

Influence of Health Promoting Leadership and Leader Humor on Employee Innovation Performance: The Role Positive Emotions

Yulin Niu & Han Zhen

Abstract

Understanding how leadership styles conducive to employee innovation performance is one of the main focuses in organizational behavior literature. In this paper, we use broaden-and-build theory to examine how health promotes leadership and leader humor affect employee innovation performance, focusing on positive emotion mediation. By using a survey data consisting of 410 full-time employees from several large state-owned companies in China, the results indicate that both health promoting leadership and leader humor significantly relate to positive emotions among employees, which in turn, enhances their innovation performance. This article makes contributions to the literature by emphasizing the role of leadership styles in creating an environment that encourages creativity and innovation by the mechanism of positive emotions.



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1. Introduction

Innovation is seen as a driver for development (Büschgens et al., 2013; Drucker & Maciariello, 2014). In the context of competition and dynamism in the world, there is a need for an organisation to have greater creativity and innovation in order to obtain a competitive edge (Amabile, 1996; Anderson, 2014). Employee's innovative achievements are the basis of organization innovation, which has a direct bearing on the existence and development of an organization (Dedahanov and others, 2017). Furthermore, it has been recognized that leadership is a critical element in the motivation of employee participation and performance (Hughes et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2020). Therefore, the leadership role and employee innovative performance have become the focus of OB&HRM scholars.

The influence of different types of leaders on employees' innovative behavior or performance has been widely studied in recent years. Studies have particularly focused on the impact of transformational leadership, with Koh et al. (2019) and Qu et al. (2015) providing key insights. Similarly, servant leadership has been a subject of interest, as illuminated by the research of Jaiswal and Dhar (2017) and Yoshida et al. (2014). Paternalistic leadership has been explored by Soomro et al. (2021), while the ethical leadership paradigm has been dissected by Feng et al. (2018), all contributing to a nuanced understanding of leadership's role in fostering creativity and productivity. However, in an ever more dynamic environment, it is important for leaders to focus more on providing a healthy working environment for their employees (Akerjordet, 2018). Although these leadership styles contain elements that promote employee health to some degree, they do not delve into how to shape the organization's health from the perspective of health promotion. Health promoting leadership, a burgeoning leadership paradigm, emphasizes the leader's role in fostering an environment that supports employees' physical and mental well-being (Barrett et al., 2005). However, there has been little research on its impact on employee innovation performance. In addition, humor is a pleasant way of communication that can break down barriers between people in an organization and increase mutual trust, thereby creating a healthy organizational atmosphere for employees in the organization (Robert et al., 2016; Rosenberg et al., 2021). As a result, it becomes an important research field to study how leader humor affects employees' innovative performance.

In our research, we concentrate on examining the impact of two distinct leadership styles: health promoting leadership and leader humor. By reviewing the literature for both types of leadership and creativity, we've found that there has not been sufficient research into how positive emotions affect this process. Drawing on Fredrickson's (2004) broaden-and-build theory, we posit that positive emotions can foster exploratory behaviors and expand an employee's resource base, influencing satisfaction and learning, and thus driving innovation (Fredrickson, 2001). Therefore, this study aims to fill this void by examining how positive emotions mediate the relationship between health-promoting leadership, leader humor, and innovation performance from the broaden-and-build perspective.

In summary, we contribute to the literature in two major points: (1) exploring the influence of health promoting leadership and leader humor on innovation performance of employees can enrich and expand the research on leadership and creativity; (2) shedding light on the mediating role of positive emotions in the relationship between health-promoting leadership and innovation performance from a broaden-and-build perspective provides some clues for scholars to clarify the mechanism by which health promoting leadership and leader humor affects employees' innovative performance.

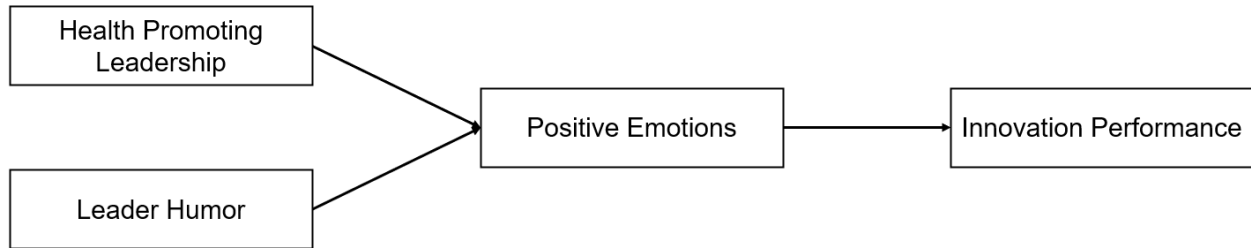


Figure 1 Theoretical model

2. Theoretical Background and Hypothesis

2.1 Health Promoting Leadership and Employee Positive Emotions

The construct of health-promoting leadership has been progressively elaborated. Although the term health promoting leadership includes the word “promoting” [lat. Promotus = move forward advance], indicating that health should advance, definitions vary from focusing on maintaining employees’ current health to definitions of health promoting leadership as a means to increase employees’ health at work. Consequently, the term Health Promoting Leadership (HPL) encompasses a range of definitions, among them a health awareness component (Akerjordet et al., 2018). Barrett et al. (2005) contribute to this understanding by articulating a four-dimensional framework for a health-promoting leader, which includes organizational learning practices, wellness planning, the cultivation of a workplace milieu, and the development of organizational members.

Positive emotions are those that occur when an individual's needs are met, or the situation is evaluated as positive (Fredrickson, 2001). Positive emotion refers to “a pleasant emotional state characterized by feelings of happiness, satisfaction, interest, pride, gratitude, love” and so on (Fredrickson, 2004). The literature has shown that employees' positive emotions are influenced by leaders, colleagues, organizational atmosphere, etc. (Goswami et al., 2016; Liang & Steve Chi, 2013; Smollan & Sayers, 2009). Health-promoting leadership, characterized by a focus on well-being, places a strong emphasis on the mental health of employees. Health promoting leaders pay attention to organizational health and encourage employees' participation in organization management (Barrett et al., 2005). Leaders who care about their subordinates' health will provide a healthy work environment for them, which can help create an atmosphere of mutual trust within the team (Nilsson et al., 2005). In such organizations, employees tend to be more frequently acknowledged and supported by their peers and superiors (Gurt et al., 2011). In addition, positive emotions are contagious (Bono & Ilies, 2006). When there are more people with a healthy mindset in the organization, even employees who were originally unhappy will be infected by this emotion and produce positive emotions. Research also found that health promoting leadership can induce subordinates' positive emotions and enhance their relationship with leaders (Bergin & Jimmieson, 2020). Therefore, we propose:

Hypothesis 1a: *Health promoting Leadership has a positive correlation with employee's positive emotions.*

2.2 Leader Humor and Employee Positive Emotions

Leader humor, as a distinct behavioral trait, involves a leader engaging in actions that are perceived as humorous by their subordinates, eliciting amusement or laughter (Cooper et al., 2018; McGraw & Warren, 2010). Leaders can use humor in a variety of ways, such as when

assigning tasks and giving instructions, by incorporating elements of humor into their communication with employees, and by maintaining a lighthearted attitude during daily interactions with team members. Leader humor is not only an effective way to communicate but also an art form in the management of teams (Rosenberg et al., 2021). Leaders who use humor can reduce the formal atmosphere at work and create a more relaxed working environment for employees.

Cooper et al. (2018) conducted an empirical study and discovered that the use of humor by leaders has a notably positive impact on fostering positive emotions among employees. Positive emotion is the internal state of employees and includes feelings such as happiness, satisfaction, interest, pride, gratitude, love, etc. (Fredrickson, 2004). Leaders who incorporate humor can foster a positive emotional climate among their team members, facilitating an environment that is ripe for knowledge sharing and innovation within the team (Yang et al., 2021). Additionally, Maosutin (2018) observed that leaders' humorous conduct not only adds an element of enjoyment to the workplace but also boosts employees' intrinsic motivation. This increased motivation subsequently drives a more positive stance towards the organization and its objectives (Jun & Lee, 2024). Drawing on the findings from these studies, it can be deduced that leaders who employ humor are likely to evoke positive emotions in their subordinates. Consequently, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1b: *There is a positive relationship between leader humor and employees' positive emotions.*

2.3 Employee's Positive Emotions and Innovation Performance

The broaden-and-build theory, as articulated by Fredrickson (2001), posits that positive emotions can catalyze a broadening of individuals' thought-action tendencies, fostering a more exploratory approach to interactions within an organization. This, in turn, can enhance organizational members' satisfaction and learning capabilities. Positive emotions also contribute positively to both the physical and psychological well-being of individuals (Isen & Geva, 1987). In addition, a positive emotional atmosphere can promote the sharing of tacit knowledge among employees (Hodgins & Dadich, 2017). When an organization has more people with a healthy mindset, it is easier to create a pleasant working environment for its members and make them feel happy and energetic at work. Research has consistently demonstrated a positive correlation between the presence of positive emotions and innovation performance. Employees who experience higher levels of positive emotions have been found to exhibit greater creativity (St-Louis & Vallerand, 2015). Furthermore, these employees tend to possess increased confidence in their work and are more inclined to embrace risk-taking (Brooks et al., 2023). Given these findings, we propose:

Hypothesis 2: *Employee's positive emotions can promote themselves' innovation performance. Taken together, considering the influences of health promoting leadership and leader humor on employees' positive emotions, we further propose:*

Hypothesis 3a: *Employees' positive emotions are expected to act as intermediaries, linking health-promoting leadership with enhanced innovation performance*

Hypothesis 3b: *Employees' positive emotions mediate the influence of leader humor on their innovation performance.*

3. Methodology

3.1 Sample and Procedure

To examine the hypothesized relationships, we conducted a survey across several major state-owned enterprises in China. Firstly, communication was established with the Human Resources Department of the survey enterprises, and random departments or teams were selected according to the actual conditions and entrusted to the department or team leader for transferring the questionnaire to their subordinate employees. In this study, we disseminated 500 questionnaires and, following the exclusion of non-responses and invalid responses, we obtained 410 valid responses from employees, which corresponds to a response rate of 82%.

The demographics of the survey participants were predominantly male, with 59.8% of the respondents identifying as such. The age distribution among the surveyed employees was fairly even, yet there was a slight concentration in the 36-40 and 31-35 age groups, comprising 29.5% and 23.4% of the participants, respectively. Regarding educational attainment, the majority of the respondents held a bachelor's degree, representing 77.3% of the survey sample. In terms of employee tenure, most respondents had a tenure of 6-10 years, adding to a total of 41.2%. The statistical results preliminarily reflect the objectivity and representativeness of the survey data to a certain extent.

3.2 Measures

Since our participants were Chinese and some original scales were in English, we adhered to the standard translation and back-translation protocol to render all scales into their Chinese equivalents (Brislin, 1970). Unless indicated otherwise, a 5-point Likert scale was implemented for all assessments, with anchors at 1 = "strongly disagree" and 5 = "strongly agree".

3.2.1 Health Promoting Leadership

We utilized the scale formulated by Barrett et al. (2005) for assessing health promoting leadership. This scale encompasses four key dimensions: organizational learning practices, wellness planning, the workplace environment, and the development of organizational members. The scale consists of 18 items, with typical items such as "Honesty and trustworthiness characterize our relationships" and "Professional development efforts sufficient to meet our needs." The Cronbach's alpha coefficient is 0.97.

3.2.2 Leader Humor

For assessing leader humor, we employed the questionnaire crafted by Yam et al. (2018), which looks at humor from the perspective of the leader and contains 7 items (Yam et al., 2018). Sample items include "Can ease a tense situation by saying something funny." The Cronbach's alpha is 0.96.

3.2.3 Employee Innovation Performance

We utilized the unidimensional scale developed by Scott and Bruce (1994) to gauge employee innovation performance, which is composed of 6 items designed to measure the extent of an employee's innovative contributions (Scott & Bruce, 1994). Illustrative items include "Searches out new technologies, processes, techniques, and/or product idea." The scale demonstrated good reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.92.

3.2.4 Positive Emotions

To quantify the experience of positive emotions among employees, this study adopted the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) developed by Watson et al. (1988). The original scale comprises 10 items for both positive and negative affect (Watson et al., 1988). For this

research, we selected the 10 items related to positive emotions to assess the degree of positive emotional experiences of employees. Examples of these items are "interested" and "inspired." The scale used in this study had a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.92.

3.2.5 Control variables

To exclude the influence of demographic factors on our hypothesized model, we employed age (coded as 1=less than 20, 2=21 to 30, 3=31 to 40, 4=greater than 40), gender was indicated (1=male, 2=female), education levels were stratified (1=college or below, 2=bachelor, 3=postgraduate or above), and tenure was detailed (1=less than 1 year, 2=1-2 years, 3=3-5 years, 4=6-10 years, 5=11-20 years, 6=more than 20 years). These controls were utilized to reduce the likelihood of confounding influences.

4 Results

Table 1 displays the average scores, standard deviations, and the intercorrelations among the variables under investigation. As an initial step, we performed a series of confirmatory factor analyses to ascertain the discriminant validity of the study variables (Brown, 2015). The findings indicated that the optimal model, comprising four variables, exhibited the most favorable fit against competing models, with $\chi^2 / df = 2.89$, CFI = 0.91, TLI = 0.92, RMSEA = 0.07, SRMR = 0.05. A detailed presentation of these outcomes is provided in Table 2.

Table 1: Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations of the Variables

	Mean	S.D.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Gender	1.40	0.49								
Age	2.95	1.04	-.110*	-						
Education	2.12	0.39	0.089	0.093	-					
Tenure	3.77	1.11	-0.073	0.431**	0.027	-				
Health Promoting Leadership	3.13	0.80	-0.054	-	-0.107*	-0.138**	(0.97)			
Leader Humor	2.49	0.99	-.111*	-0.062	-	0.032	0.488**	(0.96)		
Positive Emotions	3.02	0.81	-0.065	-0.047	-0.106*	-0.022	0.663**	0.595**	(0.92)	
Innovation Performance	2.84	0.85	-.116*	-0.002	-0.053	-0.04	0.657**	0.570**	0.732**	(0.92)

Note: N = 410. * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01.

Hypotheses 1a and 1b propose a positive association between health-promoting leadership and leader humor with employees' positive emotions. The data presented in Table 3 corroborate these predictions, demonstrating significant correlations between health-promoting leadership (B = 0.504, p < 0.001) and leader humor (B = 0.291, p < 0.001) with positive emotions in Model 2. Consequently, both hypotheses 1a and 1b find support. Hypothesis 2 posits that employees' positive emotions are conducive to enhancing their innovation performance. This hypothesis is also upheld by the findings, with positive emotions showing a positive relationship with innovation performance in Model 4 (B = 0.461, p < 0.001).

Table 2: Results of Confirmatory factor analysis

Model	CMIN/DF	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR
HPL; HUMOR; PA; EIP	2.89	0.91	0.92	0.07	0.05
HPL+ HUMOR; PA; EIP	5.38	0.79	0.80	0.10	0.12
HPL+ HUMOR+ PA; EIP	8.30	0.64	0.67	0.13	0.10
HPL+ HUMOR+PA+ EIP	9.17	0.60	0.63	0.14	0.10

Note: "+" indicates factors combined. HPL=Health Promoting Leadership, Humor=Leader Humor, PA=Positive Emotions, EIP=Employee Innovation Performance.

Table 3: Results of Hierarchical Regression Analysis

Predictors	Positive Emotions		Innovation Performance		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	
Control Variable	Constant	3.836	0.524	3.501	-0.176
	Gender	-0.101	0.01	-0.198	-0.089
	Age	-0.027	0.027	0.008	0.051
	Education	-0.142	0.014	-0.066	0.087
	Tenure	-0.004	0.012	-0.038	-0.025
Independent variable	Health Promoting Leadership		0.504***		0.304***
	Leader Humor		0.291***		0.153***
Mediating Variable	Positive Emotions				0.461***
	R ²	0.016	0.539	0.018	0.617
	F	1.679	78.504***	1.822	92.536***

Note: N = 410. * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001.

To substantiate hypotheses 3a and 3b, a bootstrap analysis was performed using Mplus 8.3 (Muthén et al., 2017). As depicted in Table 4, the mediating role of positive emotions between health-promoting leadership and employee innovation performance is indicated by an indirect effect of 0.232, CI = [0.167, 0.301]. Likewise, the mediating effect of positive emotions in the relationship between leader humor and employee innovation performance is 0.134, CI = [0.084, 0.190]. Thus, Hypothesis 3a and hypothesis 3b were supported by the data.

Table 4 Results of Mediating Analysis

Effect	SE	LLCI	ULCI
Health Promoting Leadership → Positive Emotions → Innovation Performance			
0.232	0.034	0.167	0.301
Leader Humor → Positive Emotions → Innovation Performance			
0.134	0.027	0.084	0.190

Note: N = 410. Confidence interval = 95%.

5. General discussion

The purpose of this article was to deepen the comprehension of how two distinct leadership styles—health promoting leadership and leader humor—affect employees' innovation performance. Through a survey of 410 full-time employees, our results demonstrate that each of these leadership styles bears a significant correlation with the innovation performance of employees. Moreover, the study underscores the pivotal role of positive emotions as a mediating factor in the dynamics between these leadership styles and the innovation performance of employees.

5.1 Theoretical implications

This research makes several significant contributions to the theoretical landscape of leadership and innovation. Firstly, it delves into the effects of two emerging leadership styles—health promoting leadership and leader humor—on employee innovation performance, thereby expanding the discourse on the intersection of leadership and creative endeavors. These styles underscore the evolving expectations from leaders in dynamic organizational environments and offer new insights into how leadership can foster an innovative culture within organizations (Akerjordet et al., 2018; Cooper et al., 2018). Secondly, through the application of broaden-and-build theory as an analytical framework, our research highlights how positive emotions serve as a pivotal mediation, influencing the dynamic between various leadership approaches and the innovative capabilities of employees. This vantage point offers researchers key insights into the underlying processes that enable health-promoting leadership and leader humor to bolster the innovative contributions of employees. The study posits that nurturing positive emotions could be an essential tactic for leaders who aim to elevate the collective creativity and innovation within their groups. This approach helps to fill a void in the existing

literature, where the impact of positive emotions within organizational contexts, especially concerning their interaction with leadership styles and the impact on innovation outcomes, has not been deeply explored (Diener et al., 2020). The findings highlight the potential of positive psychological experiences to broaden employees' thought-action repertoires, thereby facilitating a higher degree of exploratory interaction, knowledge sharing, and creative output. This enriches our understanding of how a supportive and humor-infused leadership approach can lead to more robust and meaningful contributions by employees within the innovation process.

5.2 Practical implications

In addition to enhancing scholarly perspectives on the impact of leadership on innovation, this research delivers actionable insights for leaders and human resource specialists within organizations. Grasping how health promoting leadership and leader humor influence employees' innovative contributions presents key strategies to invigorate creativity and foster a culture of innovation in the workplace. First, organizations should recognize the importance of nurturing a health-promoting leadership style. Leaders who prioritize their employees' well-being and create a supportive work environment can directly influence their team's innovation performance. By integrating health-promoting practices into the leadership development programs, organizations can ensure that leaders are equipped with the knowledge and skills to foster a healthy and innovative work culture. Leaders are encouraged to incorporate humor into their daily interactions with employees. As the study illustrates, leader humor positively affects employees' positive emotions, which in turn, enhances their innovation performance. Therefore, creating a work atmosphere where humor is appreciated and practiced can break down barriers, build trust, and stimulate creative thinking among team members.

Additionally, the pivotal function of positive emotions as mediation between leadership styles and innovation performance highlights the critical importance of emotional well-being in organizational settings. Organizations should invest in initiatives that promote employees' positive emotions, such as team-building activities, recognition programs, and opportunities for personal and professional growth. By cultivating a positive emotional climate, organizations can enhance employees' engagement, creativity, and commitment to innovation. Lastly, the research indicates that a comprehensive strategy encompassing both leadership and innovation management should be embraced by organizations. This approach involves not only focusing on traditional leadership behaviors but also considering the broader emotional and psychological needs of employees. By doing so, organizations can cultivate a milieu that instills a sense of worth, support, and motivation in employees, prompting them to proffer their most inventive concepts, thereby conferring a distinctive advantage in the ever-shifting and intricate market landscape.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research Avenues

While this study offers valuable insights, it comes with inherent limitations that open up fertile ground for subsequent scholarly inquiry. First, though surveying 410 full-time employees, the variables were all measured using self-reports raising the issue of common method variance bias and weakening the ability to examine causality of our theoretical model. Nonetheless, to alleviate concerns regarding CMV and to further substantiate the causality among variables, we encourage future research to incorporate more rigorous methods. For instance, future studies could adopt a diary design to collect cross-lagged data to investigate the proposed relationships in this study (Kenny, 2005). Second, although various environmental elements could potentially moderate the relationships under investigation, our theoretical framework did not account for such moderating variables. Future research could address on this issue and further

examine moderating variables like organization culture (Büschgens et al., 2013) and individual differences (Woodman & Schoenfeldt, 1989).

6. Conclusion

The study presented in this paper offers a comprehensive examination of the intricate relationship between leadership styles, positive emotions, and employee innovation performance. It systematically demonstrates the ways in which health promoting leadership and leader humor can cultivate an environment in which innovation can thrive, with positive emotions playing a central mediating role. By focusing on the importance of positive emotional experiences among employees, the research lends empirical support to the argument that the emotional aspects of workplace dynamics are as critical to innovation as strategic and operational factors. The findings between leadership, positive emotions, and employee innovation performance has crucial implications for how organizations design leadership roles and how leaders execute their functions. A forward-looking organization should view their leaders not just as strategic decision-makers, but as advocates and creators of an emotionally intelligent workplace, one which places a premium on the well-being and emotional health of its employees to drive innovation and maintain competitive advantage in an evolving business landscape. This study lays the groundwork for a new domain of leadership practice that recognizes the power of emotions in achieving superior organizational outcomes.

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