Does Motivating Language Matter? The Effect of Leader Communication and

Characteristics on Employee Motivation and Commitment

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Abstract

Does Motivating Language Matter? The Effect of Leader Communication and Characteristics on Employee Motivation and Commitment

Gabryella Sondergaard

Effective communication is the foundation of successful organizations. Motivating Language Theory proposes that leaders can strategically use direction-giving, empathetic, and meaning-making language types to positively influence employees. This research examined the effects of motivating language on employee work motivation and organizational commitment, and also examined whether leader behavioural integrity and credibility strengthens these relationships. A sample of 228 full-time employees completed an online questionnaire at 2 time points. Results showed that direction-giving, empathetic and meaning-making language have a positive effect on employee autonomous motivation and affective commitment. Direction-giving language had a positive effect on employee controlled motivation. In addition, empathetic language had a positive effect on employee normative commitment. The results also showed partial support for the strengthening effect of a leader's behavioral integrity and credibility on the relationship between motivation language types and employee motivation and commitment. The theoretical implications of this research include an examination of the unique contribution of different motivating language types, an extension of Motivating Language Theory's application on lesser understood employee outcomes, and establishes the moderating role of leader characteristics. For practitioners, motivating language offers an opportunity to train leaders on how to use language strategically to optimize employee outcomes.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

Does Motivating Language Matter? The Effect of Leader Communication and Characteristics on Employee Motivation and Commitment

INTRODUCTION

Internal communication, the information exchange interactions that occur between members of an organization (Berger, 2008), is a key component of successful workplaces. Leaders spend much of their time forming and presenting information to employees (Hackman & Johnson, 2013). As such, the content of messages and the way that they are transmitted to followers may have important implications for follower outcomes. Strong communication skills allow leaders to influence others (Hackman & Johnson, 2013). As such, using the right words at the right moment may motivate workers toward desirable personal and organizational objectives.

Strong communication allows organization members, individually and in teams, to work collaboratively towards achieving objectives (Berger, 2008). Communication allows organization members to understand their work and their organization's purpose, aids with motivation, and also develops work relationships (Berger, 2008). In contrast, poor communication is an indicator of missing leadership, which increases the risk of misinterpretations and a lack of the information accessibility necessary for employees to perform their work (Dandira, 2012). This is consistent with social information processing theory (Salancik & Pheffer, 1978), which emphasizes the importance of leader communication. According to this theory, information cues from social referents influence employee attitudes. Managers, as organizational representatives in the eyes of employees (Eisenberger et al., 2002), are likely considered credible social referents (Ashforth et al., 2012). As such, leaders and the

messaging that they convey would be highly influential on outcomes such as employee motivation and attitudes.

Employee perceptions of varied types of organizational communication influence their attitudinal and behavioural outcomes (Pincus, 1986). Using diverse communication types is thus important in a leader's ability to influence employees. From this perspective, the strategic use of language may be applied to direct employees towards desirable objectives and outcomes.

Motivating language (ML) theory (Sullivan, 1988) is a leadership-centered approach to understanding how unidirectional leader communication influences followers, and how communication can be motivating for followers (Sullivan, 1988). ML theory proposes that leaders should be viewed as more than figures who define and clarify work expectations, but as figures who develop relationships with employees and helps them to understand the vision and culture of the organization (Nguyen et al., 2021). This theory proposes that leader communication provides the information necessary for employees to become motivated at work (Sullivan, 1988) and that leaders can strategically use spoken communication to motivate employees towards positive outcomes (Mayfield et al., 1998). Empirical studies have shown ML to be positively related to beneficial employee outcomes such as increased employee performance and self-efficacy (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2012), effective employee decision-making (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2016), and intrinsic motivation (Sun et al., 2016). However, some key aspects of the theory have not received much scholarly attention. For instance, surprisingly, few studies have sought to examine the impact of ML on employee work motivation. Additionally, while ML theory relies on four underlying assumptions to ensure optimal outcomes (Sullivan, 1988), little research has been conducted on these assumptions. Moreover, previous research has often examined the combined effect of ML types (Hanke, 2021;

Holmes & Olsen, 2021; Ling & Guo; Mayfield & Mayfield, 2007), and not the distinct influence that each ML type (direction-giving, empathetic, and meaning-making) may contribute.

As such, this study aims to contribute to the literature on ML, employee motivation, and employee commitment, by examining the relationships between leader ML and employee motivation and organizational commitment, accounting for the role of contextual factors associated with some of the theory's underlying assumptions. Further, this study aims to identify the unique relationships that each type of ML may have on employee outcomes.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Motivating Language

Motivating Language Theory

ML is based on Speech-Act theory (Searle, 1969) which proposes that spoken language communicates information and the behavioural intentions of the speaker to the recipient. Speech acts are defined as "basic or minimal units of linguistic communication [...] where language takes the form of rules governed, intentional behaviour" (Searle, 1969, p. 16). As such, the contents of a leader's speech can influence the message recipients, often employees, by expressing important information and behavioural intentions of the source.

ML consists of three types of communication that must all be employed to achieve optimal outcomes; direction-giving, empathetic language, and meaning-making (Sullivan, 1988; Mayfield et al., 2015). Direction-giving aims to reduce ambiguity for workers in their roles and tasks by providing clarity on expectations, thus allowing employees to develop their knowledge (Sullivan, 1988), and by providing clarity on organizational goals and the rewards associated with workers' effort (Mayfield et al., 1995). Direction-giving supports the efficient and effective

performance of work (Nguyen et al., 2021). An example of direction-giving language could be a manager who gives their employee instructions on how to perform aspects of their work.

Second, empathetic language provides a compassionate connection with followers, creating an emotional or affective bond. It involves recognizing worker achievements and showing support or sensitivity toward an employee's work and personal challenges (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2002; Mayfield & Mayfield 2012). Leaders who are genuine in their interaction may see workers who perform better (Sullivan, 1988). An example of empathetic language would be a manager who praises their employee for performing effective and efficient work. Another example would be a manager who voices sympathy and understanding for employees who are experiencing challenges in their personal lives (Nguyen et al., 2021).

Third, meaning-making language links employees to the organization's culture and norms. Leaders communicate, through stories and other means, the values and unwritten rules that shape the organization. This communication can be especially important during times of high uncertainty or change (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2002). Specifically, it may be beneficial during the onboarding of new employees and during organizational transformation (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2009). Meaning-making motivates by allowing space for small talk at work to help workers understand and make sense of their environment (Sullivan, 1988). An example of meaning-making language would be a manager who provides guidance to their employees on how to make a good impression at an important meeting (Mayfield et al., 1998). Managers may also share inspirational stories of how key leaders in the organization started at the bottom and worked their way up, which reflects specific values of the firm (Nguyen et al., 2021). Taken together, direction-giving, empathetic, and meaning-making language make up the communications that leaders will express towards employees at work. ML theory proposes that

these three language types can be used strategically to produce desirable employee and organizational outcomes.

Motivating Language Theory Assumptions

ML theory relies on four underlying assumptions to ensure optimal outcomes from the strategic use of leader talk (Sullivan, 1988). First, this theory addresses most forms of communication that occur between leaders and their followers (Mayfield et al., 1998). The communication that leaders speak to their followers will most always be categorized as either giving directions to reduce uncertainties, empathetic to develop deeper connections with others, or used to support an employee's connection with their organization's culture and direction.

Second, it assumes that followers understand these communications as they were intended to be perceived. Workers must understand a leader's communication for their ML use to have any effect on them. Only when followers accept a leader's speech can it favourably influence the follower (Mayfield et al., 1998; Parker & Holmes, 2018). Moreover, it is important to note that ML theory considers unidirectional communication from leaders to followers. It does not account for reciprocal exchanges in conversations (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2007).

Third, spoken communication and the actions of the leader must be aligned. Any incongruencies will lead followers to disregard talk in favour of behaviour (Mayfield et al., 1998; Sullivan, 1988), which can undermine the value of ML aimed at creating positive outcomes for either individual or organization level outcomes (Mayfield et al., 1998). From this perspective, speech and action come together to form a leader's intentions, and these intentions must be positively viewed by employees. Negative perceptions of a leader's misaligned intentions and behaviours may unfavourably affect employees.

Finally, each type of ML must be used at the appropriate time for ML to be most effective. Leaders must use direction-giving, empathetic, and meaning-making language either separately or in some combination to match situational needs (Mayfield et al., 1998; Sullivan, 1988). This adaptiveness maximizes the impact of communication on employees. When leaders use all three forms of communication, each positively influences employee outcomes (Mayfield et al., 2015). These theory assumptions will be examined in more detail after discussion of the existing literature on ML and its influence on employee outcomes.

Motivating Language in the Literature

ML use has been linked with both desirable employee behaviours and attitudes. Most existing literature has examined ML effects at the individual level, with some studies looking at team dynamics. The ML use of leaders has been linked with increased employee performance (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2012; Mayfield et al, 1998). Leader ML is also linked with greater employee individual performance through workers' greater sense of self-efficacy (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2012). In contrast, Sun and colleagues (2016) found that ML positively influences performance through intrinsic motivation, but not directly. ML has also been found to support effective employee decision-making (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2016). Finally, it has also been shown to increase the individual proactiveness of employees working in teams, in part due to greater sense of trust in their leader (Lin & Guo, 2020). The role of leader communication appears to be important for influencing effective and efficient performance at work.

Leader ML has been found to reduce absenteeism by positively influencing worker attitudes towards attendance, increasing positive attitudes and actual attendance behaviour (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2009). ML may also be a strategy for increasing employee retention. Effective ML increases employee intentions to stay with the organization, where a 10% increase

in ML use leads to a 5% increase in employee intentions to remain at the organization (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2007).

ML may also explain the relationship between verbal aspects of servant leadership and outcomes such as commitment, organizational citizenship behaviour, and performance (Gutierrez-Wirsching et al., 2015).

Leader ML use has also been associated with greater employee job satisfaction (Madlock & Sexton, 2015; Mayfield et al., 1998; Sharbrough & Simmons, 2006; Simmons & Sharbrough, 2013). In addition, leader ML use increases the organizational commitment of their employees (Madlock & Sexton, 2015; Sabir & Bhutta, 2018). However, this research examined organizational commitment as a unidimensional measure, and does not account for the differing types of organizational commitment as defined by Meyer and Allen (1991), being affective commitment, normative commitment, and continuance commitment, that may offer different benefits to the organization.

ML is theorized to be an effective linguistic strategy for increasing employee motivation (Sullivan, 1988). One study found intrinsic motivation to mediate the relationship between leader ML use and employee performance and organizational citizenship behaviour (Sun et al., 2016). However, while ML is theorized to influence follower motivation, little research has examined the motivating outcomes of leader ML use.

Lastly, ML may positively influence employee perceptions of their leader. ML is linked with increased perceptions of leader competence, effectiveness (Sharbrough & Simmons, 2006; Simmons & Sharbrough, 2013) and satisfaction with leader communication (Simmons & Sharbrough, 2013). One experimental study found that leaders who use high levels of direction-giving and empathetic language in virtual teams are seen as more effective leaders and increase

the individual creative performance of their followers in a group setting (Wang et al., 2009). However, these results were found with a sample of undergraduate students, which may limit these findings' generalizability.

All components of leader ML appear to be practiced, and have a positive impact on desirable employee outcomes in various countries (Nguyen et al., 2021). Direction-giving is the most common form of leader speech in countries with greater power distance (Madlock & Sexton, 2015) or collectivism and masculinity (Madlock & Hildebrand Clubbs, 2019). In a North American context, empathetic language is most commonly used, and is most significantly associated with positive employee outcomes, followed by direction-giving (Mayfield et al., 1998; Mayfield & Mayfield, 2006). As such, various forms of language may have varying effects on employee outcomes depending on the cultural context. Nonetheless, all components of ML are observed in leader talk cross-culturally (Madlock & Sexton, 2015; Madlock & Hildebrand Clubbs, 2019; Mayfield et al., 1998), suggesting that ML is positively associated with employee outcomes in various cultural contexts.

ML states that all aspects of the theory, including direction-giving, empathetic, and meaning-making language, are three types of communication used by leaders (Sullivan, 1988). Further, practicing all three types will yield the greatest impact (Mayfield et al., 1995). However, research has demonstrated that each language type can differentially affect employee outcomes. Some research has examined ML as a holistic concept (Hanke, 2021; Holmes & Olsen, 2021; Ling & Guo; Mayfield & Mayfield, 2007). However, these studies focused on ML as a global communication approach, and sought to answer more general questions of whether or not ML does or does not influence certain employee outcomes. For example, examining ML as a mediating variable that enhances the effect of a leader's credibility on employee's satisfaction

with their supervisor's communication at work (Holmes & Olsen, 2021). In contrast, other research has frequently examined ML as a multifaceted variable, with 3 unique dimensions (Madlock & Hildebrand Clubbs, 2019; Madlock & Sexton, 2015; Men et al., 2021). Research examining ML through its different dimensions has found direction-giving, but not empathetic or meaning-making language to be predictive of job satisfaction and organizational commitment in employees (Madlock & Sexton, 2015). Other research found that the ML use of leaders was also predictive of employee job satisfaction. However, direction-giving explained greater variance (25.6%), than did empathetic (2.9%) or meaning-making (2.5%) (Madlock & Hildebrand Clubbs, 2019). Similarly, transformational and servant leadership have been shown to be positively associated with each form of ML. Each form of ML explained the link between both leadership styles and employee engagement. However, meaning-making was not found to explain the relationship between transformational leadership and employee engagement (Rabiul & Yean, 2021). Ultimately, examining each type of communication individually, will allow for a better understanding of the unique effects that different communication types have on employee outcomes.

Leader Motivating Language and Employee Motivation

While ML theory proposes that the strategic use of several types of leader communication leads to more motivated followers, this relationship has seldom been examined empirically. Motivation is the degree of a person's want or desire to engage in particular behaviours (Mitchell, 1982). It is also the effort put into something, the direction of the behaviour, and the persistence of the agent who engages in the behaviour (Pinder, 1998).

The Self-Determination Theory of motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000) proposes that humans are inherently drawn towards growth and achievement. Humans have psychological needs for

autonomy, competence and relatedness that when hindered or supported, influence motivation. The need for autonomy defines the need to feel that one is in control of their choices. The need for competence addresses the desire for mastery or to have the skills necessary for influencing outcomes. The need for relatedness is about having fulfilling social connections (Stone et al., 2009). The degree to which these needs are satisfied determines the individual's motivation, whether more controlled or autonomous (Gagné & Deci, 2005).

Humans can be motivated through a range of motivating sources at work. External motivation encompasses external regulation, introjected regulation, and identified regulation. Autonomous motivation encompasses integrated regulation and intrinsic motivation. These types of motivation follow a continuum from the highest level of controlled motivation through to the highest level of autonomous motivation.

Motivation can often come from external sources. External regulation, which can be socially or materially based, motivates individuals through rewards that are viewed as a means to an end. External regulation offers the lowest needs satisfaction before amotivation, the absence of any motivation. Introjected regulation motivates through an internal drive to obtain extrinsic rewards. Introjected regulation satisfies basic needs to a lesser extent than autonomous motivation types. Both result in controlled motivation (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Gagné et al., 2015).

Motivations can be internally driven as well. Identified regulation motivates through the valuation of specific actions or objects, where rewards have significant value to the individual. Intrinsic motivation motivates through the genuine enjoyment of engaging in the activity. Identified regulation and intrinsic motivation satisfy basic psychological needs, and is the means through which workers become autonomously motivated (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Gagné et al., 2015).

Need satisfaction is associated with better work performance (Baard et al., 2004). Research has found that autonomous motivation is associated with favourable employee outcomes such as performance (Cerasoli et al., 2014; Van der Kolk et al., 2019), job satisfaction, and affective organizational commitment (Graves & Luciano, 2013). Both intrinsic and controlled incentives can increase performance, though intrinsic incentives can have longer lasting effects (Grolnick & Ryan, 1987). Nonetheless, extrinsic or controlled motivation – which includes externally regulated and introjected behavior – can also lead to positive employee outcomes such as performance (Grolnick & Ryan, 1987) and performance as measured through quantity of output (Cerasoli et al., 2014). However, controlled motivation is also associated with undesirable outcomes, being negatively associated with job satisfaction and positively associated with turnover intentions (Gillet et al., 2013).

Leaders are representatives of the organization from an employee perspective (Eisenberger et al., 2002). The informational cues that leaders transmit to employees is a reflection of their leadership style and shapes the employees view of their work (Sun et al., 2016). A leader's style at work thus shapes employees' appraisal of their leader and of their organization, which in return shapes their work morale and the effort they are willing to exert in their work (Sun et al., 2016). Leaders, being highly influential (Hackman & Johnson, 2013), and spending the majority of their time communicating with others at work (Yukl, 2002), will be effective in motivating followers when they use ML to speak to their followers, using direction-giving, empathetic, and meaning-making language (Sullivan, 1988). One study suggested that intrinsic motivation mediated the relationship between leader ML and employee performance (Sun et al., 2016). However, while motivation is a fundamental theorized effect of leader communication (Sullivan, 1988; Mayfield et al., 1998), research has seldom examined whether

leaders ML directed toward employees influences employee motivation, and further, what types of motivation.

Leader Communication and Employee Motivation

The key skill that managers need to motivate their employees is communication (Zorn & Ruccio, 1998). Effective leaders provide ongoing feedback, communicate frequently, and with sufficient detail to give their followers a clear picture of their responsibilities. They also demonstrate an ability to connect with their followers, and show genuine care and interest (Kayworth & Leidner, 2002). As such, the connection that leaders build with their employees through communication may play a fundamental role in the work motivation of their employees.

Motivating Language and Autonomous Motivation

Communication is the foundation of leadership. Leaders who help their employees to understand their responsibilities, experience meaningful connections at work, and experience more autonomy over their career development, abilities and relational needs, may support the intrinsic motivation of their employees. Research on transformational leadership style has shown that motivated leaders who communicate inspiring vision, encourage and support worker needs, and lead by positive example increase employee autonomous motivation (Bass, 1985; Kanat-Maymon et al., 2020). In other words, leaders who communicate effectively and match what they do with what they say can be effective in motivating their employees. Similarly, teachers who communicate not in an authoritative way, but in a way that satisfies the psychological needs of their students, have students who are more intrinsically motivated to learn and willing to sustain their effort and drive toward their learning goals (Noels et al., 1999). Communication is thus a broadly applicable and important leadership skill that can directly benefit the motivation of the message recipients.

Leader autonomy-supportive behaviours increase employee autonomous motivation by providing non-judgmental feedback without being overly directive, being attentive and empathetic in interactions, and by helping employees acquire the information needed to learn to solve work challenges (Baard at al., 2004). Rewards that are verbally transmitted, such as reinforcement and positive feedback, are shown to increase employee intrinsic motivation (Robbins & Judge, 2006; Deci, 1971). As such, leaders who use ML to transmit information and relational connections with employees would likely benefit employee integrated and intrinsic motivation. This has also been supported empirically, where leader ML has been shown to be positively associated with intrinsic motivation (Sun et al., 2016). Similarly, ML has been linked to meaningfulness, the value that an individual derives from their work, which supports their intrinsic motivation (Binyamin & Brender-Ilan, 2018). Therefore, intrinsically driven motivation is a documented outcome of leader ML.

The workplace environment can be a source of need satisfaction. When leaders create autonomy supportive workplaces, they directly contribute to the need satisfaction of their followers (Deci et al., 2001). Leaders who are receptive to their followers, provide important information, and give their followers choice and encouragement to initiate their own actions (Deci & Ryan, 1985), will satisfy their followers' needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness.

Leaders who use ML would likely support the needs satisfaction required for employees to be autonomously motivated. Direction-giving provides employees with feedback (Mayfield et al., 1998) necessary to develop a sense of autonomy over their work and decisions. It would also allow employees to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary, through leader feedback, to satisfy their need for competence. Direction-giving may fulfill the need for competence by

providing the information needed for employees to perform their responsibilities at work. Empathetic language provides employees a positive relational foundation with their manager who may help to create an autonomy-supportive environment. This would allow employees to satisfy the need for relatedness. Meaning-making provides employees with inspirational stories of their organization, which helps them understand their place within it, satisfying the need for autonomy and competence in one's work environment. In addition, the organizational norms and values that are transmitted through meaning-making may help to bring employees together through the sharing of these common experiences and goals, fulfilling their need for relatedness. Thus, each type of ML would satisfy employee needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness, which would lead to autonomous motivation.

Consistent with this view, research by Men et al. (2021) found that leader direction-giving, empathetic and meaning-making language at work were positively associated with the fulfillment of employee's psychological needs for competence and relatedness. Direction-giving fulfilled the need for competence by increasing employee self-efficacy through informational communication (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2018), as well as the need for relatedness by having frequent and clear communication with leaders (Men et al., 2021). Empathetic language fulfilled the need for competence by providing encouragement that increased employee self-efficacy (Men et al., 2021; Mayfield & Mayfield, 2018). Empathetic language also fulfilled the need for relatedness by increasing bonding and positive relationships between leaders and employees (Men et al., 2021). Meaning-making language fulfilled the need for relatedness by connecting individual goals to greater organizational goals (Men et al., 2021). As psychological need fulfillment leads to greater employee autonomous motivation (Gagné & Deci, 2005), it is expected that ML will result in greater levels of autonomous motivation in employees.

Hypothesis 1: Direction-giving language (a), empathetic language, (b) and meaning-making language (c) are positively associated with employee autonomous motivation.

Motivating Language and Controlled Motivation

ML proposes that leaders who strategically employ direction-giving, empathetic, and meaning-making language will have the most motivating and desirable effect on positive employee outcomes (Sullivan, 1988; Mayfield et al., 1998). However, the motivating effects of ML may not be limited to autonomous motivation. Different motivations can be experienced by employees simultaneously (Howard et al., 2016). ML includes a wide range of language approaches, which are expected to tap into both intrinsic and extrinsic incentivization.

Direction-giving language is based on instructional communication (Sullivan, 1988), which is fundamentally directive. As such, leaders who rely on direction-giving communication may enact a more directive communication approach, more focused on work objectives. Management who focuses heavily on results will use information such as individual performance reports to address employees on their performance, and make rewards possibly contingent on their performance (Groot & Merchant, 2009). When results are used to direct employees, this external control does provide information to employees (Osterloh & Frey, 2000; Van der Kolk et al., 2019). However, it may lead to controlled motivation (Van der Kolk et al., 2019), where employees become motivated to be accepted by their superior, or to meet the expectations set out by their superior (Gagne et al., 2015). In sum, as direction-giving language involves providing instructions, performance feedback, and linking performance to rewards (Mayfield et al., 1998), it is expected that direction-giving ML will be associated with controlled motivation.

Hypothesis 2: Direction-giving is positively associated with employee controlled motivation.

Leader Motivation Language and Employee Commitment

It has been suggested that when employees are satisfied with information accessibility and quantity, they are more committed to their organization because they better identify with the organization's values and goals, and feel that they belong in their organization (Putti et al., 1990). In line with this, it is expected that leaders, being important information sources (Hackman & Johnson, 2013), would be influential on employee organizational commitment. Indeed, leaders who offer intellectual stimulation and interaction with followers positively influence affective and normative commitment, with the greatest effect on affective commitment (Kent & Chelladurai, 2001).

High quality leader communication (Jian & Dalisay, 2015) and, more specifically, ML, has been linked with greater organizational commitment (Madlock & Sexton, 2015; Sabir & Bhutta, 2018). However, research has yet to demonstrate whether ML benefits different types of organizational commitment. Based on work from Meyer and Allen (1991) organizational commitment can be broken down into affective commitment, normative commitment, and continuance commitment. Workers high in affective commitment have an emotional attachment to their workplace and stay because they want to (Meyer & Allen, 1991). This is associated with desirable performance outcomes, making it an appealing form of commitment from a managerial perspective (Kim et al., 2012). Affective commitment is often the most beneficial form of organizational commitment for an organization (Klein et al., 2009). Second, when employees are normatively committed, they stay with the organization because they experience a sense of

obligation or feel it is their duty to do so (Meyer & Allen, 1991). Lastly, employees who experience continuance commitment stay with their organization because they feel they would have too much to lose in leaving, or have no alternatives (Meyer & Allen, 1991). As described below, it is expected that ML types will be related to the two dimensions of organizational commitment, affective and normative commitment.

Motivating Language and Affective Commitment

The communication of direct supervisors is significantly influential on employee organizational commitment (Allen, 1992). When communication clarifies the organization's intentions, performance, supports peer cohesiveness, and provides information regarding work tasks, it will benefit employee organizational commitment (DeCotiis & Summers, 1987; Steers, 1977). Moreover, feedback on task performance and goal setting information increases organizational commitment (Tziner & Latham, 1989), as does the relational and social connection offered by managers through communication with subordinates (Eblen, 1987).

Literature tying ML to organizational commitment has generally focused on affective commitment, and has used the Organizational Commitment Questionnaire (Mowday et al., 1979; Madlock & Sexton, 2015), which is described as an affective commitment measure (Meyer & Allen, 1991).

Direction-giving language has been positively associated with affective commitment (Madlock & Sexton, 2015). Managers who provide timely, direct, and transparent communication increase commitment (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2002; Robbins, 2001). Direction-giving similarly provides clear instructional information aimed at informing employees (Mayfield et al., 1998). Clear information on organizational processes, values and goals likely

makes it easier for employees to connect with these processes, values and goals. As such, it can be expected that direction-giving will be positively associated with affective commitment.

Empathetic language is used to express care, encouragement, and trust to employees (Mayfield et al., 1998). Empathetic leaders make their employees feel understood, and as a result, interested in being part of their group (Holt et al., 2017). Based on this evidence, leaders who use empathetic language to connect with their employees could increase the commitment of their employees based on their desire to be a part of their organization.

Meaning-making is especially important for encouraging employee loyalty at times of change or transformation within an organization. It allows employees to maintain or rebuild their connection and identity within their organization (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2002). Similarly, this sense of belongingness and attachment can allow employees to experience affective commitment to their organization (Meyer & Allen, 1991). Storytelling is an integral part of meaning-making language. It spreads cultural norms and values across an organization, "...as stories facilitate sense-making and foster organizational unity" (McCarthy, 2008, p. 167), and has been positively associated with commitment (McCarthy, 2008). This leads to the belief that meaning-making will be similarly predictive of affective organizational commitment.

In line with this, ML has been found to generally predict affective commitment. The ML of school principals has been shown to increase the commitment of teachers to their organization, both directly and through organizational climate (Sabir & Bhutta, 2018), suggesting that both as individual dimensions and grouped as a globalized measure, ML is predictive of affective commitment to the organization. The above evidence leads to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: Direction-giving (a), empathetic (b), and meaning-making (c) language are positively associated with employee affective commitment.

Empathetic Language and Normative Commitment

Via different mechanisms, ML may also foster employee normative commitment. Strong emotional bonds between supervisors and their employees have been associated with greater levels of normative commitment (Wang, 2008). As normative commitment is based heavily on relational factors, and as empathetic language involves developing a genuine caring relationship with their employees (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2002, 2012), it is proposed that the empathetic language dimension of ML will also be associated with employee normative commitment.

Hypothesis 4: Empathetic language is positively associated with employee normative commitment.

Leader Characteristics

As previously stated, ML theory relies on four underlying assumptions. First, this theory addresses most forms of communication between leaders and their followers. Second, it assumes that followers understand their leader's spoken communications. Third, there must be alignment between what leaders say and what they do. Finally, each type of ML must be used at the appropriate time for ML to be most effective (Mayfield et al., 1995; Sullivan, 1988). These assumptions may be viewed as necessary conditions for the effective use of ML. However, few studies have sought to examine these assumptions. Previous research has examined talk and behaviour alignment as an antecedent to the ML use of leaders (Holmes, 2016; Holmes & Parker, 2017). Leader speech and behaviour congruence are proposed by Holmes (2016) to be

based in leader behavioural integrity and source credibility. The characteristics of supervisors and managers at work is proposed to be a significant determinant of their ability to influence others via communication. This study proposes to further examine ML theory's third assumption by accounting for the perceived characteristics of leader behavioural integrity and leader credibility as boundary conditions, moderating the effect of ML on employee outcomes.

Leader Behavioural Integrity

Walk and talk alignment "is the key that opens the door" to positive outcomes from the use of ML (Holmes & Parker, 2018, p. 78). Employees learn behavioural norms and expectations through the actions of their supervisor (O'Leary-Kelly et al., 1996). As such, the behavioural integrity of a leader is important for presenting desirable behaviours towards employees. Behavioural integrity is defined as a "fit between words and actions, as seen by others" (Simons, 2008, p. 5). This means that leaders should ensure that what they say and what they do are aligned, and that they follow through on promises or expressed values (Simons, 2008; Holmes & Parker, 2018). When leaders follow their communication with congruent action, their followers will believe in the leader's abilities, and have a favorable perspective of the leader.

Previous research has found leader behavioural integrity to be predictive of increased organizational commitment (Nangoli et al., 2020), suggesting that this characteristic is an important factor that shapes the attitudes of employees at work. In line with this, Holmes and Parker (2017) found that leader behavioural integrity was a significant predictor of ML over a period of three years. While this does provide evidence for an association between these two variables, the assumption of ML theory states that behavioural integrity must be present in a leader for their use of ML to be effective, rather than it being an antecedent for ML to occur

(Mayfield et al., 1995; Sullivan, 1988). As such, it is proposed that leader behavioural integrity enhances the positive impact of a leader's communication on employees.

Hypothesis 5: Leader behavioural integrity strengthens the relationship between all leader ML types and a) employee motivation and b) employee organizational commitment.

Leader Credibility

In addition to honouring their spoken intentions, leaders must also ensure that they are, and present themselves to others as a qualified leader. Source credibility is argued to be important for a leader's influence and standing from the perspective of employees. Communicators who have high source credibility have greater ability to influence those listening (McCroskey, 1971). A leader's source credibility is composed of 3 dimensions: their trustworthiness, competence and goodwill (McCroskey & Teven, 1999). Supervisors must be trusted by employees, and be perceived as well intended and having the knowledge and leadership abilities necessary for employees to believe or become invested in the messaging that the leader communicates. Source credibility has been demonstrated to be a significant predictor of ML over a longitudinal study by Holmes and Parker (2017). However, ML theory proposes that these characteristics must be present in a leader for ML to be effective (Mayfield et al., 1995; Sullivan, 1988). In line with ML theory, it is proposed that the credibility of a leader enhances the impact of ML on employee outcomes.

Hypothesis 6: Leader credibility strengthens the relationship between all leader ML types and a) employee motivation and b) organizational commitment.

RESEARCH MODEL

In summary, this study proposes that each dimension of ML used by leaders – direction-giving, empathetic, and meaning-making language – will be positively associated with the autonomous motivation of employees. Moreover, the direction-giving language of leaders will be positively associated with the controlled motivation of employees. It is also proposed that direction-giving, empathetic, and meaning-making dimensions of leader ML will be positively associated with the affective organizational commitment of employees, and that empathetic language will be positively associated with the normative organizational commitment of employees. In addition, it is proposed that the above relationships will be strengthened by both the behavioural integrity and credibility of leaders, consisting of their perceived competence, goodwill, and trustworthiness. The research model is depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Theoretical research model.
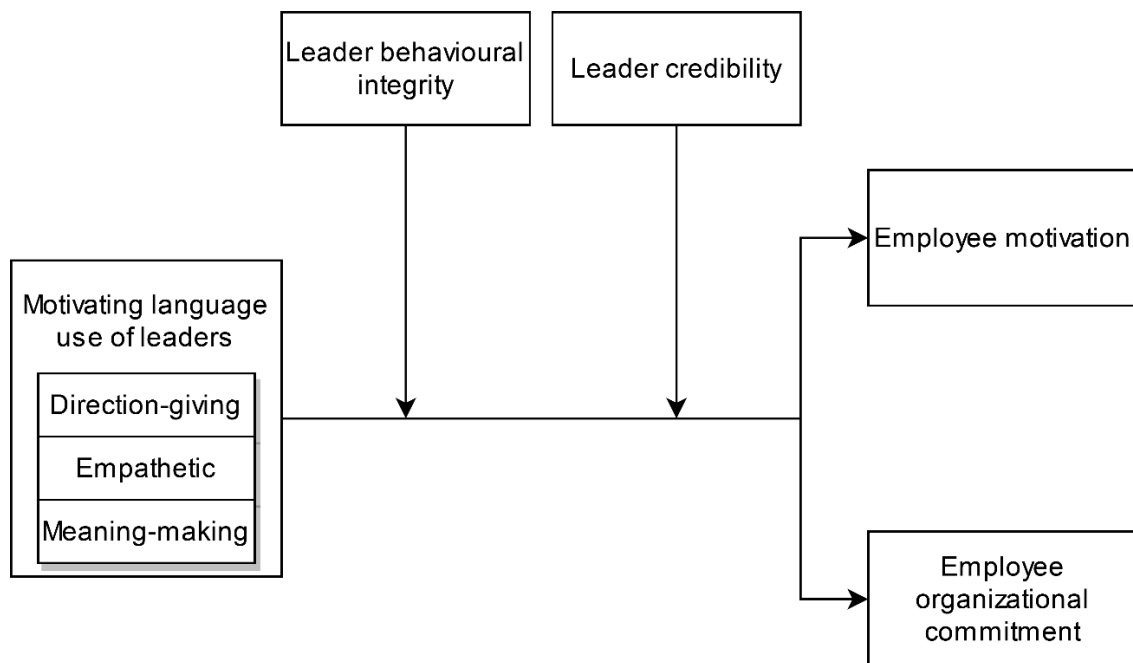
METHOD

Sample and Procedure

      This research model was empirically tested on a sample of working adults. ML is widely applicable across industries and roles (Sullivan, 1988). Examining a diverse sample increases the generalizability of ML theory (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2009). As such, employees were recruited from various organizations and industries across the globe. Participants were recruited via a data panel service. Eligibility criteria included being employed in a role that has direct supervision, working full-time, and being fluent in English, to ensure that all participants fully understood the questions and response options in the questionnaires. Part-time employees were excluded. While ML has been shown to have a positive effect on both full-time and part-time employees in certain dimensions such as job satisfaction, these effects do not extend to other outcomes such as performance (Mayfield, 2006).

      Participants were asked to complete an online questionnaire at two time points (Appendix A), spaced approximately 4 weeks apart. Both surveys were identical, and each questionnaire took approximately 15 minutes to complete. This time-lagged design was chosen to reduce common variance bias, a methodological issue with same-source, cross-sectional designs. Both surveys were published on an online platform, accessible via the data panel service's website. All participants were compensated according to the data panel service policy. The questionnaires both included measures of leader ML use, perceived leader credibility and leader behavioural integrity, organizational commitment, and controlled and autonomous motivation, as well as demographic questions. All anchors, excluding demographic questions, were based on a 5-point Likert-type scale.

Attention checks (items that were unrelated to the research, such as "I regularly eat cement") were included to monitor data quality for respondents who may have responded inattentively. Participants who failed both the attention checks were rejected and their data was excluded from any analyses.

A total of 261 participants completed the questionnaire at Time 1. From these submissions, 250 participants provided usable data. Participant submissions were rejected if they failed both screening questions. All participants reported working full time, reporting to a direct supervisor at work, and being fluent in English. Participants who submitted usable data were approved, and added to a list of participants to be invited to participate again at Time 2. A total of 232 participants responded at Time 2, of which 228 provided usable data. The final sample was thus composed of 228 participants.

Participants ranged from 19 - 61 years of age ($M = 32$, $SD = 8.41$), with 44.9% of the sample identifying as male (n = 102), 53.7% identifying as female (n = 124), and 0.4% identifying as non-binary or third-gender (n = 1). The majority of participants held a Bachelor's degree (n = 131, 57.5%) or a Masters or Doctorate degree (n = 65, 28.1%). Participants worked in industries such as Information Technologies (18.0%), Health or Social Services (11.4%), Education or Academia (10.0%), Accounting or Finance (10.5%), Engineering (9.6%), and Manufacturing (3.4%). Other reported industries included Commerce, Marketing and Sales, Arts and Fashion, Law and Pharmaceuticals. The majority of participants were located in South Africa (29.1%), Portugal (17.9%), Mexico (14.8%), Poland (9.9%), Spain (4.5%) and Greece (4.5%). The remaining participants reported coming from other countries such as the Czech Republic, Chile, Canada, Hungary, Israel, and Somalia (19.3%). Participants reported working for their current organization between less than 6 months, to more than 30 years, with the

average being slightly more than 4 years of tenure at their current organization (M = 6.38, SD =

5.58). Participants reported working under their direct supervisor from anywhere between less

than 6 months and up to 20 years. The average tenure with a supervisor was 2 years (M = 4.08,

SD = 3.01).

Measures

   Motivating language. To assess ML, the Motivating Language Scale (Mayfield et al.,

1998) was used. It is a 3-dimension scale capturing direction-giving, empathetic, and meaning-

making language. An example of direction-giving language was "My supervisor offers me

helpful advice on how to improve my work". For empathetic language, an example was "My

supervisor shows me encouragement for my work efforts". An example of meaning-making

language was "My supervisor tells me stories about key events in the organization's past". Each

dimension of the scale had good reliability in this sample (direction-giving α = .92; empathetic α

= .91; meaning-making α = .88).

   Employee work motivation. Self-reported employee motivation was captured using the

Multidimensional Work Motivation Scale (MWMS) developed by Gagné and colleagues (2015).

The dimensions were clustered into controlled and autonomous motivation types (Koestner &

Losier, 2002) based on SDT (Gagné et al., 2015; Gagné & Deci, 2005). In response to the stem

"Why do you or would you put efforts into your current job?", participants were presented with

response options such as "to get others' approval" (controlled motivation), and "because putting

efforts in this job aligns with my personal values" (autonomous motivation). Both dimensions

were found to have good reliability in this sample (controlled α = .82; autonomous α = .88).

Organizational commitment. Organizational commitment was measured using the Meyer and colleagues (1993) dimensions of affective and normative commitment to the organization. Respondents were prompted with the statement: "...With respect to your own feelings about the organization you are currently working for, please indicate the degree of your agreement or disagreement with each statement." An example item for affective commitment was "I really feel as if this organization's problems are my own", and an example item for normative commitment was "I would not leave my organization right now because I have a sense of obligation to the people in it". Each dimension of this scale had good reliability (affective α = .88; normative α = .87).

Behavioural integrity. Behavioural integrity was measured using the Behavioural Integrity Scale (Dineen et al., 2006). An example item was "My supervisor asks me to do things he or she wouldn't do himself or herself" (reverse-scored). This scale had good reliability in this sample (α = .81).

Leader credibility. Supervisor credibility was examined using the Source Credibility Scale (McCroskey & Teven, 1999), examining the three dimensions of credibility – competence, goodwill, and trustworthiness – separately, as they are independent factors (McCroskey & Teven, 1999). Participants were asked to report the extent to which each descriptor applied to their direct supervisor using a rating scale ranging from 1 (negative characteristic) to 5 (positive characteristic). Descriptors such as "Informed / Uninformed" captured Competence, "Cares about me / Doesn't care about me" captured Goodwill, and "Honest / Dishonest" captured Trustworthiness. All dimensions of this scale had good reliability in this sample (Credibility α = .92; Goodwill α = .89; Trustworthiness α = .91).

Demographic variables. Participant age, gender, organizational tenure, and tenure with their supervisor were added as control variables due to their potential relation to leadership and perceptions of leaders (de Poel et al., 2014; Eagly et al., 1992; Eagly et al., 2003), motivation (Kanat-Maymon & Reizer, 2017) or organizational commitment (Cohen, 1993).

Ethical Considerations

This research received ethics approval from Concordia University's Research Ethics Unit. The consent form provided details on the purpose, procedure, risks and benefits, confidentiality and a statement that participation was entirely voluntary and that there were no negative consequences for not participating, or by ending participation before the end of the study. At both time points, all participants were presented with a consent form and required to provide consent before accessing the questionnaire.

RESULTS

Preliminary Analyses

The analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics version 23. Data from Time 1 was used when examining the independent variable ML (direction-giving, empathetic, and meaning-making). The moderating variables of leader credibility (competence, goodwill and trustworthiness) and behavioural integrity were examined with data from Time 1. For the dependent variables organizational commitment (affective, normative) and work motivation (controlled, autonomous), data from Time 2 was used. All linear regression assumptions were met for each model that was tested. All independent and moderator variables were centered before running the analyses.

Descriptive Statistics

The first stage of analyses involved running descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations between the main variables. The results of these analyses are depicted in Table 1. The results showed that direction-giving language was positively associated with affective commitment (r = .41, p < .01), controlled motivation (r = .31, p < .01), as well as autonomous motivation (r = .34, p < .01). As expected, empathetic language was positively associated with affective commitment (r = .43, p < .01), normative commitment (r = .37, p < .01), and autonomous motivation (r = .36, p < .01). Similarly, meaning-making language was positively associated with affective commitment (r = .28, p < .01), and autonomous motivation (r = .25, p < .01). Moreover, the perceived competence of leaders was positively associated with affective commitment (r = .31, p < .01), normative commitment (r = .34, p < .01), controlled motivation (r = .19, p < .01), and autonomous motivation (r = .18, p < .01), though the latter items showed weaker relations. The perceived goodwill of leaders was positively associated with affective commitment (r = .41, p < .01), normative commitment (r = .46, p < .01), controlled motivation (r = .22, p < .01), and autonomous motivation (r = .30, p < .01). The perceived trustworthiness of leaders was also positively associated with affective commitment (r = .38, p < .01), normative commitment (r = .42, p < .01), controlled motivation (r = .22, p < .01), and autonomous motivation (r = .28, p < .01). Finally, the behavioural integrity of leaders was positively, though weakly associated with affective commitment (r = .25, p < .01), normative commitment (r = .19, p < .01), and autonomous motivation (r = .15, p < .05).

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and correlations among variables.

Variables	Mean	SD	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.
1. Direction-giving language	3.41	0.89	1										
2. Empathetic language	3.50	0.96	.85**	1									
3. Meaning-making language	2.70	0.93	.72**	.62**	1								
4. Credibility - competence	4.18	0.83	.57**	.53**	.35**	1							
5. Credibility - goodwill	3.60	0.89	.71**	.77**	.51**	.64**	1						
6. Credibility - trustworthiness	4.04	0.83	.64**	.61**	.39**	.74**	.77**	1					
7. Behavioural integrity	3.48	1.02	.43**	.51**	.19**	.38**	.56**	.53**	1				
8. Affective commitment	2.94	0.98	.41**	.43**	.28**	.31**	.41**	.38**	.25**	1			
9. Normative commitment	2.82	0.97	.40**	.37**	.31**	.34**	.46**	.42**	.19**	.78**	1		
10. Controlled motivation	3.19	0.75	.31**	.29**	.24**	.19**	.22**	.22**	.10	.35**	.33**	1	
11. Autonomous motivation	3.54	0.89	.34**	.36**	.25**	.18**	.30**	.28**	.15*	.60**	.52**	.59**	1

*p< .05; **p< .01; (2-tailed)

Hypothesis Tests

Hierarchical linear regression modeling was employed to examine the hypothesized relationships. Each variable dimension was examined in separate models[1]. Following the hypotheses, the first analyses examined the relationships between the dimensions of ML (direction-giving, empathetic, and meaning-making) and the dependent variables of controlled motivation, autonomous motivation, affective commitment, and normative commitment, and included moderating variables of behavioural integrity and credibility (competence, goodwill, trustworthiness) that were expected the strengthen the effects of ML.

These analyses were then repeated, but including gender, age, organization tenure, and tenure with the direct supervisor as control variables. These variables were included as previous research suggests that they are related to the variables in the current study (de Poel et al., 2014; Eagly et al., 1992; Eagly et al., 2003; Kanat-Maymon & Reizer, 2017; Cohen, 1993). However, as the inclusion of the control variables did not change the significance or direction of the results with the exception of one model examining the moderating effect of leader credibility - competence on the relation between empathetic language and the outcome variables, the results are presented without the control variables.

To test Hypothesis 1, a series of hierarchical regression analyses were run with autonomous motivation as the dependent variable. In each model, direction-giving, empathetic, and meaning-making language, and each of the moderating variables of credibility and

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[1] A regression analysis was also run, which included the three dimensions of ML (direction-giving, empathetic, and meaning-making) together and each dependent variable, excluding the moderators. Results suggest that empathetic language is a significant predictor of affective commitment (β = .30, t(2, 224) = 2.55, p < .05) and autonomous motivation (β = .22, t(2, 224) = 2.03, p < .05), while direction-giving language is a significant predictor of normative commitment (β = .29, t(2, 224) = 2.02, p < .05) and a marginally significant predictor of controlled motivation (β = .19, t(2, 224) = 1.70, p = .09). However, given the high correlations between ML types, and as a goal of this study was to provide a better understanding of how each type of ML could be associated with outcomes, the hypotheses were tested using regressions with ML types individually, to avoid a potential suppression effect.

behavioural integrity were entered at step 1. The models including credibility (competence) showed direction-giving (β = .35, t(2, 225) = 4.59, p < .001), empathetic (β = .33, t(2, 225) = 4.91, p < .001), and meaning-making language (β = .20, t(2, 225) = 3.06, p < .001) to be significantly associated with autonomous motivation. The model including credibility (goodwill) showed that direction-giving (β = .26, t(2, 225) = 2.98, p < .05) and empathetic language (β = .29, t(2, 225) = 3.25, p < .001) were significantly associated with autonomous motivation, while meaning-making language (β = .13, t(2, 225) = 1.80, p > .05) was only marginally associated with autonomous motivation. The model including credibility (trustworthiness) showed direction-giving (β = .28, t(2, 225) = 3.41, p < .001), empathetic (β = .28, t(2, 225) = 3.82, p < .001), and meaning-making language (β = .16, t(2, 225) = 2.42, p < .05) to be significantly associated with autonomous motivation. The model including behavioural integrity showed direction-giving (β = .34, t(2, 225) = 4.87, p < .001), empathetic (β = .35, t(2, 225) = 5.22, p < .001), and meaning-making language (β = .22, t(2, 225) = 3.48, p < .001) to be significantly associated with autonomous motivation. The models explained between 7.3% and 13.3% of variance in autonomous motivation. These results provide evidence to support Hypothesis 1.

Direction-giving was also expected to be significantly associated with controlled motivation. To examine this, direction-giving and the moderating variables credibility and behavioural integrity were entered at step 1. The model including credibility (competence) showed direction-giving language (β = .25, t(2, 225) = 3.92, p < .001) to be significantly associated with controlled motivation. The model including credibility (goodwill) showed direction-giving language (β = .26, t(2, 225) = 3.46, p < .001) to be significantly associated with controlled motivation. The model including credibility (trustworthiness) showed direction-giving language (β = .24, t(2, 225) = 3.46, p < .001) to be significantly associated with controlled

motivation. Lastly, the model including behavioural integrity showed direction-giving language (β = .28, t(2, 225) = 4.70, p < .001) to be significantly associated with controlled motivation. The models explained between 9.8% and 9.9% of variance in controlled motivation. As such, support was found for Hypothesis 2.

To examine whether ML was positively associated with affective commitment as predicted in Hypothesis 3, further hierarchical regression analyses were run with affective commitment as the dependent variable. Direction-giving, empathetic, and meaning-making language, and the moderating variables credibility and behavioural integrity were entered at step 1. The model including credibility (competence) showed direction-giving (β = .38, t(2,225) = 4.66, p < .001), empathetic (β = .37, t(2, 225) = 5.17, p < .001), and meaning-making language (β = .20, t(2, 225) = 2.88, p < .005) to be significantly associated with affective commitment. The model including credibility (goodwill) showed direction-giving (β = .26, t(2, 225) = 2.83, p < .005) and empathetic language (β = .28, t(2, 225) = 2.99, p < .005) to be significantly associated with affective commitment. However, meaning-making language (β = .10, t(2, 225) = 1.32, p > .05) was not significantly associated with affective commitment. The model including credibility (trustworthiness) showed direction-giving (β = .31, t(2, 225) = 3.56, p < .001), empathetic (β = .32, t(2, 225) = 4.14, p < .001), and meaning-making language (β = .16, t(2, 225) = 2.30, p < .05) to be significantly associated with affective commitment. The model including behavioural integrity showed direction-giving (β = .41, t(2, 225) = 5.49, p < .001), empathetic (β = .41, t(2, 225) = 5.79, p < .001), and meaning-making language (β = .25, t(2, 225) = 3.71, p < .001) to be significant associated with affective commitment. The models explained between 11.7% and 20.7% of variance in affective commitment. As expected, most of the models were

significantly and positively associated with affective commitment. This provides support for

Hypotheses 3a and 3b, and partial support for Hypothesis 3c.

Further, as proposed in Hypothesis 4, empathetic language was expected to be

significantly associated with normative organizational commitment. Empathetic language, and

the moderating variables credibility and behavioural integrity were entered at step 1 in each

model. The model including credibility (competence) showed that empathetic language (β = .27,

t(2, 225) = 3.71, p < .001), was significantly associated with normative commitment. In the

model including credibility (goodwill), empathetic language was not significantly associated

with normative commitment (β = .06, t(2, 225) = 0.61, p > . 05). The model including credibility

(trustworthiness) showed empathetic language (β = .19, t(2, 225) = 2.51, p < .05) to be

significantly associated with normative commitment. The model including behavioural integrity

showed empathetic language (β = .38, t(2, 225) = 5.22, p < .001) to be significantly associated

with normative commitment. The models explained between 14.00% and 21.10% of variance in

normative commitment. These results provide partial support for Hypothesis 4.

To examine the moderating effects of behavioral integrity anticipated in Hypothesis 5,

each dimension of ML, along with behavioural integrity were entered at step 1. The interaction

terms were added in each model at Step 2. As shown in Table 2, behavioural integrity

significantly moderated the relationship between direction-giving language and autonomous

motivation (β = .12, t(3,224) = 2.39, p < .05). As shown in Table 3, behavioural integrity

significantly moderated the relationship between empathetic language and autonomous

motivation (β = .14, t(3,224) = 2.85, p < .05), explaining between 2.20 and 3.00% of variance in

the models. There was no significant moderating effect of behavioural integrity on the

relationship between meaning-making language and autonomous motivation (β = .01, t(3,224) =

.12, p > .05). As shown in Table 4, behavioural integrity also significantly moderated the relationship between direction-giving language and controlled motivation (β = .09, t(3,224) = 2.05, p < .05), explaining an additional 1.7% of variance. Looking at organizational commitment, behavioural integrity significantly moderated the relationship between direction-giving language and affective commitment (β = .12, t(3,224) = 2.24, p < .05), as is shown in Table 5. As shown in Table 6, behavioural integrity significantly moderated the relationship between empathetic language and affective commitment (β = .11, t(3,224) = 1.99, p < .05), explaining 1.4 - 1.8% of variance in the models. Behavioural integrity did not significantly moderate the relationship between meaning-making language and affective commitment (β = - .03, t(3,224) = -.47, p > .05). Finally, behavioural integrity did not significantly moderate the relationship between empathetic language and normative commitment (β = .03, t(3,224) = .49, p > .05). These results provide partial support for Hypothesis 5.

Table 2. Regression results for the moderating effect of behavioural integrity on the relationship between direction-giving language and autonomous motivation.

| | (n=228) | | | |
Variables	Unstandardized coefficients (β)	SE	t	p
Constant	3.54	.06	63.49	.000
Direction-giving language	.34	.07	4.87	.000
Behavioural integrity	.00	.06	.07	.942
Interaction	.12	.05	2.39	.018

All predictors were centered before analysis. R^2 = .14, F(3,224) = 11.97**

**p<.01

Table 3. Regression results for the moderating effect of behavioural integrity on the relationship between empathetic language and autonomous motivation.

Variables	(n=228)			
	Unstandardized coefficients (β)	SE	t	p
Constant	3.54	.05	63.94	.000
Empathetic language	.35	.07	5.22	.000
Behavioural integrity	-.04	.06	-.57	.570
Interaction	.14	.05	2.85	.005

All predictors were centered before analysis. $R^2 = .16$, $F(3,224) = 14.12^{**}$

$^{**}p<.01$

Table 4. Regression results for the moderating effect of behavioural integrity on the relationship between direction-giving language and controlled motivation.

Variables	(n=228)			
	Unstandardized coefficients (β)	SE	t	p
Constant	3.19	.05	67.69	.000
Direction-giving language	.28	.06	4.70	.000
Behavioural integrity	-.03	.05	-.58	.562
Interaction	.09	.04	2.05	.041

All predictors were centered before analysis. $R^2 = .12$, $F(3,224) = 9.75^{**}$

$^{**}p<.01$

Table 5. Regression results for the moderating effect of behavioural integrity on the relationship between direction-giving language and affective commitment.

Variables	(n=228)			
	Unstandardized coefficients (β)	SE	*t*	*p*
Constant	2.94	.06	49.41	.000
Direction-giving language	.41	.07	5.49	.000
Behavioural integrity	.09	.06	1.38	.169
Interaction	.12	.05	2.24	.026

All predictors were centered before analysis. $R^2 = .19$, $F(3, 224) = 17.79**$

**p<.01

Table 6. Regression results for the moderating effect of behavioural integrity on the relationship between empathetic language and affective commitment.

Variables	(n=228)			
	Unstandardized coefficients (β)	SE	*t*	*p*
Constant	2.94	.06	49.74	.000
Empathetic language	.41	.07	5.79	.000
Behavioural integrity	.04	.07	.65	.514
Interaction	.11	.05	1.99	.047

All predictors were centered before analysis. $R^2 = .20$, $F(3,224) = 18.59**$

**p<.01

Figure 2. Interaction between behavioural integrity and direction-giving on autonomous motivation.
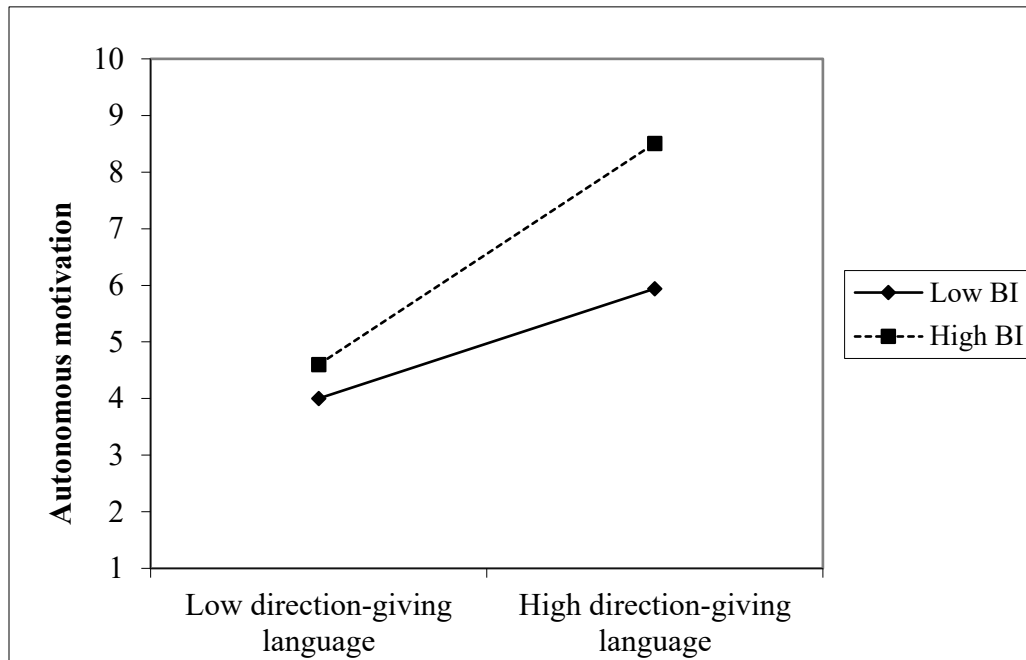
Figure 3. Interaction between behavioural integrity and empathetic language on autonomous motivation.
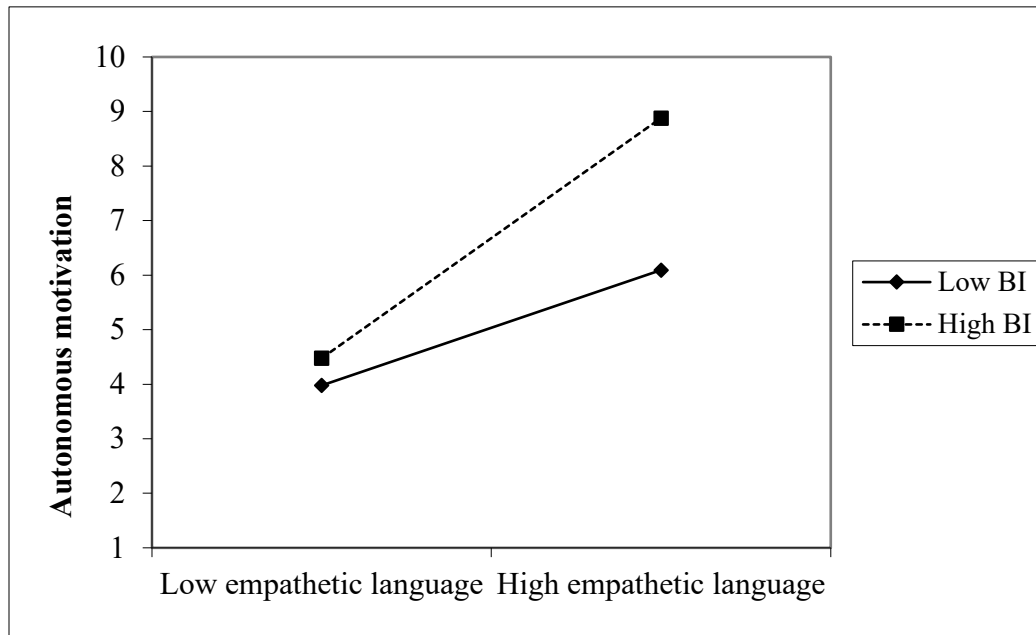
Figure 4. Interaction between behavioural integrity and direction-giving language on controlled motivation.

Figure 5. Interaction between behavioural integrity and direction-giving language on affective commitment.

Figure 6. Interaction between behavioural integrity and empathetic language on affective commitment.

To examine the moderating effects of source credibility (competence, goodwill, trustworthiness) on relationships between ML and employee outcomes proposed in Hypothesis 6, each dimension of M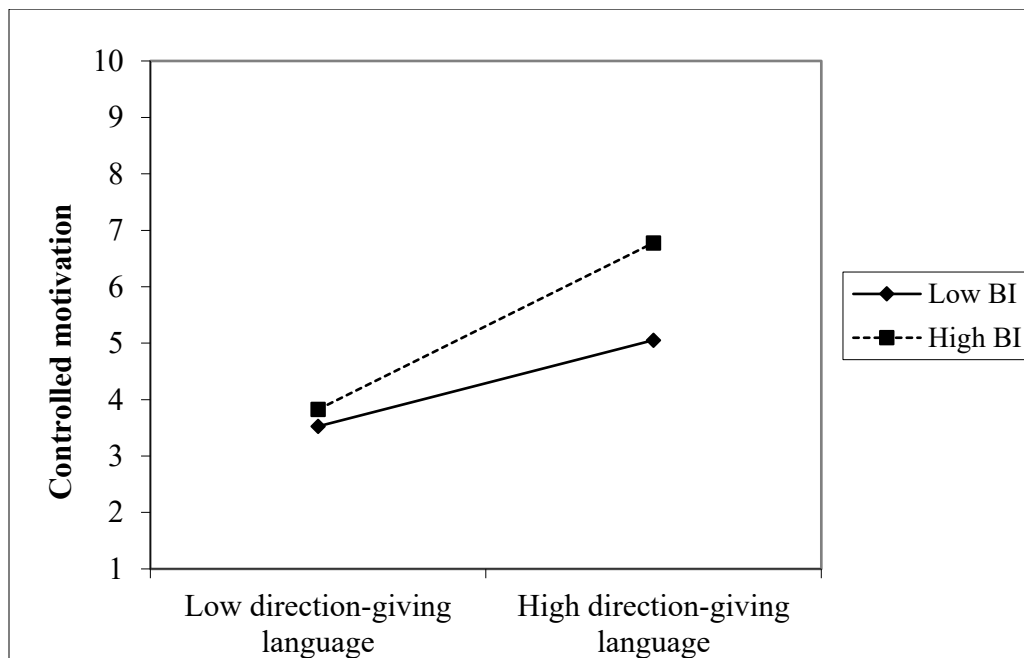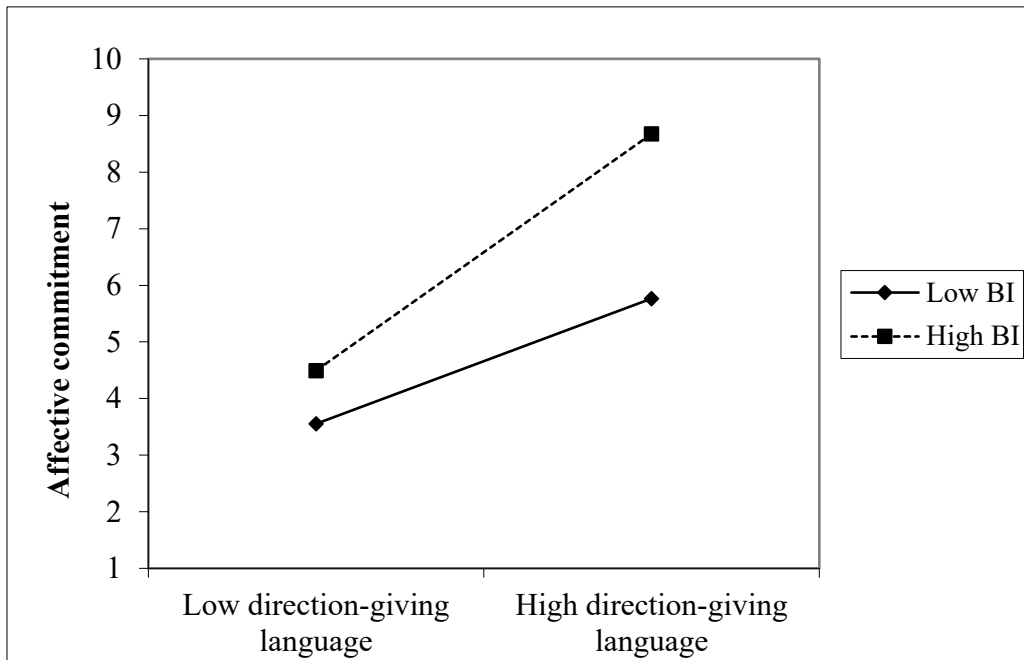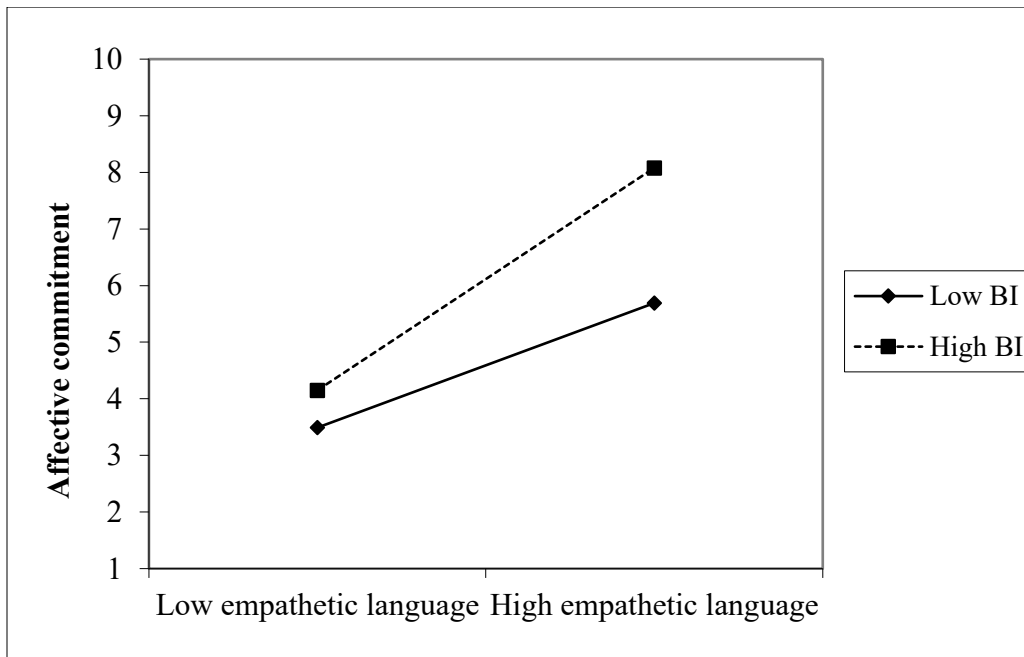L and credibility were entered at step 1, and the interaction terms were added in each model at step 2. Only one moderation effect was found to be significant, as shown in Table 7. The competence dimension of leader credibility significantly moderated the relationship between empathetic language and autonomous motivation ($\beta = .13$, $t(3,224) = 2.23$, $p < .05$), explaining an additional 1.9% of variance, suggesting that it strengthens the relationship between empathetic language and autonomous motivation. None of the other models testing the moderating effect of competence, goodwill, and trustworthiness, on the relationship between ML types (direction-giving, empathetic, and meaning-making) and the outcomes variables (autonomous motivation, controlled motivation, affective commitment, normative commitment) were significant ($\beta = -.13 - .11$, $t(3,224) = -1.94 - 1.83$, $p > .05$). As such, Hypothesis 6 was only partially supported.

Table 7. Regression results for the moderating effect of credibility - competence on the relationship between empathetic language and autonomous motivation.

Variables	(n=228)			
	Unstandardized coefficients (β)	SE	t	p
Constant	3.54	.05	63.89	.000
Empathetic language	.33	.07	4.91	.000
Credibility - competence	-.01	.08	-.12	.905
Interaction	.13	.06	2.23	.027

All predictors were centered before analysis. $R^2 = .15$, $F(3,224) = 12.80**$

**p<.01

Figure 7. Interaction between credibility - competence and empathetic language on autonomous motivation.
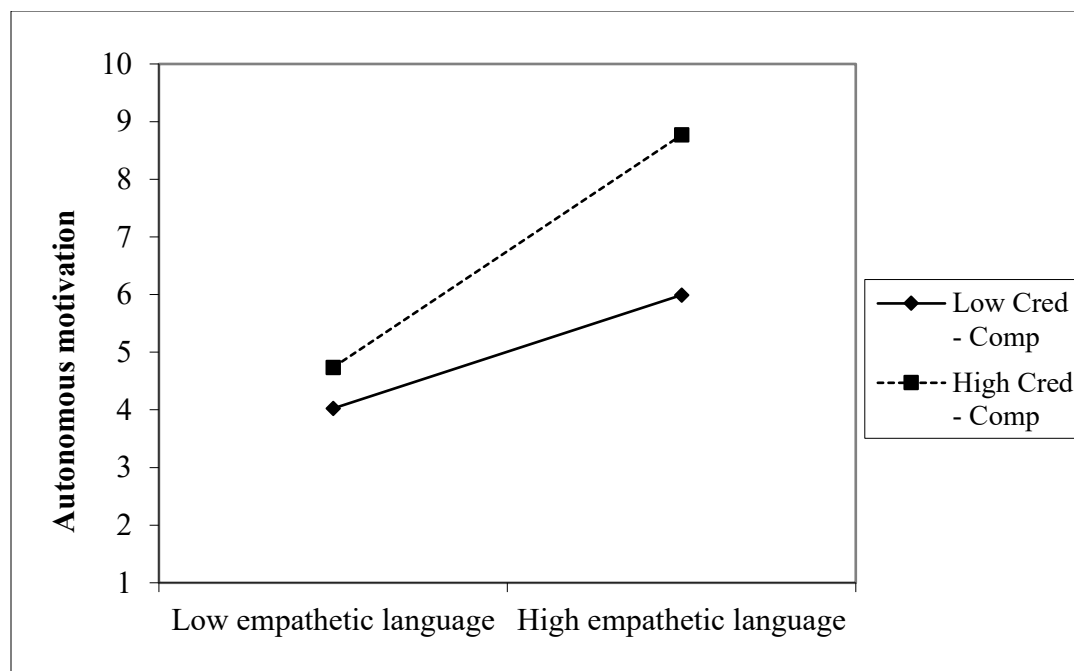
DISCUSSION

General Discussion

Managers, supervisors, and other employees who find themselves in positions of leadership spend much of their time communicating with others during their days at work. The prominence of communication in these roles carries a significant opportunity for initiating positive influence within an organization. The goal of this research was to examine whether ML types proposed by Motivating Language Theory, namely direction-giving, empathetic, and meaning-making languages, had a positive effect on employee motivation and organizational commitment. While employee motivation and organizational commitment have been examined empirically, these outcomes have not received the same attention as other outcomes such as job satisfaction or performance. Therefore, this study aimed to more clearly identify the nuanced relationships between ML and motivation and commitment through the lens of Self-Determination theory and Meyer and Allen's (1991) 3-component model of commitment, focusing on affective and normative commitment types. Further, this research sought to empirically test the third assumption of ML, which proposes that leaders must practice alignment between their spoken intentions and their behaviours (Mayfield et al., 1998). In line with ML Theory and previous research, behavioural integrity and source credibility (competence, goodwill, and trustworthiness) were used to capture this assumption. The final research model proposed that direction-giving, empathetic, and meaning-making language would be positively associated with autonomous motivation and affective commitment, that direction-giving would be positively associated with controlled motivation and that empathetic language would be positively associated with normative commitment. Further, the model proposed that these

relationships would be strengthened by both leader behavioural integrity and credibility (competence, goodwill, trustworthiness).

Consistent with expectations, and similar to previous research, this study found direction-giving, empathetic and meaning-making language to be positively related to employee autonomous motivation. Indeed, ML has been shown to fulfill the psychological needs for competence and relatedness (Men & Jin, 2021), both of which are needed for autonomous motivation (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Similarly, Sun and colleagues (2016) have also shown ML to be an important part of a leader's ability to encourage intrinsic motivation in their employees. However, the current study has gone a step further by examining each dimension of ML individually, and has found support to suggest that all forms of ML are important and contribute to autonomous motivation.

Also consistent with expectations, direction-giving language was positively associated with employee controlled motivation. Based on a review of the current literature, this is the first time that ML has been linked to controlled motivation. Previous research has shown that results control oriented management styles are positively associated with extrinsic motivation (Van der Kolk et al., 2019). The results of this study further suggest that the highly instructive nature of direction-giving language is helpful in allowing employees to perform their work, but that it can also yield more controlled forms of motivation. It is important to note that highly motivated employees exhibit profiles that can include external, introjected, identified, and autonomous motivation (Howard et al., 2016). These findings appear to follow a similar pattern, suggesting that direction-giving may contribute to more than one form of motivation at the same time. This extends the current understanding of ML, showing that ML plays a dual role, contributing to

both controlled and autonomous motivation, making it more broadly beneficial to a range of different work environments and dynamics.

This research further proposed that direction-giving, empathetic, and meaning-making language would be positively associated with affective commitment. For the most part, direction-giving, empathetic, and meaning-making language were found to be positively related with employee affective organizational commitment. All models provided support for this, excluding the model with credibility (goodwill), where meaning-making language was not a significant predictor of affective commitment. These results are in line with previous findings that show ML to be positively associated with affective organizational commitment (Madlock & Sexton, 2015; Sabir & Bhutta, 2018). However, as with autonomous motivation, ML had only been tied to affective commitment as a whole construct. This study has further revealed that each type of ML plays a unique role in directly contributing to affective commitment.

Similarly, empathetic language was also positively related to normative commitment, as predicted in all models tested, excluding the model with credibility (goodwill). Previous literature has shown that close emotional ties between leaders and their employees is associated with normative organizational commitment (Wang, 2008). These findings are in line with ML theory and previous literature. Empathetic language is useful for expressing care, trust, and encouragement, all of which aid in relationship building. This is the first study that appears to have examined normative commitment as an outcome of empathetic language. As one of the models tested did not find empathetic language to be predictive of normative commitment, further testing of this relationship would be needed to determine whether these results are reproducible in a different sample.

Further, the findings of this study suggest that certain leader characteristics may help to strengthen the effect of ML. In line with expectations, behavioural integrity was found to strengthen the relationships between direction-giving language and autonomous motivation, controlled motivation, and affective commitment. It also strengthened the relationship between empathetic language and autonomous motivation and affective commitment. However, behavioral integrity did not strengthen the relationship between meaning-making language and autonomous motivation, nor affective commitment. It also did not strengthen the relationship between empathetic language and normative commitment. Behavioural integrity has been shown to be a predictor of ML (Holmes & Parker, 2017; Holmes & Parker, 2018). However, the findings of this study provide support for the theoretical assumption that leaders must align their intentions with their actions for ML to be effective. Behavioural integrity is an important leader characteristic for increasing the influential capabilities of ML, which lends support to the moderating role of behavioural integrity that is proposed in ML theory (Mayfield & Mayfield, 1998). Indeed, walking the talk allows leaders to maximize the impact of their ML use on autonomous motivation, controlled motivation, affective commitment, and potentially, a multitude of other outcomes.

Interestingly, the competence dimension of leader credibility strengthened the relationship between empathetic language and autonomous motivation. However, it did not strengthen the relationship between empathetic language and the remaining outcome variables. Additionally, the goodwill and trustworthiness dimensions of credibility did not strengthen the effect of any ML type on the outcome variables examined. These findings suggest that competence may be important for increasing the effect of empathetic language on the autonomous motivation of employees. However, it does not suggest that goodwill and

trustworthiness dimensions of credibility play a role in strengthening the influence of ML. In addition, these results were only found in one model. Therefore, further testing is needed. These findings are contrary to what was hypothesized, and differ from existing literature. Previous research has looked at credibility as an antecedent to ML (Holmes & Parker, 2018), or as an independent variable mediated by ML (Holmes & Olsen, 2021). The current study chose to examine credibility as a moderating variable based on its proposed role in ML theory. This may explain why the results of the current study differ from that of previous research. Another possible explanation for these findings may be that the role of credibility has to date, only been examined in the education sector of the United States. As such, it is possible that the credibility of leaders in a business setting, or in different cultural settings have limited application when it comes to propelling the influence of ML on employees in the workplace.

Theoretical Implications

This research has contributed to the literature on ML in several areas. This research applied the approach that more recent studies have taken, and examined ML through its 3 separate dimensions. Examining the three dimensions of ML individually allows for a more complete understanding of the ways in which each type of language uniquely influences employee outcomes. This research has shown that the relation between ML and autonomous motivation is not unidimensional, but rather that each form of ML directly contributes to the autonomous motivation of employees. Further, this research has provided empirical support for the relationship between ML and controlled motivation, as defined through self-determination. This shows that ML's relationship is more complex than current research has demonstrated, and that ML can play several roles in shaping needs satisfaction and motivation simultaneously

within individuals. This research has also deepened the understanding of the relation between ML and commitment to the organization by examining its effect on different dimensions of commitment, as defined through Meyer and Allen's (1991) 3-component model of commitment. As with motivation, these findings show that ML has a multidimensional relationship with organizational commitment.

Another contribution of this research is that it provides preliminary support for the moderating role of behavioural integrity as a leader characteristic that strengthens the influence of ML. Previous research examined behavioural integrity and credibility as antecedents. However, this research provides support to suggest that behavioural integrity may not be a requirement for ML to be practiced, but rather that leaders can use this characteristic to increase the impact of their ML use. In contrast to existing research, the current study has not found substantial support for the role of credibility in increasing the impact of ML. Ultimately, this research suggests that behavioural integrity may be a more important characteristic than credibility in leaders when it comes to using ML to drive employees toward positive work attitudes and outcomes.

Practical Implications

There are several findings from this research that can be of use for practitioners. This research has proposed that using clear, welcoming, and inspiring language is an important communication skill for people in leadership roles to adopt. The needs of the organization or demands of a role or work environment may determine how a leader chooses to enact ML. Leaders may choose to use specific forms of ML depending on the outcomes they are looking achieve. For example, leaders can use direction-giving, empathetic, and meaning-making to

support the autonomous motivation of their employees. In contrast, they may choose to use

direction-giving language to support the controlled motivation of their employees, which may be

useful in roles or occupations where controlled motivation has demonstrated benefits for work

outcomes. Alternately, leaders may choose to use empathetic language specifically if they are

looking to encourage overall organizational commitment. Ultimately, leaders can strategically

adopt these types of communication to influence employees toward specific desired outcomes.

Furthermore, leaders can be trained to modify their cognition and behaviours (Goleman, 1998).

Knowing this, the principles of ML can be incorporated into learning and development programs

to teach leaders to put ML into practice in their communications with their employees.

In addition, the findings of this research highlight the importance of behavioral integrity

as a characteristic that strengthens the influence of ML. Workplace leaders must therefore

practice self-awareness of their intentions and actions, considering how these will be perceived

by their followers. While this study does show that ML on its own, will benefit employees,

behavioural integrity can be used as leverage to further increase the impact of ML. As such,

workplace leaders must walk the talk. By bringing awareness to their own practice of

behavioural integrity and ensuring that they are aligning their intentions with their behaviours,

leaders will maximize the benefits that ML brings to the workplace.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

There are notable limitations in this study. Firstly, the use of the time-lagged design,

while limiting potential common method variance, does not establish causal relationships. Future

studies may consider a longitudinal design, where the effect of ML can be examined over an

extended period of time. Alternatively, an experimental approach could be taken to manipulate

ML types, or even intensity levels to examine the effect of these manipulations on employee outcomes. Another option may be to contrast different organizations, where one organization practices high levels of each type of ML, and another practices low levels of each type of ML.

A second limitation is that this study sample was highly educated. More than 85% of the sample reported having completed a Bachelor's degree or higher. This may limit the generalizability of these findings to the general population of working adults.

Another possible limitation is the reliance on self-reported data. This study asked participants to report on their perceptions of their direct manager or supervisor's characteristics. Self-report data has often been perceived as biased (Donaldson & Grant-Vallone, 2002). However, other findings suggest that the quality of self-reported data may be comparable to other forms (Silvia et al., 2012). Nonetheless, future research may consider examining ML using employee and supervisor dyads to limit potential bias by collecting and comparing data from more than one source, or by using mixed methods.

This research did not account for the fourth assumption in ML, which states that leaders should use the type of language that best suits the situation or context. To date, there does not appear to be any studies that have examined this theoretical assumption. Prior research has examined profiles of ML intensity, being classified into low levels of ML and high levels of ML (Holmes & Parker, 2019). However, profiles of ML adaptability are not yet understood. Future research should examine the ability of leaders to adapt their use of ML types based on the context they find themselves in. Potential contexts to explore may include varying job roles and responsibilities, employee personalities, or work environments with varying levels of uncertainty or volatility. Prior research has proposed that leaders must observe, reflect and adapt to best meet

the needs of their team's performance (Åkerlund, 2017). Future research may consider examining whether communication adaptability influences the effect of ML on employees.

Beyond this, other research avenues may include a deeper examination of leader credibility and behavioural integrity. ML effectiveness has been documented across industries and cultures (Madlock & Sexton, 2015; Madlock & Hildebrand Clubbs, 2019; Sun et al., 2016; Sullivan, 1988). However, how leader characteristics shape the influence of ML is less understood. Behavioural integrity and credibility were previously examined in the American education sector (Holmes & Parker, 2018). A deeper examination of the potential nuances in these characteristics, or how they are influenced by external factors such as industry or culture, may help to clarify exactly how these characteristics strengthen the influence of ML in a business setting.

Finally, future research can explore other employee outcomes by extending the current study's framework. Prior research has tied ML to outcomes such as organizational citizenship behaviour and turnover (Mayfield, 1998; Sun et al, 2016). However, research has also shown that intrinsic motivation mediates the relationship between ML and organizational citizenship behaviour in addition to its direct effect (Sun et al., 2016). This suggests that ML's relationship to motivation and commitment may go beyond direct effects, and also explain relations to outcomes like organizational citizenship behaviours and turnover or turnover intentions. Examining these potential mediating effects will provide a deeper understanding of how ML influences outcomes, and how employee attitudes and motivation play a role.

Conclusion

Communication is an important source through which workplace leaders can enact positive influence on their followers. While ML is a well-established theory, there are still several areas of research that have yet to be explored. Previous research has shown that ML does affect employee motivation and commitment, and that leader characteristic affect ML. However, how the dimensions of these constructs uniquely relate to each other is not yet clear. This research shows that when leaders use direction-giving, empathetic, and meaning-making language, they can directly increase the motivation and organizational commitment of their employees. They can also enhance the impact of their communication even further by practicing what they preach in the workplace. Future research can build upon these findings and further explore the notion that ML types individually contribute to motivation and attitudes, and that leader characteristics shape the influence of ML on desirable employee outcomes.

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Appendix. Measure of Key Constructs

Demographic Questions:

1.   Age: (scroll list from 18 to 75 or above)
2.   What gender do you most identify with? (choose)
3.   Where are you located? (scroll list)
4.   What is your highest education completed? (choose)
5.   Do you currently work: "100% remotely", "100% in-person", "A combination of remote and in-person"
6.   What is your current job title? (free text)
7.   How long have you been working at your current organization? (scroll list from less than 6 months to more than 30 years)
8.   How long have you been working for your current supervisor? (scroll list from less than 6 months to more than 30 years)
9.   How long have you been part of your current work team? (scroll list from less than 6 months to more than 30 years)
10.   Currently, are you a manager or an employee? (choose)
        a.   If manager is selected:
                i.   How many employees do you currently supervise? (scroll list from 1 to more than 15)
                ii.   How many years have you been working in a leadership position? (scroll list from less than 6 months to more than 30 years)
11.   In what industry does your company operate? (choose)
        a.   If Other: (free text)
12.   How many people make up your current organization? (scroll list from 1-50 to 500 or more)
13.   How many people make up your current work team (including yourself)? (scroll list from 1 to more than 15)

Motivating Language Scale (Mayfield et al., 1998)

The examples below show different ways that your boss might talk to you. Please choose the answer that best matches your perceptions. Be sure to mark only one answer for each question.
1 (Very little) to 5 (A whole lot)

 Direction-giving/uncertainty reducing language

14.   Gives me useful explanations of what needs to be done in my work.
15.   Offers me helpful directions on how to do my job.
16.   Provides me with easily understandable instructions about my work.
17.   Offers me helpful advice on how to improve my work.
18.   Gives me good definitions of what I must do in order to receive rewards.
19.   Gives me clear instructions about solving job-related problems.
20.   Offers me specific information on how I am evaluated.
21.   Provides me with helpful information about forthcoming changes affecting my work.
22.   Provides me with helpful information about past changes affecting my work.
23.   Shares news with me about organizational achievements and financial status.

Empathetic language

24.   Gives me praise for my good work.
25.   Shows me encouragement for my work efforts.
26.   Shows concern about my job satisfaction.
27.   Expresses his/her support for my professional development.
28.   Asks me about my professional well-being.
29.   Shows trust in me.

Meaning-making language

30.   Tells me stories about key events in the organization's past.
31.   Gives me useful information that I couldn't get through official channels.
32.   Tells me stories about people who are admired in my organization.
33.   Tells me stories about people who have worked hard in this organization.
34.   Offers me advice about how to behave at the organization's social gatherings.
35.   Offers me advice about how to "fit in" with other members of this organization.
36.   Tells me stories about people who have been rewarded by this organization.
37.   Tells me stories about people who have left this organization.

Measure of Source Credibility (McCroskey & Teven, 1999)

Please indicate your impression of your direct supervisor or manager by circling the appropriate number between the pairs of adjectives below. The closer the number is to an adjective, the more certain you are of your evaluation.

Competence

1.   Intelligent 1 2 3 4 5 Unintelligent
2.   Untrained 1 2 3 4 5 Trained
3.   Inexpert 1 2 3 4 5 Expert
4.   Informed 1 2 3 4 5 Uninformed
5.   Incompetent 1 2 3 4 5 Competent
6.   Bright 1 2 3 4 5 Stupid

Goodwill

7.   Cares about me 1 2 3 4 5 Doesn't care about me
8.   Has my interests at heart 1 2 3 4 5 Doesn't have my interests at heart
9.   Self-centered 1 2 3 4 5 Not self-centered
10.   Concerned with me 1 2 3 4 5 Unconcerned with me
11.   Insensitive 1 2 3 4 5 Sensitive
12.   Not understanding 1 2 3 4 5 Understanding

Trustworthiness

13.   Honest 1 2 3 4 5 Dishonest
14.   Untrustworthy 1 2 3 4 5 Trustworthy
15.   Honorable 1 2 3 4 5 Dishonorable
16.   Moral 1 2 3 4 5 Immoral

17.   Unethical 1 2 3 4 5 Ethical
18.   Phoney 1 2 3 4 5 Genuine

Behavioural Integrity Scale (Dineen et al., 2006)

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements about your supervisor.

1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree) - all reverse-scored

38.   I wish my supervisor would practice what he or she preaches more often.
39.   My supervisor tells us to follow the rules but doesn't follow them himself or herself.
40.   My supervisor asks me to do things he or she wouldn't do himself or herself.
41.   My supervisor can get away with doing things I can't.

The Multidimensional Work Motivation Scale (MWMS) (Gagne et al., 2015)

Why do you or would you put efforts into your current job? Please select the response for each statement that applies most to you.

1 (Not at all) to 5 (Completely)

Extrinsic regulation—social

1.   To get others' approval (e.g., supervisor, colleagues, family, clients ...).
2.   Because others will respect me more (e.g., supervisor, colleagues, family, clients ...).
3.   To avoid being criticized by others (e.g., supervisor, colleagues, family, clients ...).\

Extrinsic regulation—material

4.   Because others will reward me financially only if I put enough effort in my job (e.g., employer, supervisor ...).
5.   Because others offer me greater job security if I put enough effort in my job (e.g., employer, supervisor ...).
6.   Because I risk losing my job if I don't put enough effort in it.

Introjected regulation

7.   Because I have to prove to myself that I can.
8.   Because it makes me feel proud of myself.
9.   Because otherwise I will feel ashamed of myself.
10.   Because otherwise I will feel bad about myself.

Identified regulation

11.   Because I personally consider it important to put efforts in this job.
12.   Because putting efforts in this job aligns with my personal values.
13.   Because putting efforts in this job has personal significance to me.

Intrinsic motivation

14.   Because I have fun doing my job.
15.   Because what I do in my work is exciting.
16.   Because the work I do is interesting.

Commitment to the Organization (Meyer, Allen & Smith, 1993)

Listed below is a series of statements that represent feelings that individuals might have about the organization they work for. With respect to your own feelings about the organization you are currently working for, please indicate the degree of your agreement or disagreement with each statement.

1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree)

Affective commitment to the organization

1.   I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with this organization.
2.   I really feel as if this organization's problems are my own.
3.   I do not feel a strong sense of "belonging" to my organization. (reverse scored
4.   I do not feel "emotionally attached" to this organization. (reverse scored)
5.   I do not feel like "a part of the family" at my organization. (reverse scored)
6.   This organization has a great deal of personal meaning to me.

Normative commitment to the organization

7.   I do not feel any obligation to remain with my current employer (reverse scored)
8.   Even if it were to my advantage, I do not feel it would be right to leave my organization now.
9.   I would feel guilty if I left my organization now.
10.   This organization deserves my loyalty.
11.   I would not leave my organization right now because I have a sense of obligation to the people in it.
12.   I owe a great deal to my organization.