

Develop me—quickly! Introducing Nudges as a Way to Boost Positive Leadership and Sustainment of Non-Prototypical Leaders

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Abstract

At present, the pipeline for women and people of color in leadership roles continues to shrink, and key industries exhibit a consistent and entrenched pattern of underrepresentation for non-prototypical leaders (both in regards to style and visual alignment with the leader ideal). Although leader categorization theory has suggested that leader mental representations, or prototypes, influence judgments toward leaders and affect retentions of non-traditional leaders in organizations, many existing studies on leader prototypes have focused on making sense of cognitive schemas for ideal leaders, and few studies have identified *whether* and *how* an existing leader prototype can change. To speed up progress and increase the retention of non-prototypical leaders, the proposed research utilizes daily leader micro-interventions, or meaningful “nudges,” to broaden the ideal of what it means to be an effective leader and help alter the most persistent leader prototype—an agentic leader. Through a series of studies, we examined several facets of this topic. First, we conducted an initial, integrative review of the literature on nudges/choice architecture and short leadership development programs. Then, we conducted two pilot studies to craft a leadership nudge manipulation. Finally, we conducted a field study using an ESM design to examine daily shifts in leader prototypes. Using an experience sampling investigation of over 80 leaders who completed 3 surveys a day for 10 workdays, we found that leader prototypes do shift from day to day. We did not find that these shifts could be explained by a communal leadership nudge (i.e., setting communal goals). Daily communal goal setting, however, did lead to the enactment of positive leader behaviors, endorsement of a leader identity, and reduced turnover intentions. In supplementary analyses, we also found that leaders who enacted visionary leadership behaviors were more likely to adopt a communal leader prototype and leaders who engaged in helping behaviors were less likely to adopt a communal leader prototype.

Summary of Project Findings

The prototype of an ideal leader continues to reflect dominant, agentic, and masculine tendencies (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Agentic leaders receive an overwhelming amount of recognition, evidenced by the longstanding attention leaders like Elon Musk (Jackson, 2022) and Steve Jobs (Garibay, 2021) receive. Agentic and aggressive leaders, however, pose a threat to organizational success if their power becomes disruptive or if they lead too much out of self-interest (Linden & Wilkes, 2022). While agentic leaders are celebrated, scholars have become interested in examining whether a more positive leadership style presents an advantage (Eagly & Carli, 2003; Rosette & Tost, 2010; Sergent, & Stajkovic, 2020; Paustian-Underdahl, Walker, & Woehr, 2014; Windsor et al., 2020). What this research shows is that in many contexts (e.g., contemporary organizations, crisis situations), positive leadership can be more effective than agentic. Despite this, agency prevails as the preferred leadership style (Vial & Napier, 2018) demonstrating a notable tension in the literature: positive leadership is needed (and effective), yet rarely executed.

By leveraging existing prototypes, we are more likely to select (and retain) those who “act as a leader” (i.e., engage in aggressive leadership behaviors) and those who “look like a leader” (Lord et al., 1984; Lord et al., 2001; Braun et al., 2018). As such, the continual adoption of the agentic leader prototype perpetuates a lack of diversity and deters individuals from engaging in the practice of positive leadership. To break this pattern, our work proposes a solution: the use of ‘nudges’ (micro-interventions) to change behavior and perceptions of the ideal leader image. We draw from leader categorization and role congruity theories and integrate work on choice architecture and leadership training to identify leader micro-interventions—or ‘nudges’—designed to increase positive leadership behaviors and alter the leader prototype default.

Nudges are tools that aim to change behavior easily and quickly by altering the underlying “choice architecture” of decision-making and influencing heuristics (Chapman et al., 2021). Comprehensive overviews of the application of nudges in organizations provide practical evidence that nudges are viable tools to alter individual and collective behaviors (Battaglio et al., 2019). Nudges are effective behavioral change agents and consist of small interventions such as goal setting, language alterations, and defaults (Carpena, Cole, Shapiro, & Zia, 2019).

Research suggests that individual patterns of leadership, or their behavioral engagement, can vary within-person and are therefore influenced by within-person orientations (e.g., Barnes et al., 2015; Lanaj et al., 2021; Lanaj, Gabriel, & Chawla, 2021; Lanaj, & Jennings, 2020; Lanaj, Foulk, & Erez, 2019; Liao, et al., 2021; Liu, Song, Li, & Liao, 2017; Moskowitz, Suh, & Desaulniers, 1994; Nielsen & Cleal, 2011; Weiss, Razinskas, Backmann, & Hoegl, 2018). For instance, daily leader behaviors have been shown to be influenced by leader affect (Jennings et al., 2021), sleep (Barnes et al., 2015), working conditions (Nielsen & Cleal, 2001), self-reflection (Lanaj et al., 2019), and self-compassion (Lanaj et al., 2021). In addition to these factors, daily leader behaviors can also be influenced by goal-setting, in particular whether one seeks out communal-oriented goals.

Communion involves a focus on others (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Bakan, 1966; Deaux &

LaFrance, 1998; Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt, & Kashima, 2005) and communion-oriented goals include caring for, supporting, and helping others as well as collaborating effectively, creating connection, and serving humanity (Diekmann et al., 2010). While communion has not traditionally been associated with leadership or positions of authority, we anticipate that on days when leaders adopt communion-oriented goals, they will engage in positive leadership behaviors, including helping, visioning, and change-oriented behaviors. Additionally, we propose that on days when leaders set communal goals, they will be more likely to adopt a communal leader prototype. Given the importance of context on leader behavioral patterns, we also anticipate that relevant contextual characteristics will impact these effects. In particular, we examine climate for inclusion, masculine culture, and gender representation in the organization.

The Current Project

In this work, we completed several high-level objectives. First, we reviewed the literature on nudges and choice architecture as well as the leadership development literature. This work assisted with the initial identification of a leadership nudge that would promote positive leadership behaviors—communal goal setting. Secondly, we examined whether leader prototypes—in particular, the communal leader prototype—change day to day. Lastly, we provide insight on whether a micro-intervention can alter cognitions in the form of perceived leader prototypes and leader identification and impact behavioral enactment. With this work, we aim to enhance the effectiveness of leadership by introducing a new way to provide leadership development and by enhancing the adoption of positive leadership.

Field-Based Study Using the Experience Sampling Method

For the main study, we conducted a study using the experience sampling method. Participants were recruited through advertisements on networking groups and direct emails to local businesses in a western urban area. To be eligible, participants had to work full-time (5 days a week, typical working hours), have at least one direct report, interact daily with their direct report(s), and be 18 years or older. A total of 93 leaders initially enrolled and the final sample consisted of 86 leaders (after accounting for missing data). After an initial survey collecting demographics and other between-person variables, participants underwent an interval-contingent experience-sampling methodology, approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Colorado Boulder. The study included three daily surveys for 10 consecutive weekdays. Participants received morning, afternoon, and end-of-day surveys.

We were interested in the daily impact of a positive leadership nudge on leaders' cognitive learning, behavioral transfer, and result outcomes. To support multilevel analysis, we investigated and confirmed within-person variability in our focal Level-1 variables. Results indicated that the within-person variance percentage for communal goals, leader identity, communal leader prototype, leader visionary behaviors, leader helping behaviors, and leader change-oriented behaviors had a large proportion of within-person variance, suggesting that multilevel models are appropriate.

We found that setting communal goals (the nudge) increased cognitive learning as measured by leader identity but did not result in changes in leader prototype endorsement. Setting communal

goals also increased behavioral transfer, including having a positive impact on the engagement of positive leadership behaviors (i.e., visionary leadership, change related leadership behaviors, and helping leadership behaviors). We examined whether these relationships were moderated by context, but did not find consistent support in the anticipated direction for inclusion climate, gender diversity in the organization, or masculine culture. Interestingly, while the positive leadership nudge did not have an impact on the endorsement of a communal leader prototype, we did find that when leaders engaged in visionary leader behaviors, they were more likely to endorse a communal leader prototype. We also found there was considerable within-person variance for all focal variables—including communal leader prototype—providing support that a leader prototype can change day to day.

Implications of Findings and Future Directions

The findings of this study have significant implications for the impact of positive leadership nudges on various aspects of leaders' cognitive learning, behavioral transfer, and outcomes. The introduction of communal goals as a positive leadership nudge was associated with increased cognitive learning, as evidenced by changes in leader identity. However, it did not result in alterations in leader prototype endorsement. Interestingly, setting communal goals led to enhanced behavioral transfer, positively influencing the engagement of leadership behaviors such as visionary leadership, change-related leadership, and helping behaviors. The study explored potential moderating factors but did not find consistent support for inclusion climate, gender diversity, or masculine culture. Despite the lack of direct impact on the endorsement of a communal leader prototype, engaging in visionary leader behaviors was associated with a higher likelihood of endorsing such a prototype. The study also highlighted substantial within-person variance for all focal variables, suggesting that a leader's prototype can fluctuate on a day-to-day basis. These findings underscore the nuanced effects of positive leadership nudges on leaders' cognitive and behavioral outcomes, emphasizing the importance of specific behaviors, like visionary leadership, in shaping leaders' perceptions and identities.

Building on the insights gained from this study, there are several promising avenues for future research that can further enhance our understanding of the dynamics surrounding positive leadership nudges and their impact on leaders' cognitive learning, behavioral transfer, and outcomes. First, it would be valuable to investigate the specific mechanisms through which communal goals contribute to increased cognitive learning and behavioral transfer, as indicated by changes in leader identity and leader behavior. Exploring the underlying psychological processes and cognitive frameworks involved in the adoption of communal goals could provide deeper insights into the transformative potential of such nudges. The study also highlights a disparity between the impact of communal goal setting on cognitive learning as indicated by leader identity enactment versus changes in leader prototype endorsement. Exploratory analyses showed that changes in leader prototype endorsement can be better explained by the engagement in leader behaviors suggesting that behaving as a communal leader alters prototype cognitions instead. Future research could delve into the factors influencing leader prototype endorsement and whether certain contextual or individual factors play a role in determining the effectiveness of positive leadership nudges in this regard.

Given the lack of consistent support for moderating factors such as inclusion climate, gender diversity, and masculine culture, future research could adopt a more nuanced approach to understanding the contextual influences on positive leadership nudges. Exploring specific organizational contexts or cultural nuances that may enhance or hinder the effectiveness of nudges could contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the boundary conditions for positive leadership interventions. In conclusion, future research endeavors should continue to unpack the intricacies of positive leadership nudges, exploring the mechanisms, boundary conditions, and long-term implications of these interventions to provide a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of their impact on leaders and organizations.

Table 1. Summary of Hypothesis Results for Main Study

	Hypothesis	Results
1a	A positive leadership nudge will enhance cognitive learning, such that those who are provided with this nudge in the morning will report higher levels of (1a) leader identity (afternoon).	Supported. On days when participants set communal goals, they reported higher levels of leader identity. Results indicate that there was a significant main effect of daily communal goal setting and leader identity ($\beta = .10$, $SE = .03$, $p = .000$), while controlling for relevant control variables (i.e., daily agentic goal setting, day).
1b	A positive leadership nudge will enhance cognitive learning, such that those who are provided with this nudge in the morning are more likely to (1b) alter their cognitive perceptions of a leader prototype to align with communal and positive leadership.	Not supported. On days when participants set communal goals, they were not significantly more likely to endorse the communal leader prototype ($\beta = .01$, $SE = .04$, $p > .05$).
2	A positive leadership nudge will enhance behavioral transfer such that those who are provided with this nudge in the morning are more likely to engage in positive leadership practices at work (afternoon).	Supported. On days when participants set communal goals, they were more likely to enact change related leadership behaviors ($\beta = .29$, $SE = .04$, $p = .000$), visionary leadership behaviors ($\beta = .32$, $SE = .05$, $p = .000$), and helping leadership behaviors ($\beta = .32$, $SE = .05$, $p = .000$).
3	Positive leadership practices will be positively related to leader work goal progress (evening).	Partially supported. Visionary leadership behaviors predicted thriving at work ($\beta = .05$, $SE = .029$, $p = .004$), but this was not the case for change oriented behaviors ($\beta = .00$, $SE = .03$, $p > .05$) or helping behaviors ($\beta = .01$, $SE = .02$, $p > .05$).
4	Positive leadership practices will be negatively related to leader depletion (evening).	Not supported. Visionary ($\beta = .00$, $SE = .05$, $p > .05$), change oriented ($\beta = .07$, $SE = .06$, $p > .05$), and helping behaviors ($\beta = -.01$, $SE = .04$, $p > .05$), did not significantly reduce exhaustion.
5c 5d	A positive leadership nudge will enhance result outcomes such that this micro-intervention will be negatively associated with stakeholder ratings of (c) anxiety and (d) turnover.	Partially supported. On days when leaders set communal goals, they indicated lower turnover intentions ($\beta = -.21$, $SE = .04$, $p = .000$), but the main effect was not significant for anxiety ($\beta = .81$, $SE = .59$, $p < .05$).
6	Organizational structure (i.e., workplace diversity) will moderate the relationship between a positive leadership nudge and desired outcomes such that the relationship will be stronger in organizations with greater diversity.	Not supported. For the majority of models, the interaction term was not significant.

7	Organizational climate for inclusion will moderate the relationship between a positive leadership nudge and desired outcomes such that the relationship will be stronger in organizations with a stronger climate for inclusion.	Not supported. For the majority of models, the interaction term was not significant.
8	Masculinity culture will moderate the relationship between a positive leadership nudge and desired outcomes such that the relationship will be weaker in organizations with a stronger culture for masculinity.	Partially supported. The interaction term was significant and in the anticipated direction for the relationship between communal goal setting and helping leadership behaviors ($\beta = -.11$, $SE = .05$, $p = .035$), visionary leadership behaviors ($\beta = -1.37$, $SE = .58$, $p = .019$), and state anxiety.

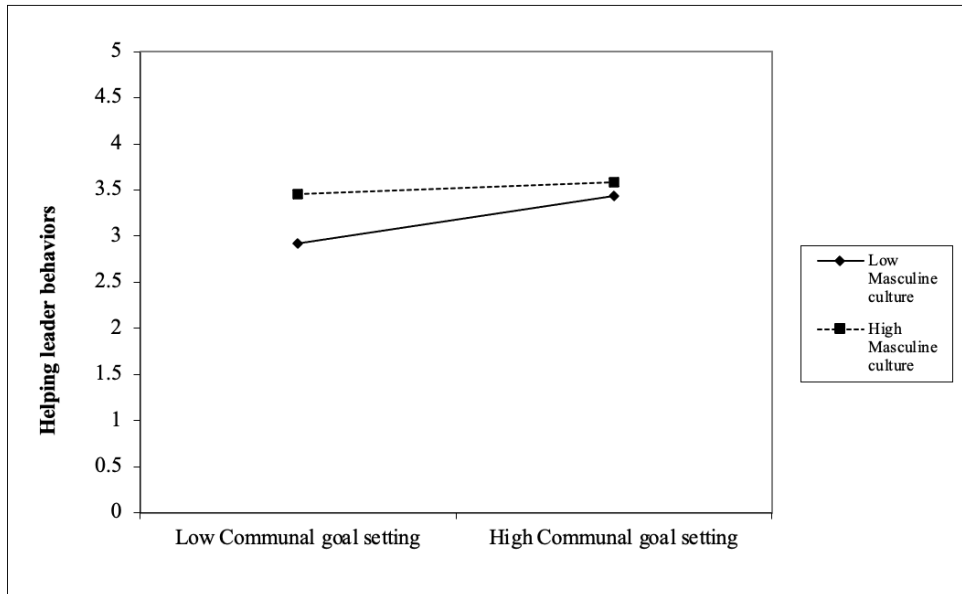


Figure 1. Relationship between communal goal setting at helping leader behaviors as moderated by masculine culture.

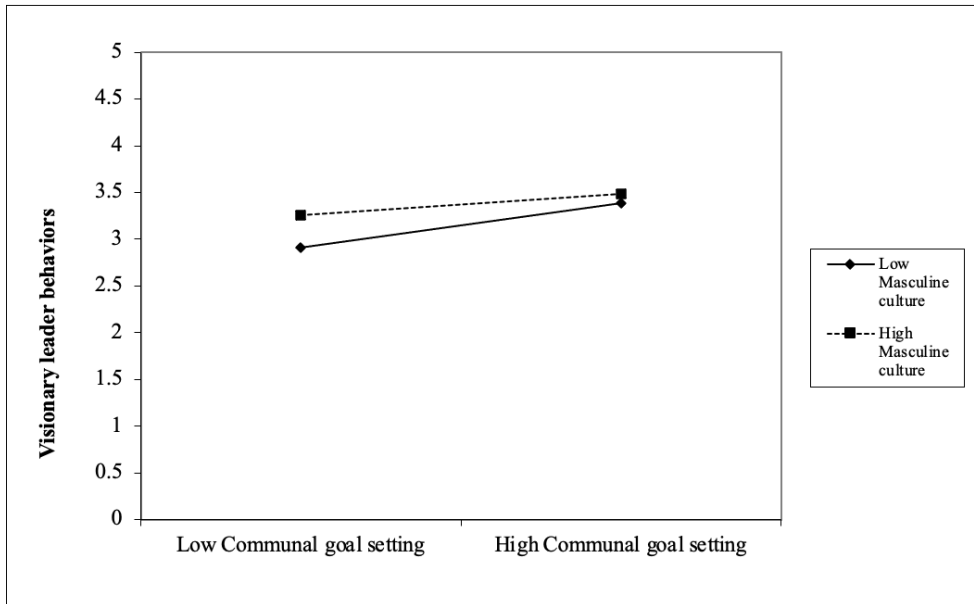


Figure 2. Relationship between communal goal setting and visionary leader behaviors as moderated by masculine culture.

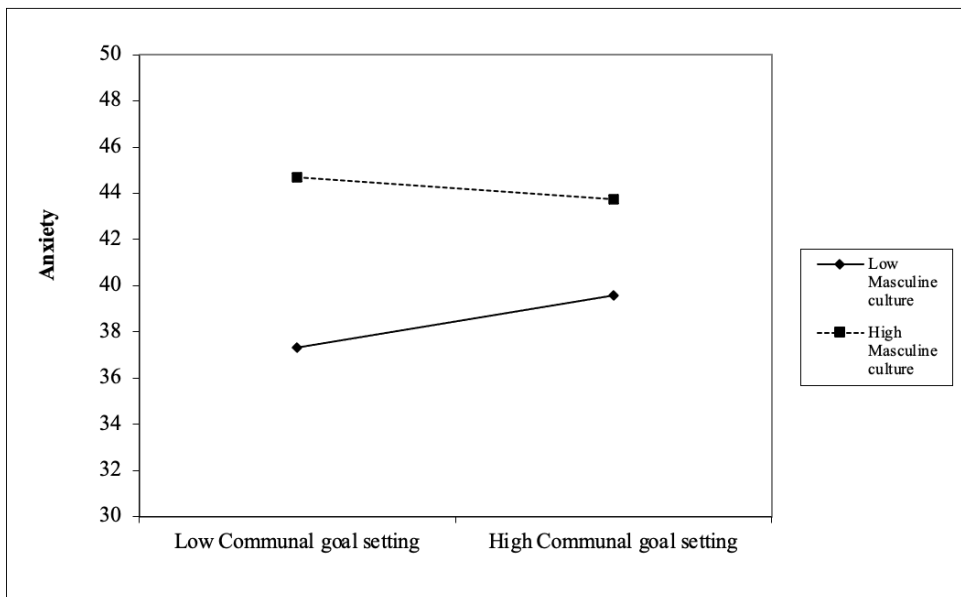


Figure 3. Relationship between communal goal setting and state anxiety as moderated by masculine culture.

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