafting <i>b</i> (<i>SE</i>)	Model 4 Job satisfaction <i>b</i> (<i>SE</i>)
<i>Control variables</i>				
Gender	0.07(0.05)	-0.01(0.05)	0.08(0.05)	-0.01(0.05)
Age	0.03(0.05)	0.02(0.05)	0.03(0.04)	0.02(0.05)
Education	-0.08(0.05)	-0.05(0.05)	-0.06(0.04)	-0.05(0.05)
<i>Dependent variables</i>				
Humble Leadership	0.63***(0.06)	0.30***(0.06)	0.47***(0.09)	0.30***(0.06)
<i>Mediator variable</i>				
Job crafting		0.12*(0.06)		0.12*(0.06)
<i>Moderator variable</i>				
Role identity			0.23**(0.08)	
<i>Interaction</i>				
Humble leadership* Role identity			0.23*(0.11)	
<i>R</i> ²	0.33	0.19	0.29	0.18

Note(s): *N* = 334; **p* < 0.05; ***p* < 0.01; ****p* < 0.001
Source(s): Authors' own work

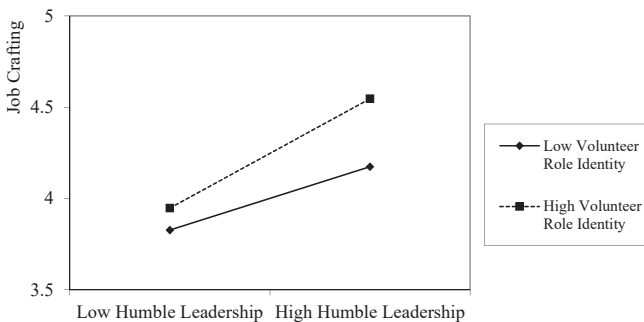


Figure 1. The interaction of humble leadership and volunteer role identity on job crafting. Source: Authors' own work

0.14)). This suggests that, when volunteer role identity is high, the positive influence of humble leadership on volunteer job satisfaction via job crafting is stronger. In contrast, under conditions of lower levels of job crafting, this positive effect is weaker ($\rho = 0.04$, $SE = 0.02$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.10]). Thus, hypothesis 6 is supported.

Discussions

Drawing on data collected from 334 volunteers who participated in a rural development volunteering program in China, this study identifies a direct and positive influence of humble leadership on volunteers' job satisfaction and highlights the mediating role of volunteers' job crafting behaviors and the moderating impact of volunteers' role identity.

Humble leadership improves development volunteers' job satisfaction. This finding aligns with prior studies in the business and public sectors (Owens *et al.*, 2013; Ou *et al.*, 2017) but

expands to the field of volunteering management. Leaders who demonstrate humility provide volunteers with a sense of being valued, empowered and respected, thereby increasing their satisfaction with their work. This finding added to the existing public leadership literature and its role in enhancing volunteers' satisfaction, with particular focuses on transformational leadership and servant leadership (Dwyer *et al.*, 2013; Ngah *et al.*, 2022; Benevene *et al.*, 2018). Humble leadership shares some overlap with these leadership approaches, such as prioritizing volunteers' development and providing psychological empowerment (Chen *et al.*, 2018; Ali *et al.*, 2020). However, it is distinct in the way it emphasizes acknowledging followers' strengths and contributions by openly admitting leaders' own limitations and fostering a psychologically safe environment (Owens *et al.*, 2013). Through these dynamic, humble leaders allow volunteers to freely express their thoughts and adjust their roles in ways that better align with their individual skills and interests (Ding *et al.*, 2020). This sense of self-determination, in turn, enhances their job satisfaction (Fernandez and Moldogaziev, 2015). This mechanism is particularly important in the context of development volunteer management, where volunteers are often placed in unfamiliar and resource-constrained settings and expected to provide long-term and skill-based services for disadvantaged communities with minimal financial support (Sherraden *et al.*, 2008; Zhang *et al.*, 2022).

In the meanwhile, these volunteers – who provide skill-based services – usually expect their job responsibilities to align with their professional expertise (Veerasamy *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, this study further identifies a mediating mechanism through which humble leadership influences volunteers' job satisfaction: their job crafting behaviors. Although job crafting was originally conceptualized in the business sector, existing literature has highlighted its importance in volunteering management. Walk and Peterson (2023) suggest that in the nonprofit setting, where volunteers often expect an autonomous and flexible working environment and need to adapt themselves to changing organizational structures and tasks, job crafting as a kind of proactive behavior increases their job satisfaction. While the prior volunteer studies focus more on the impact of job crafting on volunteers' satisfaction, the current study suggests humble leadership as an antecedent of job crafting and then leading volunteers' satisfaction.

This pathway is especially salient in the Chinese development volunteering context, where volunteers are placed within government agencies characterized by an authoritarian culture (Zheng *et al.*, 2020). In such environments, humble leadership stands out as a counterbalance to hierarchical norms, encouraging volunteers to express themselves, adjust their roles and achieve greater satisfaction from their work through job crafting.

Finally, the study identifies that volunteer role identity moderates the direct relationship between humble leadership and job crafting and also the indirect influence of humble leadership on job satisfaction via job crafting. While humble leadership creates a supportive work environment, volunteer role identity represents a self-view tied to the role of being a development volunteer (Van Ingen and Wilson, 2017). With a strong volunteer role identity, volunteers are more inclined to actively contribute to community prosperity using their skills (Grube and Piliavin, 2000). Consequently, these volunteers are better able to leverage the opportunities created by humble leaders, proactively shaping their job roles. The interaction between humble leadership and volunteer role identity thus generates a synergistic effect that enhances job crafting and boosts job satisfaction. This finding is meaningful in the context of development volunteering, where role identification can vary significantly. Volunteers may perceive themselves as tourists, clients, technical experts or even temporary government employees (Chen and Chen, 2011; Chen, 2021).

This study contributes to the literature on volunteer behaviors and public leadership, especially within the context of development volunteering and its management. While previous research has discussed the impact of transformational leadership, servant leadership and ethical leadership on volunteers' motivations and behaviors (Dwyer *et al.*, 2013; Ngah *et al.*, 2022; Benevene *et al.*, 2018), little attention has been paid to on humble leadership, which is crucial for volunteer management. Volunteers, driven by intrinsic motivations and making long-term commitments, would not expect authoritarian and arrogant leaders. An empirical study on aid

workers in humanitarian operations also suggests that authoritarian leadership reduces aid workers' flexibility and negatively affects job performance (Salem *et al.*, 2022). Humble leadership, on the contrary, creates a supportive environment for volunteers, stimulating their job crafting behaviors and potential. By examining the interactive effect of humble leadership and volunteer role identity, this study also adds a valuable dimension to the existing literature.

In China, where development volunteers often work with government authorities in underdeveloped communities, their supervisors, who are usually public managers, should prioritize humility over authoritarian control. Training programs for local leaders could integrate humility-focused leadership development. Furthermore, host organizations should actively clarify volunteer roles and organize orientation and mid-term sessions, helping volunteers build a strong sense of identity tied to their service mission. These efforts are essential for sustained engagement and satisfaction. These implications are also relevant to development volunteering programs in other countries, particularly those operating in hierarchical or state-led systems, where similar leadership dynamics and organizational challenges may be present.

Nevertheless, this study has certain limitations. Since the data were collected from a single government-initiated development volunteering program in China, the generalizability of the findings to other cultural contexts or organizational settings may be limited. Programs run by international NGOs or local nonprofits might have different leadership-volunteer dynamics. So future studies could explore whether and how organizational context (e.g. government-affiliated vs. nonprofit programs) shapes the effectiveness of humble leadership. A comparative case study or multi-site survey design – including both domestic and international volunteer programs – could be meaningful.

In addition, future studies could build on alternative mediation and moderation mechanisms. For example, other mediators beyond job crafting, such as organizational learning and knowledge sharing, could be examined to better understand the pathways through which humble leadership influences volunteer outcomes. Similarly, role identity could be explored in greater depth. What are the antecedents of a strong volunteer role identity in development volunteering programs? How might cultural values (e.g. collectivism vs. individualism) matter? Both quantitative and qualitative approaches could be used to explore these dynamics. Lastly, while the current study focuses on job satisfaction, future work could consider additional outcomes such as volunteer performance and organizational citizenship behaviors.

Conclusion

This research focuses on an overlooked management practice – volunteering management – by examining the impact of humble leadership on volunteers' job crafting behaviors and satisfaction in development volunteering programs. Empirical findings first confirm that humble leadership positively influences both volunteers' job crafting and satisfaction. Furthermore, job crafting mediates the relationship between humble leadership and job satisfaction. The results also suggest that volunteer role identity plays a crucial moderating role, strengthening both the direct relationship between humble leadership and job crafting and the indirect effect of humble leadership on job satisfaction through job crafting.

These findings contribute to the growing literature on humble leadership by extending its relevance to volunteer management. Practically, these findings suggest that development volunteer programs should emphasize the cultivation of humble leadership and actively support volunteers in building a strong sense of volunteer role identity.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to the editors, reviewers and the editorial team for their valuable comments, constructive suggestions and support throughout the review and publication process. We also extend our heartfelt thanks to all the volunteers who participated in this research and contributed to community development.

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