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How does leader communication style promote employees' commitment at times of change?

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the structure of leader communication style in the context of organizational change. In doing so, the authors intend to shed more light on how leaders can effectively communicate change projects to their subordinates, which is viewed as the key to implementing change initiatives.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper builds an integrated conceptual model for understanding leader's communication style and subordinates' commitment to change. By analyzing subordinates' different fears of change, the paper further proposes a multidimensional structure of leader communication style in the context of change. The authors then develop a scale to measure these different dimensions and test the relationship between the proposed communication style and subordinates' affective commitment to change.

Findings – Leader communication style in the context of change is found to be composed of five dimensions: hope orientation, reality orientation, subordinate orientation, support orientation, and enforcement orientation. A cross-level field study of 31 teams and 194 members shows that hope orientation, subordinate orientation, and support orientation are positively associated with subordinates' affective commitment to change.

Originality/value – This paper identifies a new structure of leader communication style that will lead to a richer understanding of how leaders communicate to their subordinates in the context of change. It also contributes to the leadership literature by implying effective ways of communicating change projects.

Keywords Organizational change, Affective commitment to change, Leader communication style, Supervisor-subordinate communication

Paper type Research paper



Introduction

Among leadership scholars and practitioners, interpersonal communication between supervisors and subordinates has been consistently viewed as a central component of the leadership process (Awamleh and Gardner, 1999; Bennis and Nanus, 2003; Den Hartog and Verburg, 1997; De Vries *et al.*, 2010; Shamir *et al.*, 1994). What's more, some researchers define leadership as a group of behaviors that are communicative in nature (De Vries *et al.*, 2010; Yukl, 2010). Thus, developing a communication perspective of leadership theory (Hackman and Johnson, 2013) is necessary. Despite the close association between leadership and communication, it is surprising that little research has been done to operationalize supervisor-subordinate communication – specifically in a leadership context (De Vries *et al.*, 2010; Penley and Hawkins, 1985) – except for studies looking at the delivery skills and speech content of presidents or prestigious business leaders (Bligh and Robinson, 2010; Emrich *et al.*, 2001).

The present research intends to move this discourse one step forward with a specific focus on considering leaders' communication style in the context of organizational change. The change context is well-suited to examining the role of leaders' communication because organizational change is a communicative challenge (Allen *et al.*, 2007; Van de Ven *et al.*, 1989). More specifically, "change is created, sustained, and managed in and by communication" (Ford and Ford, 1995, p. 560). The eventual success or failure of a change initiative is at least partially dependent on to what extent the leader effectively communicates change issues to subordinates (Choi, 2011; Jacobs *et al.*, 2013).

The extant literature has provided several different approaches to understanding the dimensionality of leader communication style (e.g. De Vries *et al.*, 2010; Norton, 1983). However, these have been criticized as both lacking a theoretical basis and being less integrative (Beatty, 1998; Daly and Bippus, 1998). Therefore, we intend to build an integrated framework by which to better understand the role of leader communication style during organizational change.

Accordingly, the present study aims to address two research questions as follows. In the context of organizational change:

RQ1. What are the different dimensions of leader communication style?

RQ2. What are the specific effects of these differing leader communication styles on subordinates' affective commitment to change?

Based on our conceptual model, we propose a multidimensional structure of leader communication style in the change context and hypothesize the effects of each dimension. To empirically test our hypotheses, we employed a multi-level field study by operationalizing leader communication style at the team level and affective commitment to change at the individual level. Our findings indicate that leader communication style in the change context have five dimensions, which we name as: hope orientation, reality orientation, subordinate orientation, support orientation, and enforcement orientation. In addition, leaders' particular communication style during times of change are shown to have distinct effects on subordinates' affective commitment to change.

In the following sections, we begin by reviewing the literature on leader communication style. Next, we lay out our conceptual model of leader communication style during organizational change, followed by developing hypotheses concerning the structure and effects of leader communication style in the change context. We then proceed to describe the method and result of our field study. After presenting our research findings, we discuss the implications of our study for current theory and practice.

Theory and hypotheses

Leader communication style

To unpack leaders' communication activities, extant studies generally focus either on the side of the message or the person (Den Hartog and Verburg, 1997; Shamir *et al.*, 1994). Den Hartog and Verburg (1997) further made a distinction between content (or "what the speech is") and composition or structure (which refers to "how the message is framed through the use of rhetorical devices") on the message side. On the person side, Den Hartog and Verburg (1997) differentiated between communicator style and the actual delivery of the leader's speech. Communicator style is defined by Norton (1978, p. 99) as "the way one verbally and paraverbally interacts to signal how literal meaning should be taken, interpreted, filtered, or understood." In contrast, studies on the delivery focus on the way in which the speech is delivered, such as use of facial expressions, eye contact, body gestures, and tone of voice (Den Hartog and Verburg, 1997). As an example, Holladay and Coombs (1994) found that the friendly, attentive, dominant, and reflective dimensions of communicator style are behavioral indicators of a leader's charisma.

In this paper, we focus on communicator style only, regardless of the content or the delivery of message. In line with Norton (1983) and De Vries *et al.* (2010, 2011), we specifically define leader communication style as the characteristic way a leader sends verbal, paraverbal, and non-verbal signals in supervisor-subordinate interactions, denoting in what way his or her messages should usually be interpreted. By definition, we focus explicitly on the communication behaviors between a leader and his/her subordinates, excluding intrapersonal communications and communicative behaviors toward non-subordinate individuals.

To date, a number of instruments have been developed to measure leader communication style either for general circumstances (Norton, 1978) or more specific contexts (Luthans and Larsen, 1986). Even though these instruments have different components, it is agreed that leader communication style is a multidimensional construct. For example, Norton's (1978, 1983) communicator style measure is made up of six dimensions, including dominant, dramatic, open, attentive, friendly, and others. Recently, De Vries *et al.* (2009, 2011) also developed a six-dimensional tool (communication styles inventory) to measure communication style. However, since the dimensionality of leader communication style varies one from another, some scholars have lamented the lack of an integrative framework for understanding the style of leaders' communication behaviors (Beatty, 1998; Daly and Bippus, 1998). Despite this criticism of being less integrated, there are two additional limitations that might hamper our understanding of how leaders communicate. First, it is noted that prior works on dimensions of communication style are fundamentally based upon either qualitative or quantitative data analysis rather than stemming from a clear theoretical basis. Therefore, the content and number of dimensions may vary across different studies simply because they use different samples (Beatty, 1998). Second, the leader-centered view has dominated research on leader communication style and, thus, few studies have incorporated the dynamic interaction between leaders' communication style, subordinates' psychological states, and embedded context. Communication, especially supervisor-subordinate communication, is basically a reciprocal process and is characterized by the context in which the communication occurs (Yukl, 2010). Therefore, to preliminarily address the above weaknesses in studying leader communication style, we aim to build an integrated model simultaneously consisting of leaders, their subordinates, and the context of change.

An integrated model of leader communication style during organizational change

An increasing number of researchers have agreed that employees' attitudes and efforts play a central role in achieving the intended goals of a specific change initiative (Armenakis *et al.*, 1993; Choi, 2011; George and Jones, 2001; Lau and Woodman, 1995). According to Choi's (2011) literature review, employees' commitment to change has received the most attention from researchers. Herscovitch and Meyer (2002) developed the concept of commitment to change and defined it as "a force (mind-set) that binds an individual to a course of action deemed necessary for the successful implementation of a change initiative" (Herscovitch and Meyer, 2002, p. 475). They further differentiated three types of commitment to change: affective, normative, and continuance. In the present study, we focus on the affective component since affective commitment is shown to be most likely to be influenced by leadership factors (Abrell-Vogel and Rowold, 2014; Herold *et al.*, 2008; Shum *et al.*, 2008). Specifically, affective commitment to change entails a desire to support a change project based on affective linkage and attachment to the change itself (Herscovitch and Meyer, 2002).

In this paper, we offer a conceptual model as outlined below to illustrate how leaders' communication style can influence subordinates' affective commitment to change (see Figure 1). This model is developed based on the cognitive appraisal theory of emotions (Ellsworth and Scherer, 2003; Lazarus, 1991), which contends that individuals' cognitions and emotions are highly interrelated and could reinforce each other. Usually, people's emotional feelings arise from their interpretations of the circumstances, deliberately or unconsciously. As we noted earlier, leaders' communication style indicate the way in which receivers should interpret messages delivered by their leader (De Vries *et al.*, 2009). Therefore, leaders' communications on change would stimulate subordinates' cognitive appraisal process in terms of particular attributes (such as novelty, valence, difficulty, and expectancy) of the change. As the consequence of the cognitive appraisal process, subordinates would experience particular emotional feelings (Elfenbein, 2007), which would further lead to downstream consequences for subordinates' attitude, behavior, and cognitions. In the present model, affective commitment to change represents a potential emotional expression toward the change and is influenced by subordinates' emotional experiences. To specify, we introduce a particular emotional experience – fear of change – to explain why leader communication style matter.

Fear is a fundamental feeling of human beings. Fear of change refers to one's perception that the object (i.e. change) is new or unknown and that one has not developed appropriate reactions toward that object (Gray, 1987; Hebb, 1946). In the context of change, fear of change is caused by multiple concerns, such as the uncertainty of change outcomes, the possibility of status or benefits loss, the difficulties and dangers embedded in the change itself, and others (Allen *et al.*, 2007; Piderit, 2000). Because fear is a negative emotion, people tend to avoid (rather than approach) objects

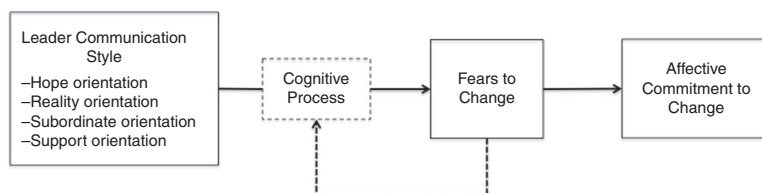


Figure 1.
A conceptual model
for understanding
leader
communication style
and affective
commitment
to change

that might engender a feeling of fear. Therefore, regardless of what causes fear of change, subordinates who experience fear of change are generally unwilling or hesitant to get involved in the change process. In other words, there is a negative association between the fear of change and affective commitment to change. Accordingly, a fundamental role of leader communication style in this context is to reduce subordinates' fear of change (Allen *et al.*, 2007), thereby convincing subordinates that the change is safe and also enhancing their affective commitment. In our present paper, we specifically focus on examining what kind of leader communication style could enhance affective commitment through reducing subordinates' fears of change.

As depicted in Figure 1, subordinates' emotional experiences (i.e. fear of change) could also reinforce their cognitive process (Elfenbein, 2007). When subordinates' emotional feelings about the change project are generally negative, they are also more likely to perceive the leader's communication content on change in a discouraging direction. The bidirectional influence of cognitive process and emotional feelings could be demonstrated more precisely in a longitudinal way. However, the present paper primarily aims to reveal what kind of leader communication style are effective in enhancing employees' affective commitment to change and, as a result, particularly emphasizes the fear of change as an outcome of the cognitive process.

Dimensions of leader communication style in the context of change

To identify possible dimensions of leader communication style in the change context, we grounded our analysis on different types of fears that could lower subordinates' affective commitment to change. Concerning subordinates' fear of change, although there have been no systematic studies to date, we do find that prior works have referred to respective fear related to change (e.g. Armenakis and Harris, 2009; Fugate *et al.*, 2008; Nesterkin, 2013; O'Connor, 1995; Rafferty *et al.*, 2013). Drawing on these, we summarized four major types of fears related to change as follows: first, fear of change failure. Since the outcomes of the change are usually unpredictable and change itself is more or less risky, subordinates might fear that the change is not feasible and may be out of the organization's or leader's control (Nadler and Tushman, 1997; O'Connor, 1995); second, fear of partial awareness. Organizational change usually involves both potential benefits and risks. However, it is likely that the leader tends to beautify the change by providing only positive information so as to persuade others (Conger and Kanungo, 1998). Therefore, subordinates might fear that they are not fully aware of both the benefits and risks associated with the change (Allen *et al.*, 2007); third, fear of personal loss. Subordinates may fear that the change is harmful to their personal interests (Ford *et al.*, 2008). Specifically, they are likely to suffer the personal loss of income, job security, and/or current status and power, especially when the change involves restructuring the organization or downsizing; fourth, fear of inadequate support. Organizational change usually necessitates dealing with difficulties, uncertainties and ambiguities, and might also encounter setbacks. Thus, decisive support from the leader is critical to increase subordinates' psychological sense of safety and willingness to overcome those challenges (Edmondson, 1999; Erdogan and Enders, 2007). In that sense, subordinates' expectation that they might not receive necessary backing, protection, orientation, and direction from the organization and leader during the change will lead to the fear of inadequate support (Armenakis and Harris, 2009; Ford *et al.*, 2008; Herold *et al.*, 2008).

Consequently, based on the idea that a leader's change communication should appropriately address different types of subordinates' fears of change, we constructed a multidimensional framework of leadership change communication style as follows.

To simplify, each dimension is theorized to primarily deal with a particular type of employees' fears. As an initial study focussing on recognizing the effects of each dimension on affective commitment, we choose to examine each dimension independently, even though all the dimensions are somewhat interrelated. We will come back to this issue in the discussion section.

The first dimension of communication style is hope orientation, which deals with the fear of change failure. To effectively manage this anxiety, leaders need to indicate that the change is promising and achievable in the near future (Bennis and Nanus, 2003; Conger and Kanungo, 1998). Specifically, leaders should communicate change information in an encouraging way. They can provide convincing examples to illustrate the viability of the change. Also, they can communicate in a more emotional, colorful way by using more vivid language and imagery (Emrich *et al.*, 2001). The central characteristic of these approaches is to instill a positive hope or belief that the change can be successfully achieved in the future.

The second type of leader communication style during the change period, reality orientation, refers to providing complete, consistent, and down to earth information about the change (Nadler and Tushman, 1997). This style is used to address subordinates' fear of partial awareness. Incomplete or even biased information will increase employees' perceived uncertainty about the change since they are not sure whether they are aware of possible risks, challenges, and difficulties concerning the change (Allen *et al.*, 2007). As a contrast, demonstrating both the benefits and the risks of the change to employees via a leader's change communication can provide a more rational basis on which employees can make decisions concerning to what extent they should get involved in the change process.

The third dimension, subordinate orientation, refers not only to emphasizing the potential benefits to the organization, but also the potential benefits to the subordinates themselves. As noted above, one reason subordinates hesitate to participate in change is because they often fear that the change is primarily meant for the organization's sake, while it has no visible benefits (and indeed, may also pose possible risks) to themselves. Therefore, the subordinate-oriented communication style is intended to address the fear of personal loss. To be subordinate oriented, leaders should consider subordinates' concerns, their need to be respected, and change-vindicated interests and personal stakes of which they may be unaware (Armenakis and Harris, 2009), which is best accomplished by a well-balanced, friendly, and sympathetic style of communication.

The last dimension of leadership change communication style we propose is termed support orientation, and deals with the fear of inadequate support. The central characteristic of support-oriented communication style is to indicate that the leader is determined to push forward the change initiative and willing to offer necessary support to employees during the change process (Armenakis and Harris, 2009; Ford *et al.*, 2008; Herold *et al.*, 2008). The goal of being supportive is to address employees' fear of inadequate support. Accordingly, leaders need to communicate change information in a convinced, self-confident, and decisive way so as to demonstrate that he/she is highly committed to the change.

Above all, we constructed a four-dimensional model of leader communication style during organizational change, which is based on and informed by the analysis of employees' diverse fears of change. Therefore, we hypothesized:

- H1.* In the context of change, leader communication style is a four-dimensional construct, consisting of hope orientation, reality orientation, subordinate orientation, and support orientation.

Effects of leader communication style on subordinates' affective commitment to change

Employees' affective commitment to change is critical to the implementation and ultimate success of organizational change (Choi, 2011). However, most employees will not commit to change automatically, since change usually involves challenging the status quo and causing ambiguity and uncertainty (Allen *et al.*, 2007). Consequently, leaders' intervention via communicating the change project to employees is of significant importance in arousing and heightening employees' affective commitment to change (Herold *et al.*, 2008; Parish *et al.*, 2008; Shum *et al.*, 2008). The present study examines the effects of leader communication style on employees' affective commitment to change, based on our four-dimensional model of leader communication style.

The hope-oriented change communication attempts to inform employees that the change is expected to succeed in the future and is under organizational or the leader's control (Lazarus, 1991; Snyder, 2002). Hope is generally defined as the perceived capability to derive pathways to desired goals and to motivate oneself via agency thinking to use those pathways (Snyder, 2002), and also can be understood as an optimistic emotional feeling (Ellsworth and Scherer, 2003). Through communicating in an emotional way (Venus *et al.*, 2013) and using colorful, vivid language, and imagery (Emrich *et al.*, 2001), the leader's feelings of hope may be transferred to employees via the process of emotional contagion (Erez *et al.*, 2008). When subordinates feel that the coming change is expected to succeed with a higher potential, they are more likely to commit to achieving the goal of change (Locke and Latham, 2002). Therefore, positive feelings of being hopeful are likely to be associated with higher affective commitment (Choi, 2011).

Therefore, we posit:

H2. A leader's hope-oriented communication style will be positively related to subordinates' affective commitment to change.

Reality-oriented communication may be helpful, because it fulfills employees' need for complete information and their desire for being treated in an authentic way. Communicating potential risks about the change via leaders' complete and unbiased information may help to promote credibility in a leader's communication (van Dam *et al.*, 2008) and make the leader perceived as placing more trust in his/her employees, which in turn leads to greater trust on the part of the employees toward the leader. Heightened trust in the leader himself/herself is shown to increase employees' level of commitment (Fuchs and Edwards, 2012; Rousseau *et al.*, 1998).

However, the reality orientation might have negative effects as well. The more complete and unbiased information that a leader delivers, the more depressed subordinates may feel as they realize there are so many expected obstacles. As subordinates tend to be afraid of change, they are more likely to selectively process the risk-relevant information in the context of being presented with both positive and negative information by their leaders, thus reinforcing their original fears. Therefore, leaders' reality-oriented communication might also, to some extent, lower subordinates' affective commitment (Oreg, 2006). Given both the negative and positive effects stated above, we consider that the effect of reality-oriented change communication on affective commitment to change might be contingent under different circumstances. In the present paper, since our major focus is to develop and examine the four-dimensional structure of leader communication style, we do not propose context-specific hypotheses for reality-oriented communication style here. In contrast,

we generally expect that a leader's reality-oriented communication style, while not specifying particular contexts, might not be significantly related to subordinates' affective commitment to change.

Change processes are political processes (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005) in that they raise the problem of interests between different groups, especially between management and employees. Given the challenging nature of the change process, employees are likely to be less willing to engage in change if they perceive it as being primarily beneficial to management. Following theories of justice (Cropanzano and Stein, 2009), a leader's communication should enable the perception that the respective change project is simultaneously in the favor of the company and the employees (Caldwell *et al.*, 2004; Seo *et al.*, 2012), which we defined as being central to the subordinate orientation described above. Since this orientation takes subordinates' needs into consideration and emphasizes potential benefits they could enjoy from the success of the change, subordinate-oriented communication, illustrated by being caring, sympathetic and well-balanced (Fuchs and Edwards, 2012), is able to elevate subordinates' commitment to change (Locke and Latham, 2002). Therefore, subordinate orientation in leadership communication should be positively associated with subordinates' affective commitment. Hence, we posit:

H3. A leader's subordinate-orientated communication style will be positively related to subordinates' affective commitment to change.

Inspired by their leader's support orientation, subordinates are more likely to believe that the leader is willing to use his/her full power and energy in coping with difficulties and unpredictable obstacles brought about by the change. Thus, subordinates will expect to perceive more leadership support during the change process and will be less afraid to engage in the change, since they have clear expectations concerning the leader's responses. When getting involved in the change within the organization, subordinates are likely to be confronted with more or less destabilizing forces of change (Armenakis and Harris, 2009), which will require them to figure out new solutions and will also engender different fears or worries. According to the conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 2002), subordinates' emotional resources might be reduced due to change-related challenges and, thus, they need to receive additional emotional resources. Thus, it becomes a point of greater significance that their leader's support-oriented communication style will provide a needed new source for emotional support and, consequently, will increase the subordinates' affective commitment. Therefore we posit:

H4. A leader's support-oriented communication style will be positively related to subordinates' affective commitment to change.

Method

Sample and procedures

We collected paired data from team leaders and team members simultaneously during the spring of 2012. Team leaders were identified in a part-time MBA program operated by a top-ranked business school in Northern China. Out of 101 MBA candidates, 34 team leaders (34 percent) from different companies voluntarily registered and agreed to distribute our questionnaires to their team members. These teams were in charge of various functions such as management, sales, marketing, accounting, production, and service in their respective organizations.

Each registered leader received one questionnaire for himself/herself and several questionnaires for his/her team members according to their self-reported team size. To ensure confidentiality, each questionnaire was sealed within a small envelope and required to be opened only by each participant himself/herself. In addition, we gave each leader a package to be used for collecting completed questionnaires from team members. Instructions for the survey were explained to each team leader by the authors both orally in the classroom and visually, by being written at the beginning of the survey as follows:

[...] Before you (team leader) distribute these team member surveys, please firstly specify a change announced by you to your team members (refers to those who are reporting to you directly). The change you specified should meet the following criteria: 1) this change should be announced in a face-to-face, personal way, rather than in virtual ways such as using email; 2) the change should impact all of your team members, rather than having impacts on particular one(s); and 3) the change should be an ongoing one [...].

The final sample for our analysis was restricted to teams where the leader and at least three members provided completed data, thus yielding a usable sample of 31 leaders (out of 34 at the beginning, or 91 percent) and 194 team members (out of 267 at the beginning, or 70 percent), with an average of 6.26 (ranging from 3 to 20) team members per leader/team. On average, 80 percent of team members within each team were sampled in our study. Of 31 team leaders, 22 were male, and all had obtained a bachelor's degree or higher. The average team leader age was 33, and the average working tenure as a leader was 5.24 years. The average team member age was 29, and 54 percent were male; 79 percent had at least received a bachelor's degree.

As for the themes of the change projects (as reported by the team leaders), 67.7 percent of the change projects dealt with a new allocation of responsibilities and/or new organizational structure. Other change themes included new HR policies (6.5 percent), new information technology (3.2 percent), and new marketing/sales strategies (3.2 percent). Additionally, 64.5 percent of reported change projects were part of a companywide program. The average size of sampled companies was around 2,400 employees, and they covered multiple industries including production (29 percent), IT (25.8 percent), finance (9.7 percent), service (6.5 percent), and others (as reported by the team leaders).

Measures

Leader communication style in the context of change. We developed a new measurement scale based on our conceptualized fear-addressing-based model for this study. First, we reviewed instances in the communication rhetoric literature, change management literature, and relevant leadership literature that referred to communication-in-change issues. Drawing from these literatures, we collected 41 attributes describing communicator styles, such as friendly, powerful, self-confident, objective, encouraging, and others.

Further, we provided this list of attributes to 57 part-time MBA candidates at a top business school in Northern China. This pilot sample includes 28 males, and 72 percent of respondents are between 26 and 30 years old. After presenting all 41 attributes, we asked these MBA candidates to choose attributes that could be effective and useful in communicating change, as well as to supply any additional, new attributes they thought necessary or important to add. Through this process, managers in this sample contributed five additional items to our list. Thus, we reached a final pool consisting of 46 items that can be used for further factor analysis.

Affective commitment to change. To measure team members' affective commitment to change, we used a six-item scale adapted from Herscovitch and Meyer (2002). Sample items include: "we believed this change is a meaningful one" and "we believed this change is a good strategy" (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.88$). Note that we changed the original item anchor from "I" to "we" based on the fundamental characteristics of Chinese social relations. It is widely held that Chinese people define themselves primarily in terms of their social and collective role, not in terms of their personal identity (Bond, 2010). Thus, they are generally more adapted to say "we" rather than "I," even if they want to express their own feelings (Brewer and Gardner, 1996). In addition, given the high-power distance between leaders and subordinates in Chinese organizations, it is risky for employees to evaluate their leaders. Therefore, the "we" wording may, to some extent, increase employees' psychological safety since it does not refer to any particular individual's thoughts and perceptions. In summary, we used the "we" wording to indicate a team member's commitment in our research context to better fit the cultural characteristics in Chinese organizations.

Team-level control variables. We controlled for the impact of the change and the time interval since the change was communicated. To measure the impact of the change, we used three items adapted from Caldwell *et al.* (2004). These respective items are: "Concerning my team, that change involved, first, big changes in team's processes and procedures, second, big changes in the way team members do their job in the team, and third, big changes in daily routines of team members." The Cronbach's α of this scale is 0.74 in our study. The impact of the change is to potentially decrease employees' affective commitment, since a high-impact change usually will cause more uncertainties and raise more fears (Choi, 2011). Similarly, time interval, or showing how long the change has been initiated, has the potential to predict commitment as employees' commitment level may decline as time goes by during the change implementation process (Choi, 2011).

Individual-level control variables. We controlled for team members' age, gender, education, and team tenure (as reported by team members). These variables were included in our analysis partly for demographical information, and partly in that they have been proven to associate with change commitment in an inconsistent way (Furst and Cable, 2008; Oreg, 2006; van Dam *et al.*, 2008).

All measures except for time interval and demographical variables used a five-point Likert-style scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Following Brislin's (1980) translation and back translation process, we translated all English scales to Chinese.

Analysis strategies

We adopted a cross-level research design and conducted all of our analyses on the final sample data (including 194 team members and 31 team leaders). First, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis to test the multidimensional structure of leadership change communication at the individual level. After the aggregating tests, individual-level data were aggregated to team level, indicating team leaders' different styles of communicating change. Second, following Bliese (2000), hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) was adopted to examine the team-level differential effects of leaders' change communication on team members' change commitment. We used SPSS 17.0 for EFA and HLM 6.08 for testing cross-level effects.

Results

Exploratory factor analysis

All of the 46 leader communication style attribute items were submitted to a principal component analysis with varimax rotation. The results are reported in Table I. According to our *H1*, we first tried a four-factor solution. However, a five-factor model emerged with eigenvalues larger than 1, which accounted for more variance and also made better sense. Therefore, we accept the five-factor structure, which accounted for 62.58 percent of the total variance. Each item loaded onto its appropriate factor, with

Items	1	2	Factor 3	4	5
<i>Hope orientation</i>					
Describing encouraging examples	0.834				
Stirring	0.757				
Telling stories in a fascinating/spellbinding way	0.747				
Colorful language	0.700				
Emotional	0.698				
Encouraging	0.655				
Expressing hope	0.647				
Catching	0.629				
<i>Reality orientation</i>					
Impartial		0.739			
Reality centered		0.710			
Unbiased		0.680			
Concrete		0.673			
Down to earth		0.667			
Complete information		0.649			
Structured		0.616			
Deliberate		0.583			
<i>Subordinate orientation</i>					
Understanding our point of view			0.784		
Respecting our interests			0.739		
Caring			0.673		
Flexible			0.666		
Sympathetic			0.638		
Considerate			0.585		
Smoothing			0.563		
Well-balanced			0.525		
<i>Support orientation</i>					
Powerful				0.768	
Decisive				0.761	
Definitive				0.754	
Self-confident				0.650	
<i>Enforcement orientation</i>					
Commanding					0.877
Dominant					0.838
Fierce wording					0.702
Cronbach's α	0.911	0.875	0.897	0.848	0.818
Note: $n = 194$					

Table I.
EFA solution
of leader
communication
style during
organizational
change

primary loadings exceeding 0.525 and cross-loadings lower than 0.30 (items with factor loadings lower than 0.5 are not reported below).

According to Table I, we named each factor based on the grouped meanings of items. Factor 1 was named as “hope orientation,” Factor 2 was named as “reality orientation,” Factor 3 was named as “subordinate orientation,” Factor 4 was named “support orientation,” and Factor 5 was named as “enforcement orientation.” As outlined in the theory section, the resulting multidimensionality of leader communication style is generally in accordance with our *HI*. The only exception is that we found a fifth factor which we called “enforcement orientation,” which refers to using commanding and powerful ways to communicate the change with subordinates. As shown in Table I, the enforcement orientation we found is characterized by being dominant, commanding and fiercely worded.

We conducted reliability tests for each factor and reported these in Table I. Cronbach’s α values are all higher than 0.818 (displayed at the bottom of Table I). Further, correlations between the five factors are reported in Table II. It can be concluded that these five factors are low to moderate related (from 0.282 to 0.655). We further conducted a series of confirmatory factor analyses to compare different structures of leader communication style. Model fit indices were compared for the uni-dimensional model, the five-dimensional model and other alternative models. Results indicated that the five-dimensional model has the best fit with our data (RMSEA = 0.061, CFI = 0.909, NNFI = 0.900) compared with the uni-dimensional model (RMSEA = 0.115, CFI = 0.661, NNFI = 0.637) and others[1]. Also of note, the fit index is not improved if we combine the support orientation and the enforcement orientation. Consequently, we are confident that the five-dimensional structure of leader change communication allows us to better capture this construct. Therefore, *HI* is at least partly supported.

Aggregation tests

It is noted that communicating change usually occurs between a leader and a group of subordinates, rather than being a dyadic interaction. Therefore, we employed a multi-level analysis to look at the effects of team-level leader communication style on individual-level commitment to change. To aggregate leader communication style (including all five dimensions) from team member ratings to team-level variables, we calculated inter-member reliability (ICC1 and ICC2) and tested whether the mean scores differed across groups based on the *F*-test of one-way analysis of variances (one-way ANOVA). ICC1 indicates the proportion of variance in ratings due to team membership,

Variable	Hope orientation	Reality orientation	Subordinate orientation	Support orientation	Enforcement orientation
Hope orientation	1				
Reality orientation	0.489**	1			
Subordinate orientation	0.655**	0.651**	1		
Support orientation	0.543**	0.507**	0.556**	1	
Enforcement orientation	0.393**	0.295**	0.282**	0.371**	1

Note: ** $p < 0.01$

Table II.
Correlations among
five dimensions (at
the individual level)

while ICC2 indicates the reliability of team mean differences (Bliese, 2000). The results of ICC1, ICC2, and the *F*-test of one-way ANOVA are displayed in Table III. According to Table III, for all five dimensions, average scores differed significantly from group to group, which provides good support for justifying aggregations.

Descriptive and correlation analysis

The individual-level and team-level descriptive statistics, internal consistency reliability, and correlations are provided in Tables IV and V. At the team level, there are modest correlations among the five dimensions of leader communication style.

HLM

We used HLM to examine the effects of different dimensions of leader communication style on team members' affective commitment to change. As shown in Table VI, time

Table III.
Results of aggregation tests

Variable	ICC1	ICC2	<i>F</i>	Sig.
Hope orientation	0.20	0.61	2.537	0.000
Reality orientation	0.20	0.62	2.603	0.000
Subordinate orientation	0.15	0.53	2.126	0.001
Support orientation	0.12	0.47	1.880	0.007
Enforcement orientation	0.28	0.71	3.407	0.000

Note: A significant *F*-test shows that there are significant differences among different groups/teams on the focal variable

Table IV.
Descriptive statistics and correlations at the individual level

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5
1. Age	29.79	5.44	–				
2. Gender	0.46	0.50	0.01	–			
3. Education	2.87	0.71	–0.14	–0.01	–		
4. Tenure	4.19	5.22	0.72***	0.08	–0.24**	–	
5. Affective commitment	3.71	0.60	–0.05	0.02	–0.01	–0.08	(0.88)

Notes: Number of team members = 194. Internal consistency reliability estimates (Cronbach's α 's) are on the diagonal. ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Table V.
Descriptive statistics and correlations at the team level

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Impact of change	3.41	0.81	(0.74)						
2. Time distance (month)	10.03	8.46	0.40*	–					
3. Hope orientation	3.50	0.45	0.19	0.28	(0.91)				
4. Reality orientation	3.80	0.33	–0.06	0.06	0.42*	(0.88)			
5. Subordinate orientation	3.71	0.39	0.27	0.15	0.54**	0.66***	(0.90)		
6. Support orientation	3.81	0.38	0.22	0.07	0.71***	0.43*	0.32****	(0.85)	
7. Enforcement orientation	3.07	0.64	0.16	0.29	0.32	0.33	0.10	0.36*	(0.82)

Notes: Number of teams = 31. Internal consistency reliability estimates (Cronbach's α 's) are on the diagonal. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$; **** $p < 0.10$

Table VI.
Hierarchical linear modeling results for individuals' affective commitment

Variable	Null model	Individual-level predictors	Adding team-level predictors
<i>Level 1</i>			
Intercept	3.64 (0.08)***	3.62 (0.08)***	3.61 (0.04)***
Age		0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)
Gender		0.14 (0.11)	0.14 (0.09)
Education		0.08 (0.08)	0.10 (0.06)
Tenure		-0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)
<i>Level 2</i>			
Time interval	(Controlled)		-0.02 (0.00)***
Impact	(Controlled)		0.08 (0.03)*
Hope orientation			0.37 (0.13)**
Reality orientation			-0.25 (0.22)
Subordinate orientation			0.49 (0.22)*
Support orientation			0.47 (0.15)**
Enforcement orientation			0.02 (0.05)
$\sim R^2$		0.13	0.28

Notes: $n = 194$ team members and 31 team leaders. Table entries represent unstandardized parameter estimates with standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

interval has a negative effect on commitment ($\gamma = -0.02, p < 0.001$) as we expected. The impact of the change positively relates with affective commitment ($\gamma = 0.08, p < 0.05$). These two variables were introduced to the regression model as control variables.

As shown in Table VI, after controlling for the impact of change and time interval, hope-oriented communication style is positively related to commitment ($\gamma = 0.37; p < 0.01$), thus confirming *H2*. Reality orientation is found to have a negative but insignificant effect on affective commitment ($\gamma = -0.25$; ns), which is consistent with our general expectation. Subordinate-oriented communication style has a positive and significant effect on affective commitment ($\gamma = 0.76; p < 0.01$), thus confirming *H3*. Support orientation is positively related to affective commitment ($\gamma = 0.47; p < 0.01$), thus confirming *H4*. The newly emerged factor, enforcement orientation, has no significant effects on affective commitment.

Discussion

Given the increasing need to implement change in organizations, leaders are confronted more and more with the task of communicating organizational change to subordinates. In the present study, we specifically examine the structure and effects of leader communication style in the context of organizational change. Prior to these analyses, we developed a conceptual model on the basis of the cognitive appraisal theory of emotions (Ellsworth and Scherer, 2003). This conceptual model provides us with an emotional approach to understanding why leader communication style could influence subordinates' affective commitment to change.

According to our conceptual model and empirical findings, leader communication style include five dimensions: hope orientation, reality orientation, subordinate orientation, support orientation, and enforcement orientation. Each orientation is theorized to address particular types of fear of change on the part of subordinates, and could further influence employees' affective commitment. An unexpected dimension, enforcement orientation, was not included in our theoretical hypotheses but emerged out of the factor analysis. However, this is not entirely surprising when we consider the cultural characteristics of Chinese society (Bond, 2010). Chinese culture is usually

labeled as having higher power distance (Hofstede, 2001) and Chinese subordinates are more accustomed to paternalistic leadership styles when it comes to interacting with their supervisors (Bond, 2010). Consequently, among Chinese subordinates, commanding, being dominant, and using fierce wording are attributed as prototypical communication behaviors. In the change context, it is believed that a leader showing enforcement behaviors might be helpful to lower subordinates' fear of inadequate support from the top management level.

In addition, we examined the effects of each communication style on subordinates' affective commitment using a cross-level research design. Our findings suggest that: first, subordinate orientation is shown to have significant positive effect on subordinates' affective commitment to change; second, hope orientation has a positive effect on subordinates' affective commitment to change; third, support orientation is found to have a significant positive effect on subordinates' affective commitment to change; and fourth, reality orientation and enforcement orientation, on the other hand, are found not to be significantly related to affective commitment to change.

Theoretical contributions

The present study makes several theoretical contributions to the leadership research. First, on the basis of the cognitive appraisal theory of emotions, we developed a conceptual model that could be used to account for why leader communication style impact employees' affective commitment to change. It is well acknowledged in previous literature that employees' positive attitudes and supportive behaviors toward change are key to the success of change initiatives (Choi, 2011). There are also a number of studies examining the role of leadership factors in promoting subordinates' willingness to change. However, few studies previous to this one have built a solid and clear theoretical basis. In contrast, our conceptual model is developed based on the cognitive appraisal theory of emotions and is particularly suitable to account for the effects of leader communication style on affective commitment to change from a perspective of emotion. Beyond the current study, our model does have the potential to be extended so as to explain the effects of leader communication style on employees' attitudes or behavior rather than affective commitment. For example, this model could also possibly shed more light on and deepen our understanding of the relationship between leader communication style and resistant or supportive behaviors to change.

Moreover, our research has identified a new structure of leader communication style. As we noted earlier in the literature review, existing structures for this construct (De Vries *et al.*, 2011) have been criticized because of theoretical weakness. Accordingly, we attempted to construct the dimensions of leader communication style in the highly specified context of organizational change. On the basis of our conceptual model and empirical findings, we developed five respective dimensions of leader communication style. The underlying idea is these different dimensions could potentially address particular types of employees' fear of change. It is noted that the current connections between communication style and fear of change were proposed in a one-by-one way. We adopted this strategy to offer an initial and clean conceptualization of leader communication style. However, in future studies, it will be worthy to further empirically consider the effects of particular communication style on multiple fears of change. In a word, even though this multidimensional structure obviously needs further examinations in addition to our initial field study, it does expand our understanding of leader communication style in a systematic way.

Lastly, the present study also contributes to the literature by developing a measurement scale for the leader communication style during organizational change. Through our empirical investigation, this 31-item scale is shown to have acceptable reliability and validity. In addition to further validity tests and refinements of the scale, we suggest employing this instrument in future studies that examine the role of leader communication style (could also be a particular dimension) during organizational change.

Practical implications

Our study also provides helpful implications to leadership practice. First, since subordinates' commitment to change is usually viewed as necessary for successful organizational change, the present study benefits leaders in terms of how to effectively communicate with their subordinates. To specify, our findings indicate that hope orientation, subordinate orientation and support orientation are positively related to subordinates' affective commitment to change. Therefore, we suggest that leaders, in the context of communicating change projects, should accordingly employ these multiple styles. For instance, leaders should emphasize the possibility of success in advancing change so as to increase employees' perceived hope. In addition, leaders should also provide continuous support during the change process and make sure that employees can see the ways in which they themselves (and not just the organization as a whole) will be benefited by engaging in the change.

Second, it is noted that a key element of a leader's change management is to carefully consider subordinates' fears of change. As the change is usually challenging and difficult, it is likely that subordinates might have different feelings of fear, such as fear of change failure, fear of incomplete information, fear of personal loss, and fear of inadequate support. As we summarized in this paper, fears of change represent subordinates' feelings that are negative and often destructive to successful change. For example, it has been shown that a large number of employees hesitate to engage in change projects because they feel that the project might not satisfy their personal benefits and needs. Accordingly, from a communicative perspective, supervisors should emphasize not only the direct benefits to subordinates when the change succeeds, but also the notion that the goal of change is generally in congruence with subordinates' personal goals. Visible benefits that will come along with the change have the extrinsic potential to motivate subordinates, whereas the notion of goal congruence is more likely to trigger their intrinsic motivation to participate in change.

Limitations and future directions

Given the explorative nature of the present study, it suffers from several limitations. First, an important weakness of our study is that we did not directly measure the emotional mechanism between leader communication style and subordinates' affective commitment. In this paper, our conceptual model has provided a solid basis for examining the mechanisms through which leader communication style promote subordinates' affective commitment. Specifically, we proposed that subordinates' fears associated with the change could hamper subordinates' affective commitment to change. Moreover, leaders' communication style, as external stimulus, can thus be effective in promoting subordinates' attitudes if they appropriately address subordinates' fears of change. Although this emotional mechanism makes adequate sense theoretically, future studies should examine it empirically through directly measuring subordinates' feelings, such as different fears of change.

Second, we used a cross-sectional survey design rather than a longitudinal one, which is insufficient to provide causal evidence for the relationship between leader communication style and subordinates' affective commitment. Future studies using longitudinal or experimental design could provide a stronger understanding of the causal relationships.

Third, as an initial study, the present paper is particularly interested in demonstrating a multidimensional structure of leader communication style and developing a scale. In terms of examining the effects of leader communication style, we therefore only used affective commitment to change as an outcome variable and did not consider the interactive relationship among different dimensions of leader communication style. As we suggested earlier in reference to reality orientation, specifying particular contextual conditions may be necessary for examining the effects of reality orientation and its interactive effects. Therefore, to understand the role of leader communication style more completely, future studies might consider a wider array of outcome variables and contextual variables.

Last, the Chinese sample used in the present study may limit the generalizability of the present findings. The dimensional structure we identified is partly supported in our Chinese sample, with an added dimension, enforcement dimension. Since we do not have more samples from other cultures, we are not aware of whether the five-dimensional structure could apply to other cultural contexts. In addition, this five-dimensional structure still needs to be examined in different samples concerning its reliability and validity (such as discriminative validity and criteria validity). In general, our research findings could be replicated in future studies using samples from other cultures.

Note

1. RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; CFI = comparative fit index; NFI = normed fit index; NNFI = non-normed fit index.

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