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Fueled by a Fearful Leader: When, to What Extent and How Leader Fear of COVID-19 Promotes Employee Performance

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Abstract

The literature generally surmises that negative affective states of leaders are detrimental to leader effectiveness and work outcomes. Taking the opposite view, this study explores how the negative affective experiences of leaders related to COVID-19 may foster team commitment and employee performance. By integrating personality systems interaction theory, cognitive appraisal theory, and the literature on stress-based emotions, we develop a model that clarifies when, how, and to what extent leader fearful states related to COVID-19 drive employee performance. Using three-wave and multisource data from 579 employees and their leaders from 69 teams, we found that among leaders who exhibited higher levels of positive affectivity, leader fear of COVID-19 indirectly fostered employee performance via the mediating roles of leader promotion of team goals and team commitment. Moreover, these moderated indirect effects were strongest at moderate levels of leader fear of COVID-19. We discuss the theoretical and practical implications of these findings for research on leader affective states.

Keywords: leader fear of COVID-19; leader positive affectivity; leader promotion of team goals; team commitment; task performance.

Fueled by a Fearful Leader: When, How, and to What Extent Leader Fear of COVID-19 Promotes Employee Performance

The global crisis sparked by the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the demand for high-performing employees who can help organizations thrive in times of crisis and uncertainty (Mischke et al., 2021). At the same time, most twenty-first-century organizations rely on teams to implement their business strategies and face the challenges of the external environment (Bell, Brown, & Weiss, 2018). Thus, a key challenge for managers during disruptive times is to successfully drive employee performance in team contexts. However, the same crisis that has accelerated the demand for a high-performing workforce has enhanced stressful experiences among managers (Clifford, 2021; Graf-Vlachy, Sun, & Zhang, 2020). A major stress reaction induced by uncertain, volatile, and threatening disruptive events, such as the pandemic, is *fear*, the unpleasant emotional state caused by the perception of threat and characterized by feelings of being afraid, frightened, nervous, and scared (De Hoog, Stroebe, & de Wit, 2008; Watson & Clark, 1994).

Evidence suggests that COVID-19-triggered fear affects all life spheres such as people's physical condition (e.g., risk of COVID-19 infection), job experiences (e.g., increased workload), and financial situation (e.g., employment uncertainty and reduction of household income) (Sarfraz, Ji, Asghar, Ivascu, & Ozturk, 2022; Zampetakis, 2022). As far as leaders are concerned, COVID-19-triggered fear generates concerns about the loss of organizational competitive advantage due to the incapacity to make timely adjustments and take appropriate decisions in response to the pandemic (Sun, Wu, & Chen, 2020), and about the negative impact of hybrid work on employees' mental health and team collaboration (Harnett & Kieran, 2020).

Research has indicated that fear of COVID-19 is related to more psychological distress (Ahorsu et al., 2022; Erbiçer, Metin, Çetinkaya, & Şen, 2022), somatic complaints

(Trougakos, Chawla, & McCarthy, 2020), counterproductive behaviors (Reizer, Galperin, Chavan, Behl, & Pereira, 2022), and turnover intentions (Labrague & de Los Santos, 2021), and to lower job satisfaction and performance (Raja, Jahanzeb, Malik, & Baig, 2022). However, there is limited evidence on how individuals who are required to achieve high standards of performance during the pandemic can cope with the fear of COVID-19 and preserve the energy to accomplish work tasks (Liu, Chen, & Li, 2021; van Zoonen & Ter Hoeven, 2021). Interestingly, Zampetakis (2022) showed that employees experiencing fear of COVID-19 were more likely to engage in job crafting behaviors and achieve higher levels of work engagement. Since fear is an emotional state that can *motivate* people to redirect their thoughts to remain engaged in their work role while protecting them from perceived threats (Izard, 1991; Kerahrodi & Michal, 2020; Lebel, 2017), it is relevant to explore its bright side as a potential driver of employee performance during the pandemic.

Previous research provides limited insights into the conditions under which fearful leaders can build employee performance. Indeed, only a few studies assessed leader fear in organizations, yielding mixed findings. While some studies provided evidence for the negative effects of leader fearful states (Mohan, Voss, & Jiménez, 2017; Wisse, Rus, Keller, & Sleebos, 2019), other studies reported non-significant (Eisenberger et al., 2014; Lagios, Restubog, Garcia, & Caesens, 2023) or even positive (Solansky, Wang, & Quansah, 2023) effects. As environmental disruptions such as pandemics are tough managerial concerns (Kim, Vaiman, & Sanders, 2022), advancing our understanding of the specific relationship between leaders' fear of COVID-19 and employee performance may help derive management strategies to enable leaders to turn their negative emotional states into drivers of effective leadership and improve employee proficiency.

The above premises beg the question of how leaders who fear the COVID-19 can manage their workforce for better performance in a team context. This study examines a

multilevel and curvilinear moderated mediation model that clarifies how, under what conditions and to what extent leader fear of COVID-19 promotes employee performance in teams. To develop our framework, we draw on two complementary theories, personality systems interaction theory (PSI; Kuhl, 2000) and cognitive appraisal theory (Lazarus, 1991), as well as on the literature on stress-based emotions (Marko & Riečanský, 2018). First, PSI theory suggests that the combination of positive and negative affective experiences enhances the leader's capacity to be alert to pandemic-related threats and enact courses of action aligned with their deeply held values (Yang, Simon, Wang, & Zheng, 2016). We specifically argue that when leaders experience high levels of positive affectivity (i.e., a dispositional tendency to experience positive emotions; Watson, Pennebaker, & Folger, 1987), the fear of COVID-19 would enable leaders to promote team goals (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Ahearne, 1997), which would sequentially increase employee performance through enhanced team commitment—i.e., team members' attachment to their team (Bishop & Scott, 2000). As the team is a target of high relevance to employees, team commitment may drive their engagement in performance-related behaviors (Becker, Billings, Eveleth, & Gilbert, 1996; Bishop, Scott, & Burroughs, 2000). Relatedly, research has indicated that the leader's communication of vision and goals facilitates team identification among teammates (Tse & Chiu, 2014). Therefore, leader promotion of team goals and team commitment are likely central processes that can explain how leader fear of COVID-19 and leader positive affectivity exert a joint cross-level effect on employee performance.

Second, cognitive appraisal theory and the literature on stress-based emotions complement the insights from PSI theory by informing about the optimal level of fear needed to enhance leader effectiveness. According to cognitive appraisal theory (Lazarus, 1991), stress-based emotions, such as fear and anxiety, tend to deplete the energetic resources available for effective behavioral functioning due to increased demands on volitional self-

control. Prior research indicates that these effects tend to occur when individuals experience acute emotional states (Marko & Riečanský, 2018; Mundorf, Zillmann, & Drew, 1991). As the tenets of PSI theory suggest that low levels of fear would also be detrimental to effective functioning, we contend that the combination of leader fear of COVID-19 and leader positive affectivity would be mostly beneficial for employee performance at moderate, rather than low or high levels of fear. Taken together, the above arguments suggest that leader fear of COVID-19 and leader positive affectivity interact to exert both linear and curvilinear (i.e., inverted U-shaped) cross-level indirect effects on employee performance through the mediating roles of leader promotion of team goals and employee team commitment. The present research's model is presented in Figure 1.

This study aims to contribute to the literature in three important ways. First, prior research has largely treated leader stress-related emotional states as being detrimental to leader effectiveness or even as leading to destructive leader behaviors (Barling, & Cloutier, 2017; Harms, Credé, Tynan, Leon, & Jeung, 2017). Our contention is that these negative emotional experiences may not necessarily lead to impaired leadership behaviors. Instead, we posit that positive and negative emotions are commonplace (Namier, 1992) and that threat-based emotions (e.g., fear) can be both friends or foes, causing individuals to either be overwhelmed by them or, conversely, to strive harder toward goal achievement (Martin & Marsh 2003). For example, evidence from neuroscience and evolutionary psychology research indicates that threat-based emotions may be adaptive when they occur among individuals with a background experience of positive emotions (Garland et al., 2010; Gilbert, 2012, 2015; Le Doux, 1998; Panksepp, 1998). Our study thus challenges prior theorizing and research on threat-based emotions, which have uniformly regarded these states as hindering optimal functioning at work (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Michel, Turgut, Hoppe, & Sonntag, 2016). Indeed, fear has been associated with reduced creativity (Guo et al., 2018), work engagement

(Clark & Loxton, 2012), and psychological and physical well-being (Mueller & Tschan, 2011), and increased silence behavior (Kiewitz et al., 2016). Instead, we posit that leader fear of COVID-19 can promote effective leader behaviors to benefit employee performance through improved team processes and that leaders' positive affectivity plays a key role in activating the positive effects of leader fear.

Second, while research has examined how leaders' negative emotional states can affect follower outcomes (e.g., Bartels et al., 2022; Sun, Wayne, & Liu, 2022; Visser, van Knippenberg, van Kleef, & Wisse, 2013), this research has mainly focused on individual-level processes as the underlying mechanisms. Our model moves research a step forward by identifying leader promotion of team goals and motivational processes as mechanisms at *the team level* that mediate the relationship between leader fear of COVID-19 and employee performance. In doing so, this study contributes to extending current knowledge about the bright and dark sides of leader negative emotions in the workplace. Finally, although effective leadership has been identified as a key factor that can help organizations cope with external disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Sergent & Stajkovic, 2020; Zhao, Ahmed, & Faraz, 2020), it is still unknown how leaders can adopt effective behaviors when they are overwhelmed by stressful emotions. The present study helps identify the conditions under which leader fear of COVID-19 can, at certain levels, enable leader promotion of team goals and foster team commitment and employee performance. As such, this study's findings provide insights into how leaders can cope with threatening emotional experiences to promote effective team functioning. Specifically, our study suggests that leaders can maintain their ability to promote team goals, team commitment, and employee commitment if they learn to contextualize their fear by building on their background of positive affect. As we demonstrate, positive affectivity brings the energy to turn threat-based emotions into a strength. Even though positive affectivity is a basic disposition, positive emotions can be fostered through

training sessions where leaders are exposed to positive experiences (e.g., mental exercises focusing on gratitude, mindful thinking; Fredrickson, 2003). Such learning would help optimize the value of leader fear for better team management.

[Figure 1 about here]

Theory and Hypotheses

Leader Fear of COVID-19: Friend or Foe?

The prevailing assumption in the literature is that leaders' experience of negative emotions is associated with dysfunctional leader behaviors and impaired employee outcomes (Barsade, 2002; Gaddis, Connelly, & Mumford, 2004; Lewis, 2000). For instance, the meta-analytical study by Joseph, Dhanani, Shen, McHugh, and McCord (2015) showed that leader negative affectivity was negatively related to leader effectiveness. Likewise, Clarkson, Wagstaff, Arthur, and Thelwell's (2019) meta-analysis revealed a contagion of negative affective states from leaders to followers and indicated that such contagion was associated with lower leader effectiveness. Recent studies confirm this pattern of relationships by providing evidence for negative associations between leader negative affective states and leader and follower outcomes such as reduced follower task performance, leader organizational citizenship behavior toward followers, leader-member exchange quality (Bartels et al., 2022), and employee work engagement (Sun et al., 2022).

Despite the above evidence, we argue that leader negative affective states, particularly fear, have the potential to elicit positive leader behaviors and employee outcomes. Two reasons may support this contention. First, while fear has often been thought to trigger avoidance or "flight" responses (Frijda, Kuipers, & Ter Schure, 1989; Shaver, Schwartz, Kirson, & O'Connor, 1987), research has provided limited evidence for flight-based reactions to fear (Lebel, 2017). Second, several theories converge to suggest that negative affective states might elicit effective work behaviors. For instance, the mood-as-information

perspective (George & Zhou, 2002; Kaufmann, 2003; Schwarz, 2002) suggests that negative affective states signal problematic events and encourage people to examine the issue and attempt to bring about changes and improvements. Similarly, the circumplex model of affect (Russell, 1980, 2003) suggests that high-activated negative moods, such as worry, fear, and anxiety, signal a threat to the self and thereby push individuals to change the situation to make it fit with their goals (Frijda, 1987). Unlike deactivating negative moods, such as sadness or dejection, highly activated negative moods provide a strong impetus for action readiness and potency, thus being more likely to energize individuals' effective behaviors (Russell, 2003). Finally, and of utmost importance, scholars have suggested that in times of crisis, as in the case of the pandemic outbreak, leader negative affective states could be effective in stimulating employee performance (Damen, van Knippenberg, & van Knippenberg, 2008), as they provide salient cues to reduce followers' uncertainty and guide their behaviors.

While the above discussion suggests that leader fear of COVID-19 might exert positive effects on leader and employee outcomes, we posit that these effects will be contingent on boundary conditions (Visser et al., 2013). A few studies have examined the conditions under which leader negative emotions could elicit positive work outcomes. For example, Van Kleef et al. (2009) found that leader expression of anger improved team performance on command-and-control tasks when team members had a high epistemic motivation (i.e., a desire to understand work situations). Relatedly, Visser et al. (2013) showed that the relationship between leader expression of sadness and follower performance depended on the type of task, such that performance increased on analytical tasks but not on creative tasks. However, these studies focused on *displayed* emotions, which can be different from, and potentially discordant with, *felt* affective states (Mesmer-Magnus, DeChurch, & Wax, 2012). This implies that what leaders express does not necessarily reflect what they truly experience in terms of emotions. Furthermore, the affective states investigated in the

above studies—sadness and anger—are functionally distinct from fear. First, unlike sadness, which is a deactivated affective state, fear represents a high-activated affective experience and, as such, is expected to exert a (potentially) greater energizing effect on effective leader behaviors (Russell, 2003). Second, although anger and fear are both high-activated emotions with the potential to motivate effective work behaviors, the former arises from perceptions of certainty, while the latter emerges from perceptions of uncertainty (Lebel, 2017), such as those typically triggered during the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak.

Evidence for the impact of leader fearful states on work-related outcomes is scant and inconsistent. Some studies provided evidence for the detrimental effects of fear. For example, Mohan et al. (2017) found that manager fear of negative evaluation impaired the quality of decision-making and front-end innovation, while Wisse et al. (2019) found leader fear of losing power to increase leader self-serving behavior. Other researchers reported non-significant findings for leader fear. Eisenberger et al. (2014) reported supervisor fear of exploitation in interpersonal relationships to be unrelated to subordinates' perceptions of leader-member exchange, and Lagios et al. (2023) found supervisor fear or retaliation to be unrelated to supervisor undermining behavior. Finally, Solansky et al. (2023) provided evidence for the benefits of leader fear of failure for leader psychological empowerment and wisdom.

Overall, these premises point to the relevance of understanding what makes leaders who fear the threat of external disruptions (i.e., the COVID-19 pandemic) engage in behaviors that foster employee performance. In the next sections, we develop our rationale based on PSI and cognitive appraisal frameworks to theorize the linear and curvilinear interactions between leader fear of COVID-19 and leader positive affectivity predicting employee performance via leader promotion of team goals and team commitment.

Linear Interaction between Leader Fear of COVID-19 and Leader Positive Affectivity: A Personality Systems Interaction Perspective

PSI theory provides important cues to understand the conditions under which fear of COVID-19 can motivate leaders to engage in adaptive actions that support effective team and employee outcomes, namely by highlighting how positive and negative affective experiences can be regulated for better adaptation (Kazén, Kaschel, & Kuhl, 2008; Kuhl & Koole, 2008). PSI theory posits that individual differences in the ability to generate positive affect in challenging situations play a central role in the adaptation process (Beckmann & Kuhl, 1984; Kazén et al., 2008; Koole & Jostmann, 2004; Kuhl, 2000). As individuals with high levels of positive affectivity tend to experience frequent positive affective states (Cardon & Patel, 2015), they should be resilient and have a greater capacity to promote team goals despite fear of COVID-19 than those who have low levels of positive affectivity. However, according to PSI theory, upshifts in negative affective experiences can also be functional when people find themselves in difficult situations, as these experiences enhance the state of alertness regarding threats in the environment (Baumann & Kuhl, 2002; Kuhl, 2000; Shackman et al., 2011).

Consistent with PSI theory, we argue that high levels of leader fear of COVID-19 and positive affectivity represent complementary conditions that maximize the likelihood that leaders will effectively promote team goals to their members. On the one hand, fear of COVID-19 is expected to boost the leader's vigilance and awareness of the threats triggered by the pandemic. This may happen because negative emotions activate the object recognition macrosystem, which facilitates the identification of threats in the environment and acts as an "alarm system" that triggers the need to identify a suitable course of action in the face of uncertainty (Shackman et al., 2011). However, on the other hand, it is the capability to generate positive affect, as reflected by high levels of positive affectivity, that provides the impetus for taking concrete, effective actions to address the threat. Indeed, following PSI

theory, increases in positive affect activate two supplementary macrosystems, namely extension memory, which facilitates the integration of external factors with personal values, and intuitive behavior control, which ignites rapid action based on intuitive thinking (Kazén et al., 2008). Thus, when leaders are afraid of COVID-19, their high levels of positive affectivity could enable them to reconnect to their personal values and use them as guiding principles to identify meaningful directions to counteract the threat (LeJeune & Luoma, 2019) and enact value-based courses of action for goal achievement (Hayes, 2004; McCracken & Yang, 2008).

As followers represent an important target for leaders pursuing task-related goals, their actions should be oriented toward building follower motivation to achieve team goals (Don, Slocum, & Woodman, 2001; Mintzberg, 1973). For example, research has consistently shown that leader transformational behaviors speak to value-based actions that inspire team members' motivation and commitment (Bono & Judge, 2003; House & Shamir, 1993; Sun & Anderson, 2012) and that a leader's vision aimed at promoting team goals is rooted in their deeply held values (Lord & Brown, 2001; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Moorman, & Fetter, 1990). From a PSI theory perspective, we thus argue that leaders who are fearful of COVID-19 but also have high levels of positive affectivity will overcome the threat related to the pandemic by drawing upon their inner values to develop a vision that promotes the team's collective goals. Conversely, increased fear of COVID-19 combined with low positive affectivity would "freeze" the leader by impairing their ability to promote team goals. Likewise, a reduced fear of COVID-19 combined with high positive affectivity might result in complacency, which would stifle the attentional focus on the threat related to the pandemic that is deemed essential for taking action.

Note that fear and positive affect can occur together. Indeed, scholars have argued that as positive and negative emotions are independent of each other and operate via different mechanisms, they can occur simultaneously (Larsen & McGraw, 2014; Watson & Tellegen,

1985). Thus, negative emotions can be accompanied by either low or high levels of positive emotions and vice versa (e.g., Watson, 2000). In support of this view, research has shown that people can report positive and negative emotions at the same time (Larsen & McGraw, 2014). For example, individuals have been found to experience mixed emotions in various life contexts, such as house moves (e.g., excitement and nostalgia), college graduation (e.g., determination and anxiety), and learning situations (e.g., enthusiasm and stress) (Ersner-Hershfield, Mikels, Sullivan, & Carstensen, 2008; Larsen, McGraw, & Cacioppo, 2001; Moeller, Ivcevic, Brackett, & White, 2018). Research has also provided evidence for the simultaneous experience of positive and negative emotions in the workplace, such as in response to organizational justice perceptions (Barclay & Kiefer, 2014) and organizational change (Oreg & Sverdlik, 2011).

Taken together, the above discussion suggests that a stronger leader fear of COVID-19 combined with high positive affectivity provides the ideal blend that may foster leader promotion of team goals. This leads to the following hypothesis.

> *Hypothesis 1*: Leader positive affectivity moderates the relationship between leader fear of COVID-19 and leader promotion of team goals such that leader fear of COVID-19 is positively related to leader promotion of team goals only when leader positive affectivity is high.

Curvilinear Interaction between Leader Fear of COVID-19 and Leader Positive Affectivity: A Cognitive Appraisal Perspective

While PSI theory helps make sense of how leader fear of COVID-19 and positive affectivity may interact, we suspect that the interaction effect may vary across *levels* of leader fear of COVID-19. Research indicates that varying intensities of fear may be accompanied by different patterns of individual responses (Kish-Gephart, Detert, Treviño, & Edmondson, 2009). Cognitive appraisal theory suggests that the emergence of negative emotions related to

appraised threat (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic) requires conspicuous self-control efforts to cope with such emotions (Lazarus, 1990; Prem, Kubicek, Diestel, & Korunka, 2016). Such efforts drain the resources necessary to engage in volitional and self-congruent actions to cope with the external threat (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998; Eysenck, Derakshan, Santos, & Calvo, 2007; Kazén, Kuhl, & Leicht, 2015). Interestingly, research has shown that the monitoring process of self-control is related to how *acute* negative emotions elicit the sympathetic arousal system (Marko & Riečanský, 2018; Mundorf et al., 1991).

Thus, based on cognitive appraisal theory, we suggest that, even if overall, under high levels of positive affectivity, the leader's fear of COVID-19 can be beneficial for their capacity to promote team goals, such benefits might vanish when the level of fear becomes too high. That is, in these circumstances, the activated arousal system would make leaders exert a high level of self-control effort to manage their acute negative emotions, resulting in reduced resources to engage in the value-based actions needed to promote team goals. At the same time, as discussed above, PSI theory also indicates that the absence of fear might be equally dysfunctional since it would impair the leader's capacity to detect external threats and thereby restrain the ability to act for better performance (Kuhl, 2000). Accordingly, the insights from PSI theory and cognitive appraisal theory suggest that when leaders have the capacity to generate positive emotions via positive affectivity, moderate rather than low or high levels of fear of COVID-19 are expected to be most beneficial to leader promotion of team goals. This leads us to hypothesize the following curvilinear (i.e., inverted U-shaped) interaction between leader fear of COVID-19 and leader positive affectivity.

> *Hypothesis 2*: Leader positive affectivity will moderate a curvilinear (i.e., inverted U-shaped) relationship between leader fear of COVID-19 and leader promotion of team goals such that this curvilinear relationship will be stronger (vs. weaker) when leader positive affectivity is high (vs. low).

Leader Promotion of Team Goals and Team Commitment

We then expect leader promotion of team goals to foster team commitment. By encouraging team members to work at achieving the team's goals (Podsakoff et al., 1990), leaders would make members collaborate and develop team commitment (Spreitzer, Perttula & Xin, 2005). Moreover, by nurturing team members' adherence to collective goals and enabling them to work together to achieve them, leaders promote the internalization of the team's values (Lee, Farh, & Chen, 2011; Podsakoff et al., 1990; Schaubroeck, Lam, & Cha, 2007). As team members align with such values, they are more likely to devote attention to the team's collective interests as well as to acknowledge their individual responsibilities as contributing to a larger collective purpose (Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993; Wang, Law, Hackett, Wang, & Chen, 2005), thus becoming more emotionally attached to the group (Bass, 1985; Kark, Shamir, & Chen, 2003). Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 3: Leader promotion of team goals will be positively related to team commitment.

Team Commitment and Employee Performance

Finally, we argue that team commitment serves as a team-level mechanism by which leader promotion of team goals relates to stronger employee performance. Theory and research on individual behaviors in group environments suggest that team commitment helps consider the team's goals as their own, making members concerned about the team's welfare and willing to work at achieving its goals (Bishop & Scott, 2000; Bishop et al., 2000; Neininger, Lehmann-Willenbrock, Kauffeld, & Henschel, 2010; Van der Vegt & Bunderson, 2005; Worchel, Rothgerber, Day, Hart, & Butemeyer, 1998). Specifically, as committed team members care highly about their group, they are more likely to proactively take initiatives aimed at furthering team goals, such as making suggestions, improving procedures, or adopting a responsible long-term focus (Den Hartog & Belschak, 2007), which help them

better perform on assigned tasks (Fay & Frese, 2001; Strauss, Griffin, & Rafferty, 2009). Likewise, members committed to their team are more willing to share information with each other on behalf of the team (Bouwmans, Runhaar, Wesselink, & Mulder, 2019). This eases the sharing of ideas, knowledge and skills that are beneficial to efficient task completion (Van Woerkom & Croon, 2009). Thus, the above arguments suggest that as team members' commitment to the group increases, resulting from the leader's capacity to promote team goals, more intense individual efforts will be deployed to facilitate the achievement of these collective goals (Ellemers, De Gilder, & Haslam, 2004), resulting in higher individual performance. This leads to the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 4: Team commitment will be positively related to individual task performance.

Cross-level Moderated Mediation Hypotheses

Combined, our proposed hypotheses form a multilevel moderated mediation model (Figure 1). In this model, leader fear of COVID-19 is expected to interact both linearly (Hypothesis 1) and curvilinearly (Hypothesis 2) with leader positive affectivity to predict leader promotion of team goals; leader promotion of team goals is hypothesized to relate to team commitment at the team level (Hypothesis 3); and team commitment is thought to relate to stronger individual task performance (i.e., a cross-level effect) (Hypothesis 4). The moderated mediational links in the theorized model suggest that leader positive affectivity should moderate both the linear and curvilinear (i.e., inverted U-shaped) indirect and cross-level effects of leader fear of COVID-19 on individual task performance via the sequential mediation of leader promotion of team goals and team commitment. Thus, at high levels of leader positive affectivity, (a) leader fear of COVID-19 leads to stronger individual task performance via enhanced leader promotion of team goals and team commitment, and (b) this

indirect positive effect is expected to be stronger at moderate, rather than low or high, levels of leader fear of COVID-19. This leads to the following remaining hypotheses.

Hypothesis 5: Leader positive affectivity moderates the indirect relationship between leader fear of COVID-19 and individual task performance via leader promotion of team goals and team commitment such that this indirect relationship is stronger (and positive) at higher levels of leader positive affectivity.

Hypothesis 6: Leader positive affectivity moderates a curvilinear (i.e., inverted U-shaped) indirect relationship between leader fear of COVID-19 and individual task performance via leader promotion of team goals and team commitment such that this indirect curvilinear relationship is stronger when leader positive affectivity is higher.

Method

Sample and Procedure

To test our hypotheses, we conducted a three-wave, multilevel, multisource study on team members and supervisors from work teams of eight government departments in Canada. Upon agreement from the human resource managers of the departments, participants were invited to complete an online survey questionnaire at three points in time, separated by three months (a typical timeframe in attitude research; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2012). At Time 1 (which extended from end of March 2020 to early December 2020), team supervisors were asked to answer survey items related to leader fear of COVID-19, leader positive affectivity, and leader negative affectivity (which was used as a control; see below). In parallel, archival data on employee age, education level, and organizational tenure were obtained. At Time 2, team members responded to items pertaining to leader promotion of team goals and team commitment. Finally, at Time 3, team supervisors evaluated team members' task performance. At Time 1, we received usable responses from 1002 team members (response rate = 74.61%) and 102 team supervisors (response rate = 60.23%). At

Time 2, 843 team member surveys were completed (response rate = 84.13%). At Time 3, 642 supervisor ratings of employee task performance were obtained. Teams with fewer than three members (n = 15) were excluded from the sample (González-Romá & Hernández, 2014). Thus, the final sample comprised 579 employees from 69 teams. Most employees (62.5%) held an undergraduate degree or higher. The average employee age was 47.86 years (SD = 11.20), and the average organizational tenure was 9.29 years (SD = 10.19). The average team size was 15.37 (SD = 7.53). Team size ranged from 4 to 38, which is similar to the range of team size reported in other studies (e.g., Campion, Medsker, & Higgs, 1993; Lester, Meglino, & Korsgaard, 2008; Magjuka & Baldwin, 1991).

We examined whether participant attrition was randomly distributed across time through multiple logistic regression. In the employee sample, Time 1 demographics (age, education level, and organizational tenure) and team size were used as predictors of the odds of leaving the sample at Time 2 and Time 3, and Time 1 variables and Time 2 leader promotion of team goals and team commitment were used as predictors of the probability of leaving the sample at Time 3. The logistic regression models predicting the probability of leaving the sample at Time 2 ($\chi^2[4] = 4.65$, *ns*) and Time 3 ($\chi^2[4] = 8.62$, *ns*) by Time 1 variables were nonsignificant, and none of the predictors was significant. Moreover, the model predicting the probability of dropping from the sample at Time 3 from Time 1 and Time 2 variables was nonsignificant ($\chi^2[6] = 11.35$, $p < .01$), yet team size increased the odds of leaving the sample at Time 3 ($B = .97$, $p < .05$). Likewise, in the supervisor sample, Time 1 leader fear of COVID-19 and positive and negative affectivity were used as predictors of the probability of leaving the sample at Time 2 and Time 3. The associated logistic regression models were nonsignificant (Time 2: $\chi^2[3] = 6.59$, *ns*; Time 3: $\chi^2[3] = 4.62$, *ns*). However, leader negative affectivity was positively related to the probability of leaving the sample at Time 2 ($B = .20$, $p < .05$). We discuss these results in the limitations.

Measures

All scale items are reported in Appendix A.

Leader Fear of COVID-19. Leader fear was measured by Kiewitz et al.' s (2016) four-item scale and targeted the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, leaders were asked to indicate the extent to which they felt "afraid", "fearful", "scared" and "nervous" in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic (α = .81). Items were rated using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*).

Leader Positive Affectivity. Leader positive affectivity was assessed with Thompson's (2007) five-item positive affectivity scale, a shortened version of Watson, Clark, and Tellegen's (1988) scale. Items were preceded by the stem "In general, I feel," with sample items being "determined" and "attentive" (α = .74). Items were rated using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*).

Leader Promotion of Team Goals. Leader promotion of team goals was measured using Podsakoff et al.'s (1990) four-item scale, which assesses the extent to which leaders are perceived to encourage team members to work collaboratively to reach a common goal (e.g., My team supervisor gets the team to work together for the same goal;" α = .97). A 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) was used. We calculated the $r_{wg(j)}$ (Bliese, 2000; James, Demaree, & Wolf, 1984, 1993) and ICC(1) and ICC(2) (Bliese, 2000) coefficients to examine whether team-level aggregation was justifiable. For the $r_{wg(j)}$ coefficient, values of .70 or above are indications of good within-group agreement (James et al., 1993). Regarding ICC(1) and ICC(2), values of .05 (Bliese, 2000) and.47 (Schneider, White, & Paul, 1998) or above would indicate reasonable between-unit variance and reliability of unit-level means, respectively. The median values for these coefficients were as follows: $r_{wg(j)}$ = .45, ICC(1) = .14, ICC(2) = .58. Thus, while the median $r_{wg(j)}$ was below the recommended threshold, the ICC1(1) and ICC(2) values were largely above the threshold. As

aggregation of leader promotion of team goals is justified by theory (Lee et al., 2011) and ICC(1) and ICC(2) indicated enough variance across teams and reliability of group means, we had reasons to aggregate individual scores to the team level.

Team Commitment. Team commitment was measured with the four-item scale developed by Klein, Cooper, Molloy, and Swanson (2014). A sample item is "How committed are you to your team?" (Response options: *not at all* [1], *slightly* [2], *moderately* [3], *quite a bit* [4], *extremely* [5]). The internal consistency of this scale was .94. As in the case of leader promotion of team goals, we calculated the $r_{wg(j)}$ (Bliese, 2000; James et al., 1984, 1993) and ICC(1) and ICC(2) (Bliese, 2000) coefficients to determine whether team-level aggregation was justifiable. The median values for these coefficients were as follows: $r_{wg(j)}$ = .94, ICC(1) = .06, ICC(2) = .35. As these values are close to or above the recommended cutoffs and as the aggregation of team commitment is theoretically justified (Joshi, Lazarova, & Liao, 2009), we aggregated individual scores to the team level.

Employee task performance. To measure team members' performance, we used Griffin, Neal, and Parker's (2007) 3-item individual task proficiency scale. The items were rated by supervisors and captured the extent to which the employee met the expectations associated with their work role (e.g., "Carried out the core parts of his or her job well;" α = .94). A 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) was used.

Control Variables. We first controlled for employee age, education level, and organizational tenure at the individual level, since these variables have been found to be related to employee task performance (Bowman & Mehay, 1999; Scheibe, Yeung, & Doerwald, 2019; Sturman, 2003). Second, we controlled for team size at the team level, as it has been shown to be associated with team processes (Ancona & Caldwell, 1992) and individual performance (i.e., individuals perform worse in larger teams; Mueller, 2012). Third, we controlled for leader negative affectivity since it has been found to be negatively

related to leader effectiveness and follower performance (Bartels et al., 2022; Joseph et al., 2015). Thompson's (2007) five-item measure (e.g., "hostile") (α = .67) with a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*) was used. We also controlled for employee fear of COVID-19, which has been shown to be negatively related to performance during the pandemic (Raja et al., 2022). The same scale used to measure leader fear of COVID-19 was utilized (α = .90). Finally, we controlled for team commitment at the individual level as an alternative mechanism that may account for the indirect effect of leader promotion of team goals on employee performance.

Analytical Strategy

As the data had a nested structure (i.e., employees nested within teams), we conducted multilevel confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) with Mplus 7.11 (Muthén & Muthén, 2015). Hypotheses were then tested using multilevel path analyses with observed variables, which partition variance and enable testing both within- and between-level effects (Arain, Hameed, Umrani, Khan, & Sheikh, 2021; Lu, Zhou, & Chen, 2018). Based on Bauer, Preacher, and Gil (2006), we had a 2-2-2-1 (curvilinear and moderated) mediation, where two Level-2 mediators (i.e., leader promotion of team goals and team commitment) mediate the (curvilinear moderated) effect of a Level-2 independent variable (i.e., leader fear of COVID-19) on a Level-1 dependent variable (i.e., employee performance). We adopted Preacher, Zyphur, and Zhang's (2010) procedure to test this multilevel mediated relationship.

Results

Multilevel Confirmatory Factor Analysis

We first conducted a multilevel CFA, which included the five substantive variables (i.e., leader fear of COVID-19, leader positive affectivity, leader promotion of team goals, team commitment, and employee task performance) and two control variables (leader negative affectivity and employee fear of COVID-19). This model yielded a good fit to the

data (χ^2[450] = 413.81, $p < .05$, comparative fit index [CFI] = 1.00, root mean square error of approximation [RMSEA] = .00, standardized root mean squared residual [SRMR] = .03) and outperformed any alternative six-factor model obtained from all possible combinations among group-level factors on a two-by-two basis ($\Delta\chi^2$[5] = 20.79 to 96.15, ps < .01) as well as a two-factor model in which the indicators of the Level-1 variables loaded on the first factor and the indicators of Level-2 variables loaded onto the second factor ($\Delta\chi^2$[21] = 4104.99, $p < .01$). The seven-factor model is thus retained as the best model. Means, standard deviations, and correlations for the study variables are reported in Table 1.

Hypothesis Testing

Table 2 presents the results of multilevel path analyses predicting leader promotion of team goals, team commitment, and employee task performance. Hypotheses 1 and 2 predicted linear and curvilinear interactions, respectively, between leader fear of COVID-19 and leader positive affectivity predicting leader promotion of team goals. As seen from Table 2, both the linear ($\gamma = 4.28$, $p < .01$) and curvilinear ($\gamma = –.75$, $p < .01$) interactions between leader fear of COVID-19 and leader positive affectivity were significant. The simple slope tests (Aiken & West 1991; Preacher et al., 2006) indicated that the linear effect of leader fear of COVID-19 on leader promotion of team goals was significant and positive when leader positive affectivity was high (i.e., *1 SD* above the mean: $\gamma = 3.59$, $p < .01$) but was nonsignificant when it was low (i.e., *1 SD* below the mean: $\gamma = –.26$, *ns*), thereby supporting Hypothesis 1 (see Figure 2). Moreover, the results from simple slope tests indicated that when leader positive affectivity was low, the curvilinear relationship between leader fear of COVID-19 and leader promotion of team goals was nonsignificant ($\gamma = –.04$, *ns*); conversely, when leader positive affectivity was high, leader fear of COVID-19 had a significantly negative curvilinear relationship with leader promotion of team goals ($\gamma = –.75$, $p < .01$). As the sign of the coefficient is negative, this confirms the expected curvilinear relationship between leader fear

of COVID-19 and leader promotion of team goals in the condition of high (vs. low) levels of leader positive affectivity (see Figure 3). Hypothesis 2 is thus supported. Interestingly, Figure 3 shows that at high levels of leader positive affectivity, there are diminishing returns of increasing levels of leader fear of COVID-19 for the promotion of team goals. Of incidental interest, Table 2 also indicates that, although not hypothesized, leader fear of COVID-19 had both a linear ($\gamma = –16.50$, $p < .01$) and curvilinear ($\gamma = 2.80$, $p < .01$) main effect on leader promotion of team goals.

Hypotheses 3 and 4 predicted positive relationships between leader promotion of team goals and team commitment and between team commitment and employee task performance, respectively. As shown in Table 2, leader promotion of team goals was positively associated with team commitment ($\gamma = .21$, $p < .01$), and team commitment was positively related to employee task performance ($\gamma = .79$, $p < .01$). Hypotheses 3 and 4 are supported. Finally, using Preacher et al.'s (2010) procedure, we tested the moderating effect of leader positive affectivity on the linear (Hypothesis 5) and curvilinear (Hypothesis 6) indirect effects between leader fear of COVID-19 and employee task performance through leader promotion of team goals and team commitment. The results showed that leader fear of COVID-19 was more strongly and positively related to employee performance via leader promotion of team goals and team commitment at high (estimate = .59, 95% CI = .23, .96) vs. low (estimate = –.04, 95% CI = –.22, .14) levels of leader positive affectivity. Hypothesis 5 is thus supported. Likewise, the results indicated that leader fear of COVID-19 had a significantly negative curvilinear indirect effect on employee performance through leader promotion of team goals and team commitment when leader positive affectivity was high (estimate = –.12, 95% CI = –.20, –.04), but this effect was nonsignificant when leader positive affectivity was low (estimate = –.01, 95% CI = –.04, .03). Hypothesis 6 is thus supported.[1] Furthermore, as seen from Table 2, multilevel path analyses showed that all the predicted linear and curvilinear

interaction effects between leader fear of COVID-19 and leader positive affectivity on employee performance were significant while controlling for the effect of individual-level team commitment.

Discussion

Fear is a pervasive reaction among most individuals during the COVID-19 pandemic (Caligiuri, de Cieri, Minbaeva, Verbeke, & Zimmermann, 2020; Hite & McDonald, 2020). In the workplace, keeping the threat of COVID-19 out of people's minds is challenging arguably because the nature of the pandemic limits the range of actions individuals can take to avoid the virus and its consequences (Ahorsu et al., 2020; Snell, 2020; De Clercq & Pereira, 2022). Leaders are nonetheless responsible for directing employees to achieve high standards of performance despite the threat of the COVID-19 (Mischke et al., 2021). Thus, as fear cannot be avoided, it is critical to understand how leaders can counteract this state to guide employees toward goal achievement. Without such knowledge, leaders may be unable to cope with fear and would engage in maladaptive reactions that interfere with their leadership role (De Clercq & Pereira, 2022; Liu et al., 2021).

The present study attempted to address this issue by developing and testing a multilevel moderated mediation model that describes the group-level mechanisms and associated boundary conditions through which varying levels of leader fear of COVID-19 can lead to enhanced vs. reduced employee task performance in teams. Consistent with predictions, the results revealed that among leaders with higher levels of positive affectivity, leader fear of COVID-19 was associated with increased leader promotion of team goals, which in turn was related to enhanced employee task performance through stronger team commitment. Moreover, the findings indicated that at high levels of leader positive affectivity, the positive indirect relation between leader fear of COVID-19 and employee performance was stronger at moderate (vs. low or high) levels of fear of COVID-19.

However, Figure 3 indicates that among leaders with high levels of positive affectivity, there are diminishing returns of increasing levels of leader fear of COVID-19 for the promotion of team goals. This might suggest a too-much-of-a-good-thing effect among leaders with high positive affectivity such that the benefits of increased leader fear of COVID-19 for promoting team goals augment up to a certain point after which they decline. Positive affectivity may thus support fearful leaders' promotion of team goals when fear is moderate-to-high but not when it is extremely high. This finding is consistent with prior research reporting similar diminishing returns of threat-based emotions (i.e., team anxiety) for team outcomes (i.e., team creativity) (Mao, Chang, Gong, & Xie, 2021). It is also consistent with scholars' assertion that negative emotions may have positive vs. negative effects on work outcomes in team contexts depending on whether such emotions exceed an optimal level (Knight & Eisenkraft, 2015).

Theoretical Implications

First, our findings contribute to the debate regarding the extent to which leader negative emotions may be beneficial (Barsade, 2002; Gaddis et al., 2004; Lewis, 2000) vs. harmful (Damen et al., 2008; Frijda, 1987; Russell, 2003) to work outcomes. While not taking sides for or against either of these perspectives, the present study proposed an integrative framework where the benefits and detriments of leader fearful states for employee performance are examined in light of mediating processes (i.e., promotion of team goals and team commitment) and boundary conditions (i.e., leader positive affectivity), as well as of the levels of fear. Interestingly, although not predicted, our findings also reveal a negative linear and a positive curvilinear (i.e., U-shaped) main effect of leader fear of COVID-19 on leader promotion of team goals. The linear effect might reflect the assumption suggesting that leader negative emotions are detrimental to leader effectiveness (Barsade, 2002; Gaddis et al., 2004; Lewis, 2000). Conversely, the U-shaped effect might mirror the alternative perspective

arguing that high-activated emotions can provide the energizing potential for effective actions to face work-related issues (Frijda, 1987; Russell, 1980, 2003). However, these findings should be interpreted with caution since they might have been affected by multicollinearity due to the inclusion of multiple interaction terms in the analyses.[2]

Nonetheless, extending these competing perspectives, our results suggest that a more accurate understanding of the potential benefits and threats associated with leader fearful emotions regarding COVID-19 requires considering (a) the process by which leader fear relates to employee performance (i.e., promotion of team goals and team commitment), (b) the boundary conditions associated with this relationship (i.e., leader positive affectivity), and (c) the level of fear. Consistent with our theorizing, we showed that leaders with high levels of positive affectivity are more likely to capitalize on their fear of COVID-19—particularly when this emotional state is maintained at moderate levels—to improve their capacity to promote team goals, enhance team commitment, and ultimately facilitate employee performance. Conversely, the beneficial effects of (moderate) leader fear of COVID-19 are stifled when leader positive affectivity is low.

The present investigation also offers new and important insights into how to ensure leader effectiveness in times of crisis. Indeed, while scholars have theoretically emphasized a leader's articulation of a shared vision (i.e., promotion of team goals) as an effective skill that helps boost employee performance during and after times of crisis (Dirani et al., 2020), empirical evidence regarding how such effective leader behaviors can be enacted remains scarce. This study fills that gap by proposing and showing that the experience of (moderate levels of) leader fear of COVID-19 and leader positive affectivity represents the ideal blend for leader effectiveness in promoting collective goals within teams and ultimately encouraging employee performance through enhanced team commitment during periods of disruptive events. In other words, it is likely that periods of crisis such as the COVID-19

pandemic constitute favorable contexts that highlight the importance of leaders properly combining the experience of both positive and negative affect to influence team processes and outcomes (Shemla, Kearney, Wegge, & Stegmann, 2020).

Our results also provide an important contribution to the literature on affective states in the workplace. Few studies have investigated how positive and negative affective states interact to predict employee outcomes (Dimotakis, Scott, & Koopman, 2011; Yoon et al., 2022). This research has mainly adopted a negative view of negative affect, relying on the idea that positive affect mitigates the narrowing aftereffects of negative emotions (i.e., the undo effect; Fredrickson, 2003; Larsen & Prizmic, 2008). This perspective posits that high levels of positive affect allow individuals to broaden their cognitions about the job and buffer the undermining effect of negative affect. Consistent with this view, research indicates that optimal work functioning is associated with the combination of low levels of negative affect and high levels of positive affect (Dimotakis et al., 2011; Yoon et al., 2022). Our results provide evidence for an alternative perspective where positive affect draws a positive effect from leaders' negative emotions (i.e., fear of COVID-19) instead of undoing its negative effects. This suggests that leaders' capacity to guide employees toward goal achievement is optimized when high levels of positive affect are accompanied by *higher*, instead of lower, levels of leader fear. Therefore, our findings add to current knowledge about the interplay of positive and negative affect by indicating that leader fear and positive affectivity complement each other to enhance leader effectiveness in promoting team commitment and employee performance in times of crisis.

Furthermore, this study extends the stream of research on the effects of leader affective states on work-related outcomes, which has thus far distinctively treated team-level (e.g., Chi, Chung, & Tsai, 2011; Van Kleef et al., 2009) and individual-level (e.g., Little, Gooty, & Williams, 2016; Visser et al., 2013) influences. The present investigation offers an

integrative, cross-level perspective to provide evidence for the key role of team-level mechanisms in explaining why and how leader fear of COVID-19 can, at different levels, benefit individual-level task performance. These findings are relevant because although scholars have highlighted the importance of motivation to explain leadership influences on work outcomes (e.g., Yukl, 2009), limited attention has been devoted to examining the motivational mechanisms instilled by leaders to generate follower performance (Kark, Van Dijk, & Vashdi, 2018). Our study contributes to advance current theorizing on leaders' motivational influence by revealing that the promotion of team goals is an important means through which leaders may motivate team members' attachment to the group and individual performance. Similarly, while team-level motivational processes have been shown to exert cross-level influences on individual-level goal striving (Chen & Kanfer, 2006; Chen, Kanfer, DeShon, Mathieu, & Kozlowski, 2009), there is a dearth of knowledge about how these processes may channel the effect of team-level input variables, such as leadership variables, onto individual performance. As such, the current findings highlight the importance of team motivational processes as a linchpin, explaining how (and when) leader fear may enable team members to achieve higher levels of performance.

Finally, our investigation contributes to enriching the current literature on the role of leader personality traits in the workplace. Research in this area has primarily focused on leader traits, including leader positive affectivity, as antecedents of effective leader behaviors and work-related outcomes (Hu & Judge, 2017; Ishaq, Bashir, & Khan, 2021; Joseph et al., 2015; Walumbwa, & Schaubroeck, 2009). By providing evidence for the positive moderating role of leader positive affectivity, the current findings unravel an important function of leader personality: enabling leaders who are experiencing taxing emotional states to effectively motivate team members' collective efforts and, ultimately, improve members' work-related performance. Therefore, this study lends nuances to past research that has essentially

demonstrated that leader negative emotions would *universally* penalize employee performance (Bartels et al., 2022; Li et al., 2020). The current findings suggest that the positive role of leader negative emotions emerges *only* when the leader's positive affectivity (i.e., a *within-person* contextual factor) is high. From a PSI theory perspective, we argue that what leader positive affectivity brings to the party is the ability to drive leaders' energy into actions that can address the threat related to the fear of COVID-19 (Shackman et al., 2011).

Practical Implications

Our findings have relevant implications for managers and supervisors who manage members' task-related performance in teams in times of crisis. First, our results suggest that the experience of leader negative emotions in the face of disruptive events (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic) may be salutary for team functioning, but only when combined with high levels of positive affectivity. This underscores the importance for organizations of investing in training programs that help leaders develop the capacity to leverage their positive affect disposition to engender more efficient attitudes in the workplace, particularly converting the experience of fearful states into behaviors directed at building team functioning and individual performance. Relatedly, our findings indicate that when leader fear of COVID-19 was accompanied by low levels of positive affectivity, it was not beneficial for team commitment and employee performance. This suggests that training programs aimed at boosting leader positive affect should also target those leaders who are less used to experience positive emotions in their daily life.

Research has indicated that various forms of training can be effective at activating positive affect. For example, positive mood has been found to improve among employees attending a problem-solving training program (Ayres & Malouff, 2007). Thus, this type of training could be implemented among leaders to develop specific problem-solving skills, such as the identification, definition and understanding of problems, setting goals related to the

problem, generation, implementation and evaluation of alternative solutions, and evaluation of the effectiveness of the effort at solving the problem (D'Zurilla & Nezu, 1999). Similarly, mindfulness training programs (Bishop et al., 2004) have also been shown to be effective at fostering positive emotions (Garland et al., 2010). These programs could be used to boost leaders' positive affect by helping them attend to and monitor their present-moment experiences (i.e., pleasant, unpleasant and neutral events) at work, and cultivate an open and nonjudgmental attitude while living such experiences (i.e., accept the present state without trying to change it) (Lindsay et al., 2018).

Furthermore, our findings showed that the joint benefits of (moderate levels of) leader fear of COVID-19 and leader positive affectivity for individual task performance occurred through the mediating role of leader promotion of team goals and team commitment. Therefore, organizations may want to train leaders to communicate to team members a compelling vision of collective goals based on their core values. Doing so would increase the likelihood that team members develop a collective attachment to the team and engage in task proficiency. Specifically, leaders should be taught to connect followers' current tasks to the team's higher-order goals and to adopt a communication style involving the use of inclusive language (i.e., "we" and "us") (Saboe, Taing, Way, & Johnson, 2015). Moreover, as the benefits of promoting team goals for group and individual outcomes emerged in response to leader threat-based emotions (i.e., fear), leadership training programs should include sessions where leaders (a) discuss how the fear induced by external events may hinder their capacity to promote team goals and (b) seek to identify ways to revise team goals in light of the threats identified.[3]

Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several limitations that provide opportunities for future research directions. First, from a theoretical perspective, this study focused on a highly activated

negative affective experience (i.e., fear) with reference to a specific external disruption (i.e., the COVID-19 pandemic). A meaningful extension of this investigation would be to examine whether, how, and to what extent low-activated negative affective states (such as depressed or hopeless feelings) that are likely to also emerge from disruptive events influence team and individual-level outcomes. Such research endeavors would help enrich our understanding of the effects of various leader emotions in organizations. Second, while we used PSI theory to build our reasoning regarding the effects of leader fear and positive affectivity in team context, alternative theoretical perspectives should be explored in the future. For example, regulatory focus theory (Brockner & Higgins, 2001; Higgins, 1998) suggests that people with a promotion focus (i.e., an approach motivation) are more attentive than people with a prevention focus (i.e., an avoidance motivation) to the positive aspects of situations (Crowe & Higgins, 1997) and are proactive at achieving desired outcomes (Higgins, Roney, Crowe, & Hymes, 1994). It might be worth exploring whether leader promotion vs. prevention focus shapes the association between leader fear and team processes and employe performance.

Third, our study focused on teams at the first hierarchical level of the organization, hence the findings may not generalize to teams at a higher level of the hierarchy. For example, teams at the executive level may entertain a dynamics where negative and positive emotions from a CEO may not be as critical in influencing team members. Plausibly, strategic decisions may be rooted in a more cognitive assessment of environmental opportunities. Fourth, although we found leader promotion of team goals and team goal commitment to be key mediators of the effects of leader fear of COVID-19, other mechanisms remain likely. For instance, emotional contagion (Johnson, 2008)—which refers to the transfer of emotions from one person to another (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994)—is another potential mechanism. A promising research avenue would be to explore whether team members' fear—reflecting contagion from leaders to followers—mediates the effect of leader fear on team

commitment and employee performance. Relatedly, our study focused on the bright side of leader fear and emotions. However, it would be worth exploring their dark side. For instance, leader threat-based emotions have been found to increase the likelihood of abusive supervision (Xi, He, Fehr, & Zhao, 2022), ultimately hindering followers' well-being (Han, Harms, & Bai, 2017). Thus, abusive leader behaviors might be elicited by leader fear as a mechanism that undermines team commitment and task performance.

From a methodological perspective, the team-level mechanisms (i.e., leader promotion of team goals and team commitment) that were responsible for transmitting the effects of leader fear of COVID-19 to individual task performance were measured at the same time (i.e., Time 2), thus preventing us from drawing causal inferences regarding the relationship between these variables. Accordingly, future research should attempt to replicate these findings by adopting a full longitudinal design with temporal separation between the measurements of leader promotion of team goals and team commitment. On a related note, since leader affective states and behaviors have been shown to be subject to within-individual variations over time (Bartels et al., 2022), the adoption of experience sampling methods could be particularly valuable to examine how within-person fluctuations of leader negative affective states influence within-person changes in leader behaviors and, ultimately, team- and individual-level outcomes. Finally, analyses revealed two attrition biases: team size was associated with an increased likelihood of dropping out from the sample at Time 3, and leader negative affectivity was associated with an increased probability of leaving the sample at Time 2. These effects may not be surprising, as larger teams may make participants less concerned and aware of the value of organizational surveys, while leader negative affectivity may reduce the team's attention to stimuli irrelevant to their work (i.e., participation in research projects through survey methods).

Conclusion

This study challenges the traditional view that leader negative affective states are detrimental to leader effectiveness and team and employee outcomes. By adopting a contingent view on leader emotions, this study indicates that leaders' specific fear regarding COVID-19 can benefit individual performance through enhanced leader promotion of team goals and team commitment when combined with high levels of leader positive affectivity and maintained at moderate levels. These findings produce a finer-grained understanding of the role of leader negative affect in times of crisis and reveal that examination of multilevel moderated mediation processes helps disentangle the positive and dark sides of leader negative emotions. We hope these findings will inspire future research on the benefits and threats associated with the positive and negative emotions of leaders during disruptive times.

Footnotes

[1] Since the main effects of leader fear of COVID-19 could have been due to collinearity issues associated with the inclusion of multiple interaction terms (Belsley, Kuh, & Welsch, 1980), we examined these effects without the inclusion of linear and curvilinear interaction terms. The results showed that while leader fear of COVID-19 was linearly unrelated to leader promotion of team goals ($\gamma = -.02$, *ns*), the curvilinear relationship was negative and significant ($\gamma = -.17$, $p < .05$). Nonetheless, neither the linear (estimate = –.00, 95% CI = –.01, .01) nor the curvilinear (estimate = –.00, 95% CI = –.02, .01) indirect effect of leader fear of COVID-19 on individual task performance via leader promotion of team goals and team commitment was significant, suggesting that the linear and curvilinear indirect effects of leader fear of COVID-19 emerge only when leader positive affectivity is high, as predicted by our hypotheses.

[2] To further demonstrate that the linear and curvilinear interaction effects of leader fear of COVID-19 and leader positive affectivity on team commitment and, ultimately, employee performance occurred indirectly through leader promotion of team goals, we additionally controlled for the linear and curvilinear interaction effects on team commitment and employee performance. The results showed that none of these additional interaction effects were significant: for team commitment: $\gamma = .16$, *ns* (linear), $\gamma = .01$, *ns* (curvilinear); for employee performance: $\gamma = .20$, *ns* (linear), $\gamma = -.29$, *ns* (curvilinear). In contrast, the hypothesized linear ($\gamma = 4.20$, $p < .01$) and curvilinear ($\gamma = -.73$, $p < .01$) interaction effects predicting leader promotion of team goals remained significant in these analyses. Moreover, since leader promotion of team goals and team commitment were measured at the same time (Time 2), we examined the possibility of a reverse relationship between these two constructs by performing an alternative multilevel path model in which team commitment preceded leader promotion of team goals in mediating the linear and curvilinear interactions between leader fear of COVID-19 and leader positive affectivity. The results indicated that while the linear interaction between leader fear of COVID-19 and leader positive affectivity was significant ($\gamma = 1.09$, $p < .05$), the curvilinear interaction effect was not ($\gamma = -.15$, *ns*). Moreover, although team commitment significantly predicted leader promotion of team goals ($\gamma = .87$, $p < .05$), the latter was unrelated to employee performance ($\gamma = -.12$, *ns*). Thus, this alternative model underperforms compared with the theorized model depicted in Figure 1 both theoretically (i.e., there is little theoretical logic for expecting a reverse relationship between leader promotion of team goals and team commitment) and empirically (i.e., several of the expected effects were nonsignificant).

[3] We thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

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Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Employee age (T1)	47.65	11.24	–										
2. Employee education level (T1)	–	–	–.05	–									
3. Employee organizational tenure (T1)	9.21	10.17	.51**	–.17**	–								
4. Employee fear of COVID-19 (T1)	2.19	0.99	.06	–.05	.05	(.90)							
5. Team size (T1)	15.28	7.58	.13**	–.17**	.09*	.12**	–						
6. Leader negative affectivity (T1)	1.58	0.45	–.10*	.03	–.07	.03	–.15**	(.67)					
7. Leader fear of COVID-19 (T1)	1.58	0.65	.02	.04	.01	.05	–.15**	.49**	(.81)				
8. Leader positive affectivity (T1)	4.23	0.44	.05	.04	–.01	–.02	–.03	–.16**	–.22**	(.74)			
9. Leader promotion of team goals (T2)	5.46	1.55	–.07	.04	–.05	.01	–.14**	–.02	.03	.01	(.97)		
10. Team commitment (T2)	4.06	0.68	–.05	.04	–.02	–.00	–.03	–.02	.06	.00	.43**	(.94)	
11. Employee task performance (T3)	4.49	0.68	–.08*	.01	–.04	–.02	–.04	–.07	–.07	.05	.06	.11*	(.94)

Note. $N = 579$ employees and 69 teams. Internal consistency coefficients (Cronbach's alphas) appear along the diagonal, in parentheses. T1 = Time 1; T2 = Time 2; T3 = Time 3. *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

Table 2

Results of Multilevel Path Analyses

	Leader promotion of team goals			Team commitment			Team commitment (individual-level)			Employee task performance		
	B	*SE*	*p*	*B*	*SE*	*p*	*B*	*SE*	*p*	*B*	*SE*	*p*
Employee age	–	–	–	–	–	–	.07	.05	.10	–.22	.15	.13
Employee education	–	–	–	–	–	–	–.35	.21	.09	1.08	.67	.10
Employee organizational tenure	–	–	–	–	–	–	–.11	.06	.09	.32	.21	.12
Employee fear of COVID-19	–	–	–	–	–	–	.06	–	–	1.50	.86	.08
Team size	–.02	.01	.13	.00	.00	.54	–.01	.00	.30	.01	.01	.49
Leader negative affectivity	–.13	.21	.52	.02	.06	.75	.01	.08	.94	–.35	.17	.04
Team commitment (individual-level)	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–.92	.65	.16
Leader fear of COVID-19	–16.50	3.20	.00	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Leader fear of COVD-19 squared	2.80	.61	.00	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Leader positive affectivity (LPA)	–4.51	.91	.00	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Leader fear of COVID-19 × LPA	4.28	.82	.00	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Leader fear of COVD-19 squared × LPA	–.75	.16	.00	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Leader promotion of team goals	–	–	–	.21	.04	.00	.16	.05	.00	–	–	–
Team commitment	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	.79	.20	.00

Note: $N = 579$ employees and 69 teams.

Figure 1. Theoretical model. Dotted lines represent non-hypothesized relationships. The curved arrow represents a curvilinear (i.e., inverted U-shaped) relationship.

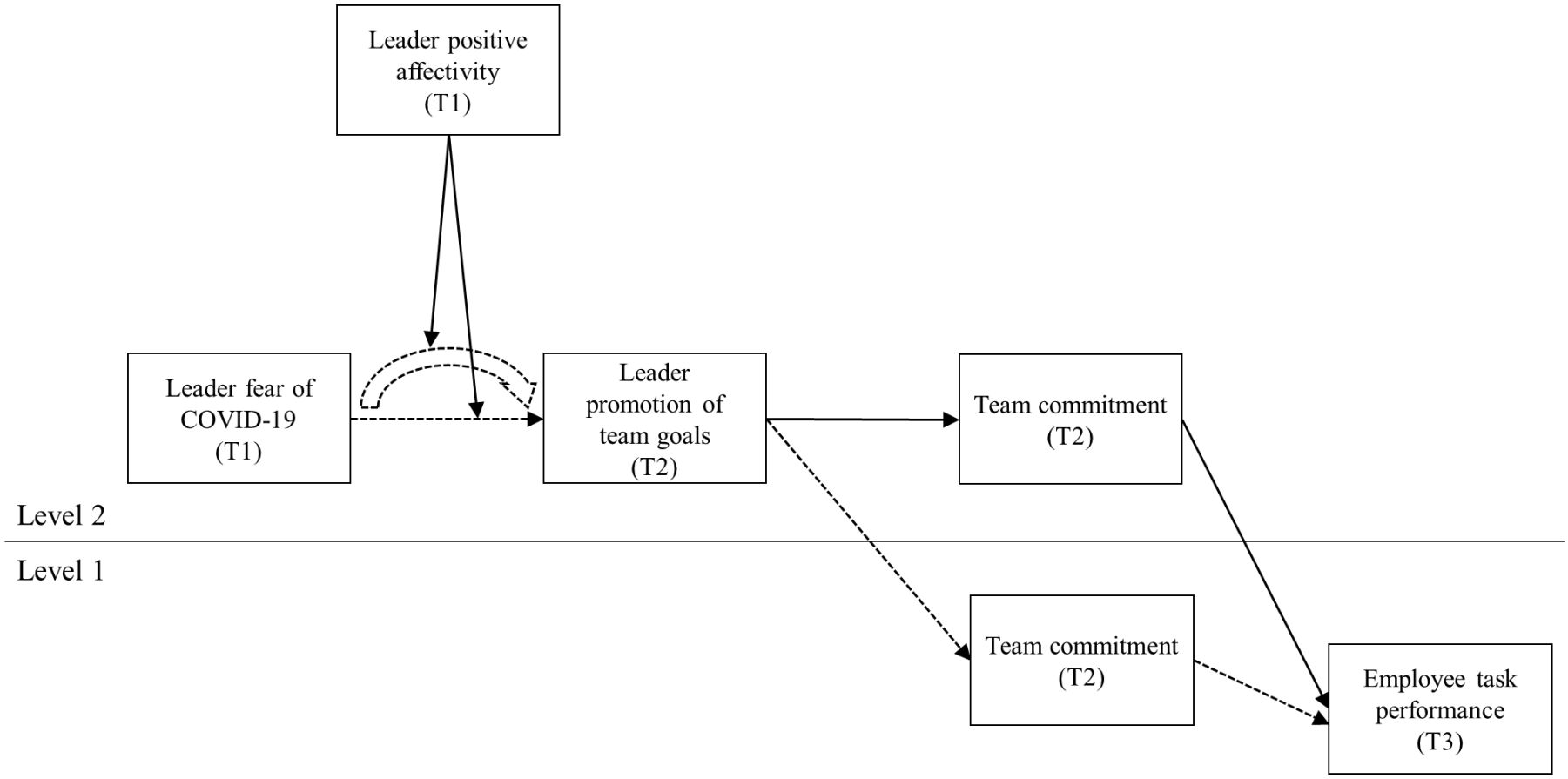


Figure 2. Linear interaction between leader fear of COVID-19 and leader positive affectivity (LPA) predicting leader promotion of team goals.

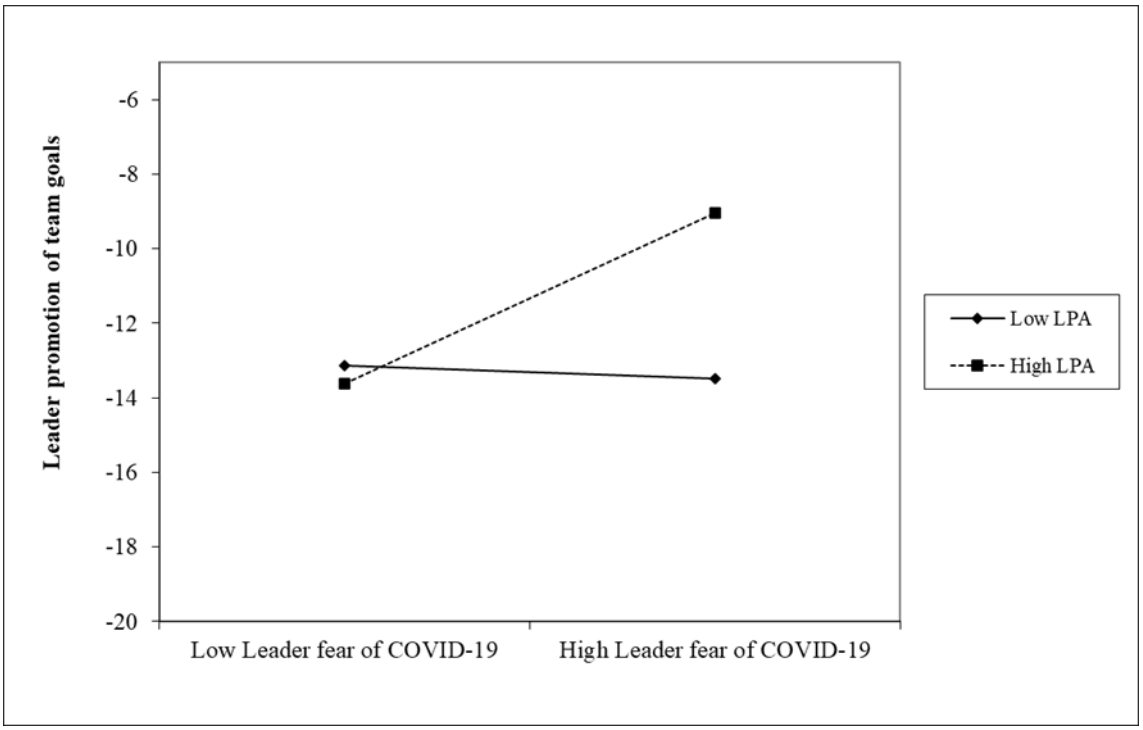
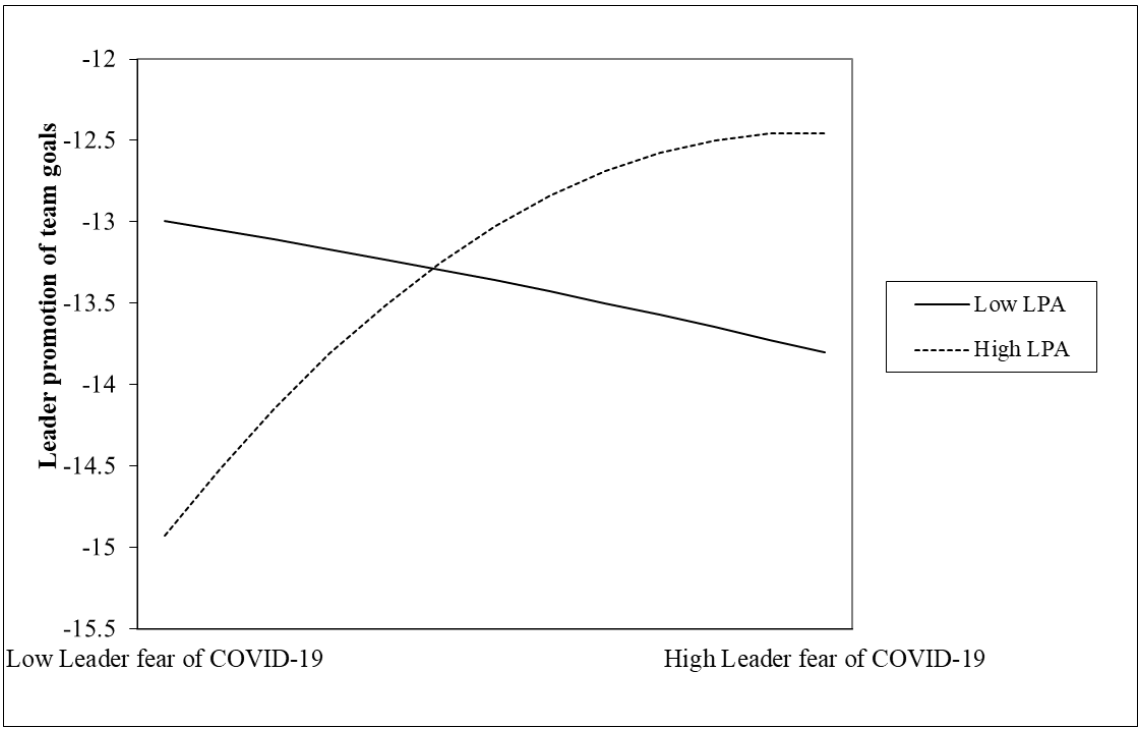


Figure 3. Curvilinear interaction between leader fear of COVID-19 and leader positive affectivity (LPA) predicting leader promotion of team goals.



Appendix A: Questionnaire Items

Leader/employee fear of COVID-19

1. Nervous
2. Scared
3. Afraid
4. Fearful

Leader positive affectivity

1. Determined
2. Inspired
3. Alert
4. Active
5. Attentive

Leader negative affectivity

1. Upset
2. Nervous
3. Hostile
4. Ashamed
5. Afraid

Leader promotion of team goals

1. Fosters collaboration among work groups
2. Encourages employees to be “team players”
3. Gets the group to work together for the same goal
4. Develops a team attitude and spirit among employees

Team commitment

1. How committed are you to your team?
2. To what extent do you care about your team?
3. How dedicated are you to your team?
4. To what extent have you chosen to be committed to your team?

Employee task performance

1. Carried out the core parts of his or her job well
2. Completed his or her core tasks well using the standard procedures
3. Ensured his or her tasks were completed properly