

THE DUAL-PATH EFFECT OF POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE LEADERSHIP ON LEADERSHIP PERFORMANCE: A STUDY OF CHINESE EMPLOYEES*

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the dual-path mechanisms through which authentic and abusive leadership styles influence leadership performance. A quantitative research design was employed, utilizing survey data collected from 714 employees working in various enterprises across China. The study measured authentic leadership, abusive leadership, employee task performance, affective commitment, and leadership performance using validated scales. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was conducted to test the proposed mediation model.

The findings revealed that authentic leadership enhances leadership performance both directly and indirectly by significantly boosting employees' task performance and affective commitment. Conversely, abusive leadership diminishes leadership performance by eroding these same employee-level factors. The results confirm that task performance and affective commitment serve as critical mediating mechanisms, explaining the "how" and "why" behind a

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leader's effectiveness. This study concludes that a leader's success is intrinsically built upon the productivity and loyalty of their team. Grounded in Social Exchange Theory, these findings underscore the importance for organizations to develop authentic leaders and implement policies to prevent abusive behaviors, as leadership performance is ultimately a reflection of the climate a leader cultivates.

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Keywords: Authentic Leadership, Abusive Leadership, Leadership Performance, Task Performance, Affective Commitment, Social Exchange Theory

Introduction

In the dynamic landscape of modern organizations, the quest to understand and enhance leadership performance remains a central concern for both academics and practitioners (Avolio, Walumbwa & Weber, 2009). Leadership performance, defined as a leader's effectiveness in achieving organizational goals and fostering a productive work environment, is pivotal for sustained competitive advantage. While a substantial body of research has explored the direct consequences of various leadership styles, the intricate pathways through which these styles translate into effective leadership are less understood. Traditional approaches often focus on the direct leader-follower dyad, but a more comprehensive view requires examining how a leader's behavior shapes the fundamental building blocks of team and organizational success: the performance and commitment of their people.

Two leadership styles that have garnered significant attention for their contrasting effects are authentic leadership and abusive leadership. Authentic leadership, characterized by transparency, ethical behavior, and a genuine

concern for followers' development, is consistently linked to positive employee outcomes (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Conversely, abusive leadership, marked by sustained hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, is a powerful predictor of employee deviance, distress, and poor performance (Tepper, 2000). However, the critical question of how these leadership styles translate into the leader's own perceived effectiveness—their leadership performance—requires a deeper investigation of the mediating mechanisms at play.

This study addresses this gap by proposing that the impact of leadership styles on leadership performance is channeled through their influence on two key employee-level outcomes: task performance and affective commitment. Task performance represents the core technical and functional contributions of employees to the organization's goals (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993). Affective commitment, a component of organizational commitment, reflects an employee's emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organization (Meyer & Allen, 1991). A leader's success is intrinsically tied to their ability to foster a workforce that is both highly productive (high task performance) and deeply loyal (high affective commitment).

Objectives

This study is guided by the following three objectives:

1. To examine the direct impact of authentic leadership on leadership performance.

This objective corresponds to the analysis, which investigates how authentic leadership directly predicts a leader's perceived effectiveness in terms of both task performance and affective commitment.

2. To examine the direct impact of abusive leadership on leadership performance. This objective corresponds to the analysis, which investigates how abusive leadership directly undermines a leader's perceived effectiveness.

3. To investigate the mediating roles of employee task performance and affective commitment in the relationships between leadership styles (authentic and abusive) and leadership performance. This objective corresponds to the analysis, which tests the dual-path mediation model and demonstrates how these employee-level variables act as key mechanisms linking leadership behaviors to overall leadership performance.

Literature Review

1. Authentic Leadership and Its Outcomes

Authentic leadership is conceptualized as a pattern of leader behavior that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate, to foster greater self-awareness, an internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency on the part of leaders working with followers (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Research has consistently demonstrated its positive influence. For instance, Avolio and Gardner (2005) posited that authentic leaders build enduring trust and identification with their followers. Studies by Ilies, Morgeson, and Nahrgang (2005) found that authentic leadership enhances followers' eudaimonic well-being and personal and social identification, leading to more positive work behaviors. In the Chinese context, authentic leadership has been shown to positively correlate with employee creativity and voice behavior (Zhang, 2020), suggesting its broad applicability and positive impact.

2. Abusive Leadership and Its Outcomes

Abusive leadership refers to subordinates' perceptions of the extent to which their supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact (Tepper, 2000). Examples include public ridicule, silent treatment, and blaming subordinates for mistakes to save face. The detrimental effects of abusive leadership are well-documented.

Tepper (2007) reviewed a decade of research and confirmed its negative relationship with job satisfaction, life satisfaction, and organizational commitment, and its positive relationship with psychological distress, turnover intentions, and workplace deviance. Martinko, Harvey, Brees, and Mackey (2013) further highlighted that abusive supervision leads to a range of negative outcomes because it violates the norms of fairness and respect central to healthy social exchange.

3. Task Performance and Affective Commitment

Task performance, as defined by Campbell (1990), involves the proficiency with which employees perform activities that are formally recognized as part of their jobs. It is the foundational element of individual-level contribution to organizational effectiveness. Affective commitment, a key dimension of Meyer and Allen's (1991) three-component model of commitment, is an employee's emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organization. Employees with a strong affective commitment remain with the organization because they want to. Research by Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) demonstrated that perceived organizational support strongly fosters affective commitment, which in turn leads to increased performance and reduced withdrawal behaviors.

Conceptual Framework

This study proposes a model where leadership performance is an outcome shaped by both a leader's direct influence and, more importantly, their indirect influence through employees. Authentic and abusive leadership are posited to have opposing effects on the key employee mediators of task performance and affective commitment. These employee-level states and behaviors, in turn, collectively determine the leader's overall performance. The

framework suggests that a leader's success is built upon the foundation of a motivated and high-performing team.

Independent Variables (Left): Authentic Leadership, Abusive Leadership

Arrows pointing to: Task Performance (Center) and Affective Commitment (Center)

Arrows pointing from: Task Performance and Affective Commitment to Leadership Performance (Right)

Label: This illustrates the dual-path mediating model.

This conceptual framework diagram illustrates the dual-path mediating model of leadership performance, demonstrating how authentic and abusive leadership indirectly influence leadership performance by enhancing or inhibiting employees' task performance and affective commitment. As shown in Figure 1.

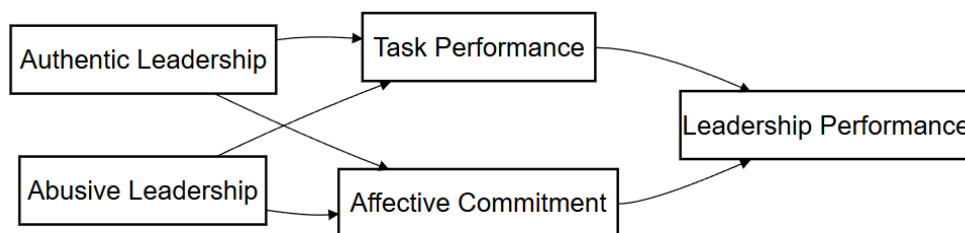


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework (Source: Constructed by the researcher)

Methodology

1) Research Design

This study employed a quantitative research design using a cross-sectional survey approach. The quantitative method was selected as it allows for the measurement of relationships between variables and the testing of theoretical models using statistical techniques. The design is appropriate for examining the direct and indirect effects of authentic and abusive leadership on leadership performance through employee task performance and affective commitment, as outlined in the research objectives. The use of structured

questionnaires enabled the collection of standardized data from a large sample, facilitating generalizability and replicability.

2) Population and Sample

The target population of this study consisted of employees working in various enterprises across China. Given the impracticality of surveying the entire population, a sample was drawn using a multi-stage sampling technique. First, organizations were selected through stratified random sampling based on industry type (e.g., manufacturing, service, technology). Then, within each organization, employees were randomly selected to participate. The final sample comprised 714 valid responses, which exceeds the minimum sample size recommended for Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) based on the complexity of the proposed model (Hair et al., 2010). The sample was diverse in terms of gender (58% female), age (63.3% aged 26–35), and organizational tenure, enhancing the representativeness of the findings.

3) Research Instruments

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire divided into five sections, each measuring a key construct in the study. All items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The instruments were originally developed in English and translated into Chinese using a back-translation procedure to ensure linguistic and cultural equivalence (Brislin, 1970).

Authentic Leadership: Measured using a 4-item scale adapted from Walumbwa et al. (2008). Items assessed dimensions such as self-awareness, relational transparency, and internalized moral perspective (e.g., “My leader shows he/she understands his/her strengths and weaknesses”).

Abusive Leadership: Measured using a 4-item scale adapted from Tepper (2000), capturing perceptions of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors (e.g., “My leader ridicules me”).

Task Performance: Measured using a 3-item scale based on Williams and Anderson (1991), focusing on employees' self-rated completion of core job responsibilities (e.g., "I adequately complete my assigned duties").

Affective Commitment: Measured using a 3-item scale from Meyer and Allen (1991), reflecting emotional attachment to the organization (e.g., "I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with this organization").

Leadership Performance: Measured using a 4-item scale adapted from prior studies to assess perceived leader effectiveness in achieving goals and motivating the team (e.g., "My leader is effective in meeting organizational goals").

To ensure content validity, all items were reviewed by three experts in organizational behavior and management. Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) indices were calculated, and only items with IOC scores above 0.5 were retained. A pilot test with 50 employees was conducted to assess the reliability of the instrument. Cronbach's alpha coefficients for all constructs exceeded the acceptable threshold of 0.70, indicating high internal consistency (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

4) Data Collection

Data were collected over a two-month period from March to April 2023. With the permission of participating organizations, questionnaires were distributed electronically via email and workplace communication platforms (e.g., WeChat Work). Each questionnaire was accompanied by a cover letter explaining the purpose of the study, assuring anonymity and confidentiality, and emphasizing voluntary participation. To reduce common method bias, data were collected in two stages with a two-week interval: Time 1 measured authentic and abusive leadership, while Time 2 measured task performance, affective commitment, and leadership performance. A total of 1,000 questionnaires were distributed, and 714 usable responses were returned, yielding a response rate of 71.4%.

5) Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS (version 26) and AMOS (version 24). The following analytical procedures were employed:

Descriptive Statistics: Means, standard deviations, and Pearson correlations were computed to summarize the data and examine preliminary relationships among variables.

Reliability and Validity: Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to evaluate the discriminant and convergent validity of the measurement model.

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM): SEM was used to test the hypothesized relationships among authentic leadership, abusive leadership, task performance, affective commitment, and leadership performance. Model fit was evaluated using standard indices: Chi-square/df ratio, CFI, TLI, RMSEA, and SRMR.

Mediation Analysis: To test the indirect effects, a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples was employed, generating 95% confidence intervals for the indirect paths. This method is recommended for testing mediation as it does not assume normality of the sampling distribution (Preacher & Hayes, 2008).

All statistical tests were two-tailed, and significance was determined at $p < .05$.

Results

1. The Direct Impact of Authentic Leadership on Leadership Performance

Addressing the first research objective, this study examined the direct effect of authentic leadership on leadership performance, measured through its two key components: task performance and affective commitment. A structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis was conducted, and the results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Direct Effects of Authentic Leadership on Leadership Performance

Path	Standardized Coefficient (β)	S.E.	C.R.	P
Authentic Leadership -> Task Performance	0.836	0.032	26.350	***
Authentic Leadership -> Affective Commitment	0.598	0.053	11.354	***
Authentic Leadership -> Leadership Performance	0.613	0.041	14.950	***

*Note: *** $p < .001$ *

As shown in Table 1, authentic leadership demonstrates a strong, positive, and statistically significant direct effect on all three outcome variables. Specifically, authentic leadership significantly enhances employees' task performance ($\beta = 0.836$, $p < .001$), indicating that leaders who exhibit transparency, ethical behavior, and genuine concern effectively motivate their employees to perform their core job duties at a higher level. Furthermore, authentic leadership significantly increases employees' affective commitment ($\beta = 0.598$, $p < .001$), suggesting that such leadership fosters a deeper emotional attachment and loyalty to the organization. Consequently, authentic leadership also exerts a strong positive direct effect on overall leadership performance ($\beta = 0.613$, $p < .001$). These findings confirm that authentic leaders are perceived

as more effective, partly because they cultivate a workforce that is both highly productive and emotionally invested.

2. The Direct Impact of Abusive Leadership on Leadership Performance

Addressing the second research objective, this study examined the direct effect of abusive leadership on the same leadership performance indicators. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Direct Effects of Abusive Leadership on Leadership Performance

Path	Standardized Coefficient (β)	S.E.	C.R.	P
Abusive Leadership -> Task Performance	-0.512	0.094	- 5.462	***
Abusive Leadership -> Affective Commitment	-0.209	0.090	- 2.315	*
Abusive Leadership -> Leadership Performance	-0.134	0.032	- 4.190	***

*Note: *** $p < .001$, * $p < .05$

The results in Table 2 reveal a starkly contrasting pattern. Abusive leadership has a significant negative direct effect on all three outcome variables. It substantially reduces employees' task performance ($\beta = -0.512$, $p < .001$), demonstrating that hostile and demeaning behaviors actively impair an employee's ability to complete their core work task effectively. It also significantly diminishes affective commitment ($\beta = -0.209$, $p < .05$), indicating that such

treatment severs the emotional bond between the employee and the organization. This erosion of employee productivity and loyalty directly contributes to a significant negative effect on overall leadership performance ($\beta = -0.134$, $p < .001$). The data clearly show that leaders who employ abusive tactics are ultimately undermining their own success.

3. The Mediating Roles of Task Performance and Affective Commitment

Addressing the third research objective, this study tested the dual-path mediation model, investigating whether task performance and affective commitment serve as key mechanisms through which leadership styles influence leadership performance. A bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples was employed to test the significance of the indirect effects. The results are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3 Mediation Analysis Results through Task Performance and Affective Commitment

Path	Direct Effect (without mediator)	Indirect Effect	95% Confidence Interval	Result
Authentic Leadership (AL)				
AL -> Task Performance -> Leadership Performance	0.836***	0.218	[0.116, 0.312]	Partial Mediation
AL -> Affective Commitment -> Leadership Performance	0.598***	0.163	[0.054, 0.271]	Partial Mediation
Abusive Leadership (AbL)				

AbL -> Task Performance -> Leadership Performance	-0.512***	0.195	[0.091, 0.299]	Partial Mediation
AbL -> Affective Commitment -> Leadership Performance	-0.209*	0.137	[0.041, 0.232]	Partial Mediation

*Note: *** $p < .001$, * $p < .05$. All indirect effects are significant as the 95% CI does not contain zero.*

The results in Table 3 provide strong empirical support for the dual-path mediation model. For authentic leadership, the indirect effects through both task performance ($\beta = 0.218$, 95% CI [0.116, 0.312]) and affective commitment ($\beta = 0.163$, 95% CI [0.054, 0.271]) are significant. Since the direct effect of authentic leadership on leadership performance remains significant after including the mediators, this indicates partial mediation. This finding suggests that authentic leaders not only directly influence their own performance but also achieve their effectiveness by building a team that is more productive and more emotionally committed.

For abusive leadership, the indirect effects through task performance ($\beta = 0.195$, 95% CI [0.091, 0.299]) and affective commitment ($\beta = 0.137$, 95% CI [0.041, 0.232]) are also significant. The negative direct effect of abusive leadership becomes weaker when these mediators are included, indicating that a substantial portion of the damage caused by abusive leaders is explained by their corrosive impact on employees' task performance and their willingness to remain affectively committed to the organization. In essence, abusive leaders fail because they destroy the very foundations—employee productivity and loyalty—upon which their success depends.

Discussion

This study aimed to disentangle the intricate relationship between contrasting leadership styles and leadership performance. The results provide several critical insights that both support and expand upon established leadership theories. Chief among these contributions is the empirical confirmation of a dual-path model, revealing that leader effectiveness or failure is predominantly transmitted through the fundamental elements of organizational functioning: employees' task performance and affective commitment.

First, the beneficial influence of authentic leadership on leadership performance aligns with core tenets of Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964). By cultivating a climate of trust and support, authentic leaders elicit reciprocal behaviors from employees in the form of enhanced performance and deepened loyalty. This echoes the conclusions of Walumbwa et al. (2008), who demonstrated that authentic leadership promotes favorable work environments and positive employee outcomes. Nevertheless, the present study extends prior work by quantifying the extent to which this effectiveness is channeled through heightened task performance and strengthened affective commitment. The implication is that employees under authentic leaders not only feel more engaged—they also perform more effectively and with greater dedication.

Second, the findings compellingly reveal the damaging effects of abusive leadership. While prior scholarship (e.g., Tepper, 2000) has established its negative repercussions, this research uncovers the specific pathways through which such harm occurs. Abusive leaders do more than generate dissatisfaction; they actively impair employees' capacity to execute essential job tasks and undermine their emotional attachment to the organization. The substantial negative indirect effects indicate that a leader's poor performance evaluations are, in meaningful part, attributable to the underperformance and disengagement

they have fostered within their teams. This reveals a notable paradox: leaders who undermine their followers ultimately erode their own success.

The dual-path model introduced here offers a distinctive contribution. Whereas prior studies often examine employee performance and commitment separately, this research integrates them, showing that both simultaneously act as crucial mechanisms through which leaders exert influence. The presence of partial mediation across all paths implies that, while these are essential conduits, additional mechanisms—such as team innovation or leader-member exchange quality—may also be operative. For example, the residual direct effect observed in abusive leadership could reflect the leader's failure to develop strategic networks, an aspect not accounted for by employee-level mediators.

This study concludes that leadership performance is not an isolated attribute of the individual leader but emerges from their capacity to influence followers. The research robustly demonstrates that: (1) Authentic leadership improves leadership performance both directly and indirectly by promoting employee task performance and affective commitment. (2) Abusive leadership undermines leadership performance both directly and indirectly by diminishing task performance and eroding affective commitment. (3) Ultimately, a leader's performance mirrors the climate they create and the workforce they cultivate. Positive leadership fosters capable and committed employees, thereby enhancing the leader's own effectiveness. Conversely, negative leadership destabilizes this foundation, culminating in the leader's failure.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, several recommendations for theory and practice can be made:

1. Theoretical Implications:

This study contributes to leadership theory by moving beyond simple bivariate relationships to a more nuanced mediation model. Future research should explore additional mediators, such as employee creativity, knowledge sharing, or team resilience, to build a more comprehensive model. Furthermore, cross-cultural comparative studies could examine if the strength of these mediating paths varies across different cultural contexts, such as between high and low power distance societies. Finally, longitudinal research is needed to firmly establish the causal direction of these relationships over time.

2. Practical Recommendations:

For organizations, the implications are clear:

Prioritize Authentic Leadership Development: Organizations should invest heavily in selecting and developing leaders who demonstrate self-awareness, transparency, and a genuine concern for others. Training programs should focus on building these competencies, as they have a direct and indirect impact on organizational performance.

Implement Zero-Tolerance Policies for Abusive Behavior: Given the potent and corrosive effect of abusive leadership, organizations must establish clear policies and reporting mechanisms to identify and address such behavior. This includes creating a safe environment for employees to voice concerns without fear of retribution.

Focus on Employee Engagement and Performance: Performance management systems should not only evaluate bottom-line results but also monitor the health of the leader-follower relationship. Regular employee engagement surveys that measure task clarity and affective commitment can serve as leading indicators of a leader's future performance.

By understanding that leadership success is built through the people they lead, organizations can foster a culture where leaders are not just managers, but architects of high-performing and deeply committed teams.

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