

Hybrid Shifts, Leadership Lifts: How Change Leadership Can Make a Difference in Employees' Change-Supportive Behavior During the Transition to Hybrid Working Models Since COVID-19

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The transition to hybrid working models since COVID-19 has posed significant challenges for organizations, particularly in securing employees' support. This study investigates how change leadership shapes the latter, focusing on the interplay with leader-member exchange (LMX) and organizational identification. Using data from 282 knowledge workers across industries and ordinary least squares regression, we show a positive relationship between change leadership and change-supportive behavior mediated by LMX. Surprisingly, organizational identification negatively moderates this relationship, revealing a 'ceiling effect' where highly identified employees' intrinsic motivation diminishes the impact of change leadership. These findings provide valuable guidance for the navigation of effective change.

Keywords: change leadership, work models, employee engagement, leader-member-exchange, organizational identification, behavioral support

INTRODUCTION

Large-scale social and economic shocks often force organizations to engage in a radical, immediate, and profound reconsideration of the organization of work, fundamentally altering their modus operandi. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, this shock resulted in a forced transition to implementing new remote working models worldwide (Kooij, 2020; Spicer, 2020). Indeed, overnight, while working at the office was the industry standard for most 'white-collar' employees, remote work became a necessary and widespread new way of working to protect human health (Molino et al., 2020). Even though remote work is not a new phenomenon – known since the 1970s as 'teleworking' (Haddon & Lewis, 1994) – it was unique in its scale and scope following the COVID-19 outbreak (Stoker et al., 2022). This unexpected but nearly ubiquitous shift to remote work caused quite some challenges for organizations and their employees who tried to remain productive while being forced to adapt to new emerging technologies, work patterns, business strategies, and lifestyles (Amankwah-Amoah et al., 2021; Pradies et al., 2021; Wildman et al., 2021).

However, many organizations seemed to struggle with garnering employee support for the forced change; an observation that fits well with existing research about the generally high failure rate of change initiatives (Burnes, 2015). These failures are typically attributed to flaws in management practices such as

a narrow focus on efficiency and profitability (Choi, 2011; Georgalis et al., 2015; Gill, 2002). Indeed, scholars widely study and understand how change can be mismanaged. What is less researched in academia and realized and/or focused on by leaders in practice is the ‘human side’, even though employee support is a sine qua non for successful change implementation (Armenakis et al., 1993; Coch & French Jr, 1948). Research has shown that employees’ perception of and response to change are key indicators of either the success or failure of organizational change (Lines, 2005). Given the importance of and the consensus in the literature about employees’ change-supportive behavior for successfully transitioning organizational change, it becomes imperative to gain a better understanding of how change-supportive behavior can be fostered in times of forced change (Abrell-Vogel & Rowold, 2014; Oreg & Berson, 2019). In this vein, the effects of COVID-19 on the workplace offer a unique opportunity to investigate the process behind influencing employees’ support of unanticipated working shifts. These shifts were, in the following years, transitioning into planned routines when the world reached an ‘endemic’ state (Mishra, 2022), i.e. flexible working hours and ‘work-from-home’ were not mandatory anymore.

Nevertheless, many companies maintained hybrid working models in partially remote working and flexible working hours (Wörtler et al., 2021). Recent trends indicate a reversal of this flexibility, with large companies like Amazon announcing a ‘return to office’ (RTO) policy of five days per week starting in 2025 (Reuter, 2024). This resurgence of more rigid working patterns underscores the ongoing relevance of understanding how leadership can influence employees’ adaptability and support for such changes, especially in light of the hybrid models that emerged post-COVID. For this purpose, employees again needed support from their organization to adapt to and support the new contexts and routines.

Existing literature informs us that leadership is a key predictor of employee behavior (Buil et al., 2019; Carasco-Saul et al., 2015). For example, empirical studies show that transformational leadership is related to employee organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) (Podsakoff et al., 1996), charismatic leadership affects employee performance (Shamir et al., 1993), group task performance (Conger et al., 2000), and OCB (Babcock-Roberson & Strickland, 2010), and authentic leadership impacts employee job performance and extra effort (Avolio et al., 2004) as well as proactive behavior (Liu et al., 2018). However, a key variable that has received limited research attention is the connection of employees’ change-supportive behavior to change leadership. This is quite surprising given that change leadership is a construct defined as the tactical leadership behaviors toward implementing a substantial episodic change at hand (Herold et al., 2008). Even less researched about the link between change leadership and employees’ proactive support is the potential effect of the relationship between leader and employee (O’Donnell et al., 2012), conceptualized as leader-member-exchange (LMX). To deepen the understanding of the underlying inner cause-and-effect working mechanisms taking place in this multifaceted process, this article goes a step further and additionally tests for a possible boundary condition: organizational identification, i.e. an individual’s sense of psychological affinity to their organization. This construct can serve as a fruitful lens through which to explore how employees’ identities and their interface with the organizations’ identity and post-pandemic identification processes influence their support of the shifting work routines. Given the role of change-supportive behavior as a key factor in affecting change successfully, the current study sets out to identify its predictors and interrelationships.

Our article combines insights from the leadership and organizational change literature, using the social exchange theory and social identity approach as the underlying theoretical lens to develop and test our research model. The social exchange theory is a broad conceptual paradigm that spans various social science disciplines (Cropanzano et al., 2017; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). The paradigm treats social life as a series of sequential transactions between two or more parties (Mitchell et al., 2012) whose relationship influences the exchange quality (Blau, 1964). Resources are exchanged through a reciprocal process that can be characterized – in contrast to economic exchanges which are rather *quid pro quo* – as open-ended and involving greater trust (Organ, 1997). In this framework, LMX focuses on the dyadic relationship between a leader and an employee, which might engender a shared identity, mutual trust, and employees’ desire to reciprocate this treatment by performing prosocial organizational behaviors (Gouldner, 1960). An additional lens to examine human behavior lies in the social identity approach assumption that individuals behave the way they do because of who they believe they are, i.e. their identity (Korte, 2007). Individuals

have multiple selves which are personally, contextually, and socially derived (Hogg et al., 1995). As one of many, the social self is fractured into as many selves as there are groups with which the person interacts (James, 1890). Organizations, *per definitionem*, are social entities comprised of various interacting groups (Turner, 1981). Within this collective, employees develop and sustain socially derived identities and a sense of psychological affinity to their organization, termed organizational identification (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Employees' organizational identification satisfies their need for positive self-regard and reduced uncertainty (Hogg & Terry, 2000). Hence, employees are motivated to achieve organizational goals and might be more receptive to change initiatives promoted by their leader (van Dick & Kerschreiter, 2016).

This study proposes that the social exchange theory can be fruitfully connected to the social identity approach. Concretely, we explore how change leadership affects employees' responses to organizational change, considering the mediator LMX and moderator organizational identification. So far, no study has examined this moderated mediation model. The study by Han et al. (2018) explores the effect of LMX on OCB-related behaviors but finds no effect on change-related OCB. Moreover, one qualitative study provides evidence for change leadership's relation to organizational identification without incorporating mediators or moderators or testing the relation quantitatively (Aitken & von Treuer, 2020). Another study links change leadership to employees' intentions to support change (Onyeneke & Abe, 2021). The present study addresses this theoretical gap by examining the relationship quantitatively and adding a different dependable variable, i.e. change-supportive behavior, that has not been linked to the combined construct of LMX and organizational identification thus far. Our article is unique in focusing not on employees' (extensively researched) change-related psychological states, such as commitment or change readiness, but on the behavioral aspect of change support. Within employees' response range, it is the proactive change-related OCB that has been shown to drive change toward success (Agote et al., 2016; Armenakis et al., 2000; Klein & Sorra, 1996; Stouten et al., 2018). Moreover, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, our study uniquely analyses which leadership behaviors helped employees to adapt to the changes in their working environment. In this sense, our work differentiates itself from and adds to previous research on the role of leadership within the disruptive organizational changes during the COVID-19 outbreak period, such as e.g. Iannotta et al. (2020), Bartsch et al. (2020), Thielsch et al. (2021), and Spagnoli et al. (2020). Adding on to our theoretical contributions, we can also find several novel practical implications. We advise organizations on a granular employee mapping regarding their organizational identification levels, paired with targeted change leadership training and the facilitation of high-quality leader-member exchanges.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

Change-Supportive Behavior: Employees' Support as the Heart of Change

Change-supportive behavior is defined as "actions employees engage in to actively participate in, facilitate, and contribute to a planned change initiated by the organization" (Kim et al., 2011, p. 1665). By focusing on observable behavior rather than psychological states, this study addresses the active and positive role that employees might play in supporting organizational change. Our work emphasizes active contributions rather than passive responses and entails support for change efforts rather than individual or general improvements. There is a paucity of empirical research examining this construct and a dearth of theoretical models to explain employees' change-supportive behavior (Mehboob & Othman, 2020). A pioneering exception is the work by Herscovitch and Meyer (2002) that investigated behavioral support as a consequence of commitment to change. The authors conceptualized it as a continuum of active resistance, passive resistance, compliance, cooperation, and championing. Notably, only the latter refers to active support and effective change-facilitation in the sense of change-supportive behavior. Thus, change-supportive behavior is a practical and conceptual means of organizational change (Oreg et al., 2018; Rafferty & Minbashian, 2019). It not only allows employees to participate in organizational change processes but also helps reduce others' resistance to change, minimizes confusion and insecurity, and promotes the usefulness and urgency of the initiative both internally and externally (Chou, 2015). Despite this importance, scholars and practitioners underline the challenges associated with ensuring such behavior

during organizational change (Faupel & Süß, 2019), underscoring the relevance of our study in exploring its antecedents.

Change Leadership: Leaders' Behaviors During Change Processes

Leadership is one of the most researched phenomena in the organizational context and has also become a popular topic in the organizational change literature (Avolio & Bass, 2002). The most commonly used definitions of leadership include motivating, influencing, enabling, or empowering others to achieve organizational goals (Jiménez, 2018; Reed et al., 2019). For this purpose, leaders use various behaviors, which can be classified into three broad meta-categories: task, relations, and change (Yukl, 2012). Change leadership is a research subfield informed by the interrelationships between leadership studies and organizational change studies, each field favoring different theoretical frameworks and methodologies (Hughes, 2018). Change leadership tactically focuses on leadership behaviors toward implementing a concrete episodic change at hand.

Conversely, transformational leadership (to which it is often compared) is strategic, long-term oriented, and affects the organization beyond a specific change situation (Herold et al., 2008). In this sense, change leadership is a less-researched, event-based construct that concentrates on the roles that managers and change agents assume when influencing the implementation and outcomes of an organizational change. In contrast to a linear or step-based implementation, change leaders facilitate and engage the organization within a complex, iterative, and responsive process (Onyeneke & Abe, 2021).

In light of the evolving trends in the environments surrounding organizations that exert tremendous forces for changes in the way people work together, it is indispensable to understand and effectively practice change leadership (Dumas & Beinecke, 2018). As already observed by Anderson (2012, p. 326), the “[f]amiliar ways of working and our commonly held assumptions about work are rapidly disappearing”. One key driver is the COVID-19 pandemic and the rapid advancement and dissemination of communications technology and relatedly new working models. Many popular leadership models are considered insufficient to deal with such complex and rapid change as leaders need to adapt their leadership approaches to specific strategic change situations (Ahn et al., 2004). Within the organizational change literature, change leadership is one of the most frequently identified change drivers (Whelan-Berry & Somerville, 2010). Specifically, leaders must encourage the whole organization and its employees to learn, innovate, question and experiment, seek new perspectives, and encourage participation in the change (Burke, 2017). An extensive review of empirical, peer-reviewed journal articles by Ford and Ford (2012) found that the literature regarding the composition of effective change leadership is still rare and incomplete. However, the authors conclude that leaders significantly affect organizational change, an effect which the review by Lee et al. (2015) could expand to the attitudes and behaviors of change recipients.

Fundamental change leadership behaviors include developing a clear change vision, using persuasive communication, managing internal and external information, encouraging active participation, formalizing activities, showing concern for individuals who have trouble with the change, and implementing rites and ceremonies (Battilana et al., 2010; Herold et al., 2008; Higgs & Rowland, 2011; Szabla, 2007). Leaders serve as change role models through these change-related behaviors and can inspire employees (Bono & Judge, 2004). Effective communication thereby reduces uncertainty and builds trust (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Oreg et al., 2011). Moreover, involving employees in decision-making and recognizing their contributions (Morgan & Zeffane, 2003) and ensuring that employees have the necessary resources (Shin et al., 2012) fosters a sense of ownership and support for change. Based on these findings, we deduce the following hypothesis:

***Hypothesis #1:** Change leadership is positively related to employees' change-supportive behavior.*

Leader-Member-Exchange: High-Quality Relationships Matter

The change-related behaviors of leaders are not the only leadership-related variable predicting employees' support. LMX theory, initially developed by Dansereau Jr et al. (1975), has been widely researched and acknowledged as “one of the more interesting and useful approaches for studying

hypothesized linkages between leadership processes and outcomes” (Gerstner & Day, 1997, p. 827). In contrast to previous traditional leadership theories that assumed that leaders applied the same leadership style to all employees, LMX proposes that leaders treat each of their employees differently based on their relationship classification into a personal in-group or distant out-group (Dienesch & Liden, 1986; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). As leaders have limited time, resources, and authority, they cannot develop similar relations with all employees but only develop a few high-quality relationships (Bauer & Green, 1996). In this sense, LMX focuses on the dyadic relationship between a leader and an employee and refers to its quality of exchange as the degree of socio-emotional support and exchange of valuable resources (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).

Drawing on the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), LMX suggests that the higher the relationship quality between leader and employee, the more the employee feels obliged to repay the leader and the organization (Gouldner, 1960). Leaders provide high-quality LMX employees with information exchange, opportunities for involvement and development, and socio-emotional resources such as respect and loyalty (Deluga & Perry, 1991; Erdogan et al., 2006; Sparrowe & Liden, 1997). Several meta-analyses attest to the positive relationship between LMX and employees’ OCB (Dulebohn et al., 2012; Ilies et al., 2007; Martin et al., 2016). Such a relationship engenders employees’ desire to reciprocate this treatment by performing prosocial organizational behaviors and attitudes – including OCB, higher job performance, satisfaction, and commitment (Breevaart et al., 2015; Scandura & Graen, 1984). In this sense, high-quality LMX employees will engage in supportive behaviors to maintain their favorable exchange relationship with the leader. Thus, these employees will believe that change-supportive behavior verifies their relationship with the leader and their standing in the group. Consistent with social exchange theory, these arguments suggest the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis #2: LMX is positively related to employees’ change-supportive behavior.

Moreover, recent research has demonstrated that LMX and change recipients’ interpretations are vital boundary conditions to explain the direct effects of leader behaviors on employee outcomes (Armenakis & Harris, 2009; Michel & Tews, 2016). Employees’ perceptions of leadership are socially constructed through their interactions (Smircich & Morgan, 1982). Concretely, the proactive steps and effective communication inherent in change leadership foster positive reciprocal exchanges between leaders and employees. As change leaders engage in open dialogue, provide a clear vision, and actively participate in change initiatives, they establish a foundation for trust and commitment, aligning individual and organizational goals (Burnes et al., 2018). As has been shown in previous research, building trust with employees and demonstrating consistency is a key element in social exchange (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Meyer et al., 2002). Showcasing commitment and engagement can also positively influence the quality of the relationship (Kahn, 1990). Change leaders also articulate a compelling vision for the future – so when employees perceive alignment between their individual goals and the organizational vision promoted by change leaders, it strengthens the social exchange, enhancing the quality of LMX (Asgari et al., 2008; Podsakoff et al., 1990). Therefore, we deduce the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis #3: Change leadership is positively related to LMX.

Considering the arguments for Hypotheses 2 and 3, it becomes clear that LMX can be drawn on as an important mediator in the relationship between change leadership and change-supportive behavior. By establishing and/or enhancing positive LMX relationships, change leaders are likely to influence employees’ behaviors, fostering a supportive stance toward organizational change. This mediating role of LMX in translating leadership influence into desirable work behaviors has been supported in previous research (Bhal et al., 2009; Dulebohn et al., 2012; Newman et al., 2017; Xu et al., 2012). Consistent with social exchange theory, we suggest the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis #4: *The direct relationship between change leadership and employees' change-supportive behavior is mediated by LMX.*

Organizational Identification: Employees' Complex Identification Processes

Both an organization's identity and its employees' identification with it are crucial elements for change implementation. Expressly, organizational change necessitates formal and informal adjustments to the organization's and its employees' identities (Corley & Gioia, 2004; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006; Reissner, 2010). Moreover, a considerable body of academic work has proven that employees' process of organizational identification significantly impacts their willingness to support change efforts (Giessner, 2011; Tienari & Vaara, 2016). The organizational identity answers the question 'Who are we as an organization?', reflecting its 'fundamental essence' and representing employees' shared perceptions of its central, enduring, and distinctive characteristics (Clark et al., 2010; Haslam, 2004; Pratt et al., 2016). Derived from there, the concept of organizational identification can be defined as an individual's sense of psychological affinity to their employing organization – "the perception of oneness with or belongingness to the organization" (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 34) and "the congruence of individual and organizational values" (Riketta, 2005, p. 360).

Organizational identification can best be explained with the social identity approach that comprises the social identity theory (Tajfel et al., 1979) and self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987): People's membership in social groups forms part of their self-concept (i.e., their social identity) and accentuates members' perceived similarity. This accentuation reduces uncertainty because people know how to behave and what to expect from their environment as group members. To maintain a positive social identity, people strive for positive group member differentiation (Hogg & Terry, 2000). Thus, employees identify with their organization to satisfy their natural need for positive self-regard and reduced uncertainty in the world. Their salient organizational membership is a potential and significant source for this purpose. In this sense, organizational identification helps employees make sense of their experiences, make decisions, and anchor the self. As a moderator, we postulate that organizational identification is expected to influence the strength of the relationship between change leadership and change-supportive behavior. This interactive effect aligns with the idea that organizational identification is not a uniform construct but varies across individuals, influencing how they respond to leadership behaviors (Edwards & Peccei, 2010; He & Brown, 2013).

There are several reasons for this postulated moderating influence of which we will highlight two we find particularly striking. Firstly, high organizational identification implies a strong sense of belonging and attachment to the organization (Dutton et al., 1994) as well as a strong alignment between personal and organizational identities (van Dick & Kerschreiter, 2016; Van Knippenberg & Van Schie, 2000). This alignment is expected to create a favorable context for change because the organization's values, goals, and norms become more salient and congruent with employees' own, leading to a higher commitment to organizational goals and values (Dukerich et al., 2002). This process has been confirmed by dozens of empirical studies and corresponding meta-analyses, such as by Ashforth et al. (2008), Riketta (2005), Christ et al. (2003), and Van Dick et al. (2006). Following this reasoning, it can be deduced that highly identified employees perceive change initiatives as congruent with their organizational identity, values, and norms. Therefore, organizational identification contributes to a profound dedication among employees, so that those highly identified with the organization may be more receptive to the influence of change leaders, resulting in a more pronounced effect on their change-supportive behavior. Conversely, at lower levels of organizational identification, weaker alignment diminishes employees' receptivity to change leadership, resulting in a diminished effect on change-supportive behavior.

Secondly, effective communication is vital for successful change management. High organizational identification contributes to a shared understanding of the organization's vision and purpose (Brewer & Kramer, 1986; Loi et al., 2014). This shared understanding enhances leaders' communication effectiveness, which in turn may lead to heightened change-supportive behavior. In contrast, low organizational identification is linked to communication challenges, making it difficult to effectively communicate the rationale behind proposed changes (Christensen, 2014; Jones et al., 2004; Leonard & Grobler, 2006; Scott, 2020). Employees at lower levels of organizational identification may not fully understand or appreciate

the reasons behind the change, leading to decreased effectiveness of change leadership on change-supportive behavior. We argue that:

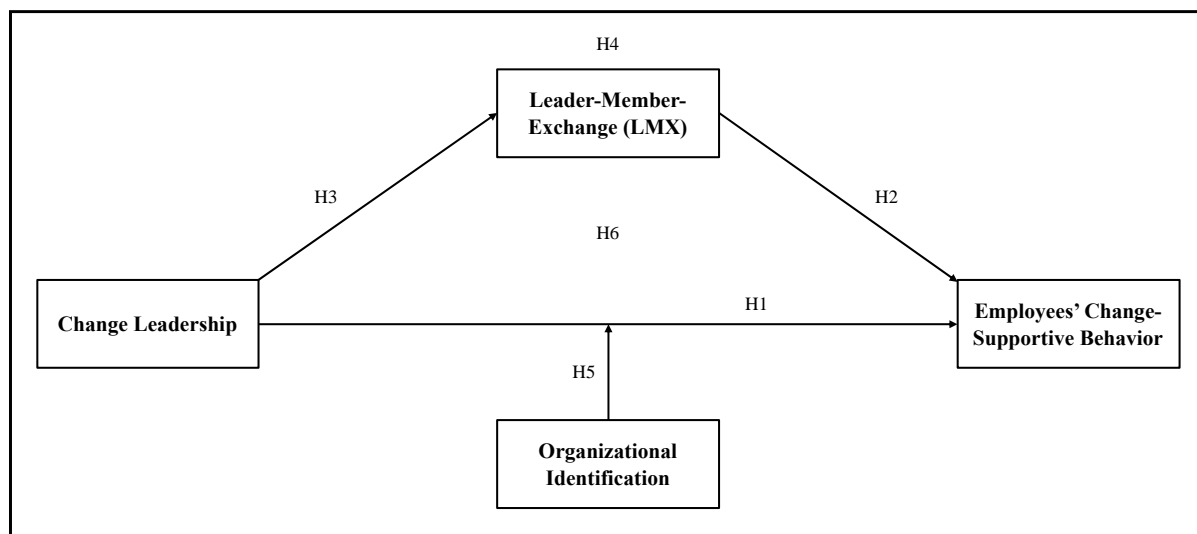
Hypothesis #5: *Organizational identification moderates the relationship between change leadership and employees' change-supportive behavior, such that the effect will be stronger (weaker) for higher (lower) organizational identification.*

Since we hypothesize that LMX mediates the relationship between change leadership and change-supportive behavior (Hypothesis 4) and that organizational identification moderates this relationship (Hypothesis 5), we can by extension postulate that combining the rationales behind these hypotheses leads to a conditional indirect effect of organizational identification:

Hypothesis #6: *The indirect influence of change leadership on change-supportive behavior through LMX is stronger (weaker) for employees with higher (lower) organizational identification.*

Summarizing the theoretical ideas and hypotheses above, we propose a moderated mediation model in which LMX mediates the direct relationship between change leadership and employees' change-supportive behavior and organizational identification moderates this relationship (see Figure 1).

**FIGURE 1
HYPOTHESIZED RESEARCH MODEL**



RESEARCH METHOD

Study Context, Design, and Sample

This work focuses on the transition period between ‘emergency’ and ‘routine’ organizational states after the outbreak of COVID-19, spanning the time from 2022 to 2023. This period offers a unique insight into how change leadership can influence the proactive behaviors of employees towards change, i.e., the transition to hybrid working models.

Snowball sampling, i.e., a non-random sampling technique where researchers intentionally select participants based on specific criteria that are relevant to the research objectives and ask them to refer other eligible participants, was employed as the method for this study. This approach was deemed appropriate for capturing diverse perspectives within the specific context of individuals experiencing a transition to remote work. In our research context, snowball sampling was particularly effective in accessing participants

within a specific niche or shared experience (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). Given that the study focused on individuals with the common experience of transitioning to remote work, snowball sampling facilitated the recruitment of participants with relevant insights and experiences (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). The inclusion criterion for all participants was explicitly that respondents were currently employed, regardless of their professional position or industry, and had experienced a shift from daily office work to the option of remote work since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, the targeted population was knowledge workers. The recruitment process was initiated through the authors' professional and personal networks and extended through various channels such as email and professional platforms like LinkedIn. Leveraging personal and professional networks ensured a degree of homogeneity in the sample, aligning with the study's focus on individuals undergoing a common organizational change. Data collection took the form of a cross-sectional online survey, administered through the Qualtrics platform. A pilot study involving five participants was conducted to assess the survey's feasibility and refine it based on feedback. The survey, offered in both English and German, consisted of 32 questions across eight sections. A translation-back-translation approach of the English scales, conducted by the native-speaking German co-author and double-checked by a second native-speaking German colleague, ensured linguistic accuracy and cultural relevance (Brislin, 1986). Data collection spanned from November 2022 to September 2023. For data analysis, IBM SPSS Statistics software (version 29) was employed.

Our sample comprised 282 respondents from diverse organizations with a majority (64%) female, and an average age of 29 years ($SD = 8.8$). The average tenure in their current position was four years ($SD = 4.4$). Among the participants, 62% reported prior change experience, and 23% held managerial or leadership roles. The sample size was determined from a pool of 352 received responses. After excluding 56 incomplete datasets and 14 with incorrect answers to control questions, a final dataset of 282 responses was deemed usable for analysis. Regarding potential outliers, four cases were found for change leadership, eight for change-supportive behavior, and four for LMX. To avoid data bias, these were not removed from the data set.

Measures

Employees' Change-Supportive Behavior

To conceptualize employees' change-supportive behavior, the championing behavior sub-scale by Herscovitch and Meyer (2002) was utilized. Notably, Faupel and Süß (2019) showed that from six items, two ("I persevere with the change to reach goals" and "I try to overcome co-workers' resistance toward the change") caused a significant difference in the measurement level between those participants who had leadership responsibility and those who did not, which is why the authors deleted the two items. Following their lead, the current study also employs only four items that have high composite reliability ($CR = .86$). These items include "I try to find ways to overcome change-related difficulties" and "I speak positively about the change to outsiders", rated on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Change Leadership

To assess change leadership, the questionnaire used the seven items adapted from Herold et al. (2008) with high internal reliability ($\alpha = .89$). Each respondent was asked to rate how extensively they perceived their leaders to be engaged in the seven change leadership behaviors. Sample items include that the leader "developed a clear vision for what was going to be achieved by our work unit" and "carefully monitored and communicated the progress of the change implementation". Employee perceptions of leadership activities were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Organizational Identification

The respondents' level of organizational identification was measured with a 6-item scale developed by Mael and Ashforth (1992) with high internal reliability ($\alpha = 0.87$). Sample items include "When someone criticizes (name of school), it feels like a personal insult" and "This school's successes are my successes". The word "organization" was inserted instead of "school". The six items were assessed with a five-point

Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). The scale was reverse-coded before the analysis to match the other scale directions.

Leader-Member-Exchange

Employees' perceptions of their LMX quality were assessed through the LMX-7 scale developed by Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) with high internal reliability ($\alpha = .90$). This version was chosen because the authors recommended – in their review of LMX development over 25 years – the use of LMX-7 over all other measures of LMX. For the German version, the German LMX-7 version translated by Schyns (2002) was used with even higher internal reliability ($\alpha = .92$). An example item is “How well does your leader recognize your potential?” assessed with a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (low LMX) to 5 (high LMX) with different labels.

Control Variables

Five control variables (two demographic-related and three work-related) were controlled to ensure that extraneous factors did not influence the hypothesized effects. Consistent with previous OCB research, the variables gender and age were controlled for as these demographics have been shown to relate to promotive OCB (Michel & Tews, 2016; Van Dyne & LePine, 1998). It can be expected that people's change experience might influence how much they identify with their organization and respond to changes (Nortier, 1995). Moreover, people's working experience and status, in the form of managerial position, might influence their behavior, as El Badawy et al. (2017) show. Moreover, past research has shown that employees' organizational tenure influences their change-supportive behavior (Agarwal, 2016).

Analytical Strategy

The statistical significance test by Preacher et al. (2007) using the PROCESS macro approach (Hayes, 2017) was employed to analyze the hypothesized relationships, consistent with the methods applied by previous studies that also predict mediation and moderated mediation frameworks, such as by De Clercq and Pereira (2021), Ma and Jiang (2018), and Helpap (2016). The PROCESS macro approach is an observed variable ordinary least squares (OLS) and logistic regression path analysis modeling tool specialized in mediation, moderation, and conditional process analysis.

As Hypotheses 1-3 identify a set of relationships that constitute a mediation model, which is formalized in Hypothesis 4, these hypotheses were tested by mediation analysis. We estimated the indirect effect of change leadership on change-supportive behavior through LMX by using PROCESS macro's Model 4. The first step to test Hypotheses 1-3 included an assessment of the signs and significance levels of the direct paths between change leadership and change-supportive behavior (c' path), change leadership and LMX (a path), and LMX and change-supportive behavior (b path). In the second step, the interactive effect of LMX on the direct relationship between change leadership and change supportive behavior ($a*b$) and the total effect (c path) were examined to test Hypothesis 4. Hypothesis 5 was tested by moderation analysis through PROCESS macro's Model 1 and the overall moderated mediation, postulated in Hypothesis 6, was tested through PROCESS macro's Model 5. Both tests compared the effect sizes in the conditional relationships when the moderator organizational identification was one standard deviation below its mean, at its mean, and one standard deviation above its mean, excluding (Hypothesis 5) and including (Hypothesis 6) the presence of the mediator LMX. For all analyses, the variables forming products were mean-centered to decrease multicollinearity in the regression equation and create a meaningful zero point, hence improving the interpretation (Frazier et al., 2004). In addition, bootstrapping intervals, resampling the distribution 5,000 times and thus reducing standard deviation, were employed to draw more accurate inferences from the results (Hayes, 2017). Confidence intervals (CIs) were generated at a 95% level. This methodological choice allowed for a robust exploration of the factors influencing employees' change-supportive behavior.

RESULTS

Preliminary Analyses

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Before the hypothesis testing, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted with AMOS (Analysis of Moment Structures) to assess how well our chosen indicators measured the latent constructs, which is crucial in validating the scales. A four-factor CFA model was specified in line with the study variables, and without the hypothesized relationships among them. The CFA model had a chi-square value of 342.29 with 238 degrees of freedom, and a significant p-value of 0.00. Given the sample size ($n = 282$) and the number of observed variables (24 items), a significant p-value was expected (Hair et al., 2014). However, a close examination of absolute, incremental, and parsimonious fit indices showed that the model had a very good fit; SRMR = 0.053, RMSEA = 0.039, GFI = 0.907, CFI = 0.969, TLI = 0.964, CMIN/DF = 1.438. Regarding the robustness of the construct validity testing, all standardized item loading estimates, except for the first item of change-supportive behavior (0.257), exceeded the recommended minimum threshold of 0.5 (Barclay et al., 1995). A second CFA model, excluding this item, showed no significant model fit improvement (chi-square = 309.94, DF = 217, $p < .01$; SRMR = 0.047 ($\Delta 0.006$); RMSEA = 0.039 ($\Delta 0.000$); GFI = 0.912 ($\Delta 0.005$); CFI = 0.972 ($\Delta 0.003$); TLI = 0.967 ($\Delta 0.003$); CMIN/DF = 1.428 ($\Delta 0.010$)). Hence, all the indicators proposed have been retained in the research, also to preserve content reliability as the first item of change-supportive behavior is important for the construct (“I try to find ways to overcome change-related difficulties.”).

Construct reliability was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha and composite reliability (ρ_c). Following the guideline by Nunnally and Bernstein (1994) that suggests 0.70 as a benchmark, we observed good reliability as all ρ_c values exceeded this threshold. Cronbach’s alpha was re-computed for each scale and further supported construct reliability. Evaluating the average variance extracted (AVE) which should be greater than 0.50, all AVE values were above this threshold in our study, indicating that 50% or more of the variance of the construct was due to its indicators. Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell-Larcker Criterion, i.e., through a comparison of the square root of the AVE to all inter-factor correlations (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Results indicated adequate discriminant validity as the square root of AVE for each factor was greater than all inter-factor correlations. A summary of these results is provided in Table 1.

TABLE 1
VALIDITY, RELIABILITY, AND LATENT FACTOR CORRELATIONS

Construct	Cronbach’s α	ρ_c	AVE	CSB	CL	OID	LMX
CSB	.772	0.803	0.541	<i>0.736</i>			
CL	.882	0.880	0.513	0.426***	<i>0.716</i>		
OID	.852	0.856	0.500	0.249***	0.180**	<i>0.707</i>	
LMX	.893	0.896	0.556	0.396***	0.618***	0.351***	<i>0.746</i>

Note. Change-supportive behavior (CSB), change leadership (CL), organizational identification (OID), leader-member-exchange (LMX), composite reliability (ρ_c), average variance extracted (AVE), ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, Statistics in bold and italics represent the square root of the respective AVE.

To determine common-method bias, the Common Latent Factor technique was employed (Richardson et al., 2009). Even though the difference in the chi-squared value was significant compared to the original measurement model (7.55 at 1 df), none of the differences in standardized regression weights were higher than the threshold of 0.20 (Lowry & Gaskin, 2014), indicating that common-method bias was not a substantial concern (see Table 2).

TABLE 2
COMPARISON OF STANDARDIZED REGRESSION WEIGHTS FOR
COMMON METHOD BIAS

Standardized Regression Weight		Estimate with CLF	Estimate no CLF	Difference
<i>CSB_4</i>	← <i>CSB</i>	0.591	0.661	0.070
<i>CSB_3</i>	← <i>CSB</i>	0.892	0.93	0.038
<i>CSB_2</i>	← <i>CSB</i>	0.832	0.892	0.060
<i>CSB_1</i>	← <i>CSB</i>	0.152	0.257	0.105
<i>CL_7</i>	← <i>CL</i>	0.572	0.66	0.088
<i>CL_6</i>	← <i>CL</i>	0.619	0.706	0.087
<i>CL_5</i>	← <i>CL</i>	0.599	0.7	0.101
<i>CL_4</i>	← <i>CL</i>	0.658	0.744	0.086
<i>CL_3</i>	← <i>CL</i>	0.635	0.699	0.064
<i>CL_2</i>	← <i>CL</i>	0.627	0.712	0.085
<i>CL_1</i>	← <i>CL</i>	0.694	0.786	0.092
<i>OID_6</i>	← <i>OID</i>	0.499	0.575	0.076
<i>OID_5</i>	← <i>OID</i>	0.736	0.805	0.069
<i>OID_4</i>	← <i>OID</i>	0.645	0.735	0.090
<i>OID_3</i>	← <i>OID</i>	0.577	0.653	0.076
<i>OID_2</i>	← <i>OID</i>	0.664	0.729	0.065
<i>OID_1</i>	← <i>OID</i>	0.661	0.723	0.062
<i>LMX_7</i>	← <i>LMX</i>	0.757	0.861	0.104
<i>LMX_6</i>	← <i>LMX</i>	0.726	0.82	0.094
<i>LMX_5</i>	← <i>LMX</i>	0.583	0.673	0.090
<i>LMX_4</i>	← <i>LMX</i>	0.704	0.785	0.081
<i>LMX_3</i>	← <i>LMX</i>	0.6	0.689	0.089
<i>LMX_2</i>	← <i>LMX</i>	0.658	0.77	0.112
<i>LMX_1</i>	← <i>LMX</i>	0.419	0.582	0.163

Note. Common Latent Factor (CLF), change-supportive behavior (CSB), change leadership (CL), organizational identification (OID), leader-member-exchange (LMX).

Descriptive Analysis

The means, standard deviations, and Pearson product-moment correlations are depicted in Table 3. As tenure did not correlate with the main variables, it was omitted from the regression analyses (Becker, 2005).

TABLE 3
MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS, AND CORRELATIONS OF VARIABLES

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1 CSB	5.46	.97	1								
2 LMX	3.61	.76	.375**	1							
3 CL	3.39	.82	.405**	.552**	1						
4 OID	3.32	.89	.290**	.289**	.157**	1					
Control Variables											
5 Gender ^a	1.65	.48	.160*	.018	.020	.126*	1				
6 Age	29.41	8.80	.123*	-.101	-.097	.114	-.131*	1			
7 Tenure	3.67	4.43	.081	-.064	-.092	.091	-.053	.596**	1		
8 Change Experience ^b	1.38	.49	-.157**	-.110	-.225**	-.048	-.007	-.222**	-.199**	1	
9 Position ^c	1.77	.42	-.124*	-.173**	-.098	-.194**	.175**	-.318**	-.215**	.277**	1

Note. N = 282. Change-supportive behavior (CSB), leader-member-exchange (LMX), change leadership (CL), organizational identification (OID). * p < .05. ** p < .01. a 1 = male, 2 = female, b 1 = yes, 2 = no, c 1 = yes, 2 = no.

Hypotheses Testing

Hypotheses 1-4

Mediation. The mediation analysis for testing Hypotheses 1-4, i.e., the direct relationships between change leadership and change-supportive behavior (Hypothesis 1), LMX and change-supportive behavior (Hypothesis 2), and change leadership and LMX (Hypothesis 3), as well as the overall mediating influence of LMX on the relationship between change leadership and change-supportive behavior (Hypothesis 4), showed significant results.

TABLE 4
RESULTS OF MEDIATION ANALYSIS

Path	Unstandardized B Coefficient	Standardized β Coefficient	Standard Error	t-value	p-value
<i>CL</i> → <i>LMX</i> (<i>a</i>)	.495	.535	.055	9.071	< .001
<i>LMX</i> → <i>CSB</i> (<i>b</i>)	.288	.225	.092	3.144	< .01
Direct Effect (<i>c'</i>)	.343	.290	.898	3.917	< .001
Total effect (<i>c</i>)	.486	.410	.089	5.425	< .001
Indirect Effect (<i>a*b</i>)	.143		.048	95% CI [.053, .240]	
Indirect Effect (<i>a*b</i>)		.120	.039	95% CI [.044, .199]	
Control Variables					
Gender	.037	.184	.113	3.307	< .01
Age	.018	.165	.007	2.776	< .01
Change Experience	-.021	-.012	.125	-.168	> .05
Managerial Position	-.138	-.060	.132	-1.049	> .05

Note. N = 282. Variables forming products were mean-centered prior to analysis. Change leadership (CL), leader-member-exchange (LMX), change-supportive behavior (CSB). ^a 1 = male, 2 = female, ^b 1 = yes, 2 = no, ^c 1 = yes, 2 = no.

The findings of the analysis (see Table 4) affirm that the direct relationship between change leadership and change-supportive behavior (c') is significant ($\beta = 0.290, p < .001$), supporting Hypothesis 1. Moreover, the relationship between change leadership and LMX (a) is significant ($\beta = .535, p < .001$), supporting Hypothesis 2, as is the relation (b) between LMX and CSB ($\beta = .225, p < .01$), supporting Hypothesis 3. Additionally, the results show a significant and positive partial complementary mediating influence, expressed as the indirect effect ($a*b$), of LMX on the relationship between change leadership and change-supportive behavior ($\beta = .120, 95\% \text{ CI } [.044, .199]$), lending support for Hypothesis 4. When considering both the direct and mediated pathways, the total effect (c) of change leadership on change-supportive behavior is substantial ($\beta = 0.410, p < .001$). Gender ($\beta = .184, p < 0.01$) and age ($\beta = .165, p < 0.01$) were found to be significant covariates in the model, suggesting their relevance in influencing employees' responses to organizational change.

Hypothesis 5

Moderation. Even though the moderating effect of organizational identification on the relationship between change leadership and change-supportive behavior was significant, it was negative and contradictory to Hypothesis 5, which hence needs to be rejected.

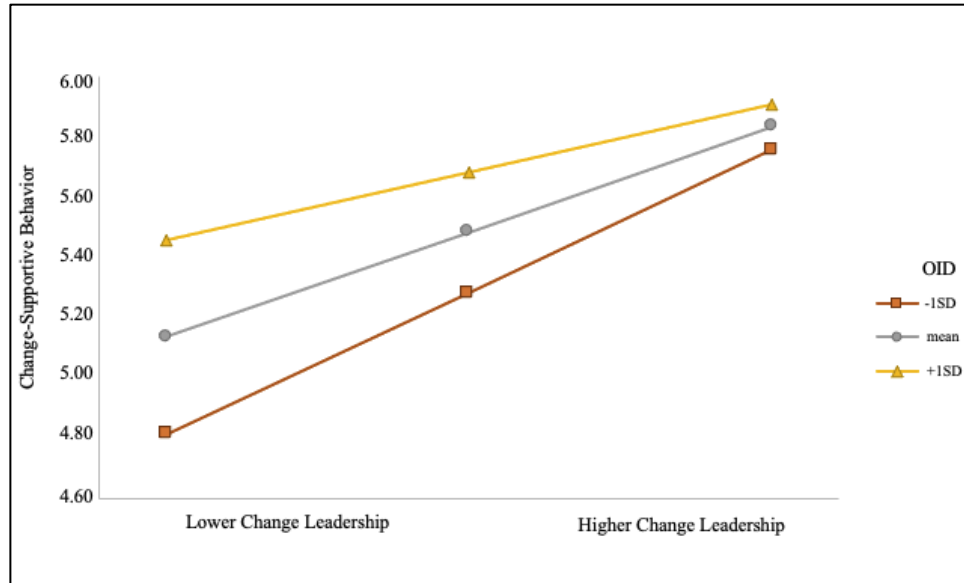
TABLE 5
RESULTS OF MODERATION ANALYSIS

Predictor	Unstandardized B Coefficient	Standard Error	t-value	p-value
<i>Intercept</i>	3.811	.555	6.865	< .0001
<i>CL</i>	.425	.085	4.998	< .001
<i>OID</i>	.224	.070	3.191	< .01
<i>CL * OID Interaction</i>	-.170	.077	.2217	< .05
<i>Term</i>				
Control Variables				
<i>Gender</i>	.301	.112	2.682	< .01
<i>Age</i>	.017	.006	2.679	< .01
<i>Change Experience</i>	-.062	.123	-.503	> .05
<i>Managerial Position</i>	-.101	.133	-.763	> .05

Note. N = 282. Table entries represent unstandardized parameter estimates due to statistical restrictions in moderation analysis by PROCESS. Variables forming products were mean-centered prior to analysis. Change leadership (CL), organizational identification (OID). a 1 = male, 2 = female, b 1 = yes, 2 = no, c 1 = yes, 2 = no.

The results (see Table 5) show a significant negative moderating interaction effect between change leadership and organizational identification on change-supportive behavior ($B = -.170, p < 0.05$). This negative interaction suggests that as organizational identification increases, the positive impact of change leadership on change-supportive behavior decreases; the opposite effect was postulated. Examining the conditional effects of change leadership at different values of organizational identification reveals nuanced dynamics. The Johnson-Neyman analysis identifies a significant region for organizational identification below 1.099, highlighting specifically low levels of organizational identification where the interaction effect is pronounced. The control variables gender ($B = .301, p < 0.01$) and age ($B = 0.017, p < 0.01$), show significant effects, implying that females and older employees tend to exhibit higher change-supportive behavior.

FIGURE 2
MODERATING EFFECT OF ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTIFICATION ON THE
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHANGE LEADERSHIP AND
CHANGE-SUPPORTIVE BEHAVIOR



Results of the simple slope analysis (Aiken & West, 1991) conducted to understand better the nature of the moderation effect of organizational identification are shown in Figure 2. The results indicate that at a low level of organizational identification, the impact of change leadership on change-supportive behavior is much stronger ($B = .576, p < .001$) in comparison to the mean level of organizational identification ($B = .425, p < .001$) and high organizational identification ($B = .275, p < .05$). As the level of organizational identification increases, the strength of the relationship between change leadership and change-supportive behavior decreases.

Hypothesis 6

Moderated Mediation. The overall moderated mediation model, i.e., the postulated conditionally indirect effect, was significant, though the interaction effect of organizational identification again proved negative, so Hypothesis 6 cannot be accepted.

TABLE 6
RESULTS OF MODERATED MEDIATION ANALYSIS

Paths	Unstandardized B Coefficient	Standard Error	t-value	p-value
<i>CL → LMX (a)</i>	.495	.055	9.071	< .0001
<i>LMX → CSB (b)</i>	.217	.089	2.417	< .05
<i>Direct Effect (c')</i>	.326	.092	3.533	< .001
<i>Indirect Effect (a*b)</i>	.108	.045	95% CI [.017, .164]	
<i>CL * OID Interaction</i>	-.157	.074	-2.123	< .05
<i>Term</i>				
Control Variables				
<i>Gender</i>	.305	.112	2.741	< .01
<i>Age</i>	.019	.007	2.970	< .01
<i>Change Experience</i>	-.069	.123	-.557	> .05
<i>Managerial Position</i>	-.049	.131	-.377	> .05

Note. N = 282. Table entries represent unstandardized parameter estimates due to statistical restrictions in moderation analysis by PROCESS. Variables forming products were mean-centered prior to analysis. Change leadership (CL), leader-member-exchange (LMX), change-supportive behavior (CSB). a 1 = male, 2 = female, b 1 = yes, 2 = no, c 1 = yes, 2 = no.

The results (see Table 6) revealed a significant mediating influence of LMX in the relationship between change leadership and change-supportive behavior ($B = 0.108$, 95% CI [0.017, 0.164]). Moreover, the interaction between change leadership and organizational identification significantly negatively moderated the relationship with change-supportive behavior ($B = -0.157$, $t = -2.123$, $p < .05$), hence leading to a rejection of Hypothesis 6. The highest order unconditional interaction ($X*W$) was found to be significant ($F = 4.507$, $df1 = 1$, $df2 = 273$, $p < .05$), further indicating the significance of the interaction between change leadership and organizational identification. Thereby, conditional effects at different values of organizational identification suggested a significant interaction effect below the threshold value of organizational identification at 0.683, so the moderating effect of organizational identification appears to be only significant at lower levels. Specifically, probing the interaction effect at three levels of the moderator shows that at a low level of organizational identification ($B = .465$, $p < .001$), the relationship between change leadership and change-supportive behavior is much stronger in comparison to the mean level of organizational identification ($B = .326$, $p < .001$), where it is attenuated. At a high level of organizational identification, the interaction effect is not only nearly flat but also not significant ($B = .187$, $p = 1.21$). Hence, as the level of organizational identification increases, the strength of the relationship between change leadership and change-supportive behavior decreases. In summary, the results suggest a nuanced relationship between change leadership and change-supportive behavior depending on the level of organizational identification. While the positive relationship between change leadership and change-supportive behavior is strong at lower organizational identification levels and remains significant at the mean level, it diminishes and becomes non-significant at higher levels of organizational identification. Control variables demonstrated that gender ($B = 0.305$, $t = 2.741$, $p < .01$) and age ($B = 0.019$, $t = 2.970$, $p < .01$) were significantly associated with change-supportive behavior.

DISCUSSION

Our article addresses the overall research question of how leaders can foster active behavioral support from their employees during change, forming an integral part of the transition to hybrid 'New Work' models. While the effect of leadership on employee behavior has been studied earlier, to the best of our knowledge no studies have analyzed the underlying mechanisms of LMX and organizational identification in the context of change-related predictor (change leadership) and outcome (change-supportive behavior)

variables. The potential mediating role of the relationship quality between leader and employee was analyzed as one explanation of how leaders influence their subordinates. This mediation was proposed to be moderated by employees' organizational identification. Our approach addresses researchers' call for a more nuanced analysis of the different antecedents of employees' behavior (Dumas & Beinecke, 2018) and equips leaders with some best practices in change management.

In this study, all postulated direct relationships could be proven, with change leadership significantly influencing employees' change-supportive behavior (Hypothesis 1) and demonstrating a direct relationship with LMX (Hypothesis 2). Employees who perceived their leader to display change leadership also showed greater proactive support and increased LMX relationship quality. Additionally, LMX had a direct relation with change-supportive behavior (Hypothesis 3), indicating that LMX quality influenced how much employees supported the ongoing change initiative. Apart from the direct relationships, LMX mediated the connection between change leadership and change-supportive behavior (Hypothesis 4). Hence, LMX is essential to creating proactive employee behavior supporting organizational change. Contrary to what we hypothesized, this study could not prove the positive moderating role of organizational identification (Hypotheses 5 and 6) but revealed a negative moderation effect of organizational identification on the relationship between change leadership and change-supportive behavior. The effect was especially pronounced for employees with high organizational identification. This suggests that change leadership effectiveness varies with employee identification levels, emphasizing the need for leaders to focus on maintaining high-quality relationships in high-organizational identification environments.

These novel findings can be explained in the following way: On the one hand, at high levels of organizational identification, employees already exhibit a strong alignment with organizational goals (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). The pronounced identification with the organization implies a high level of commitment, making additional efforts by leaders, as initially proposed in Hypothesis 5, seem redundant. Employees with high organizational identification are intrinsically motivated to support organizational changes due to their strong alignment with the organizational identity, which may lead to a 'ceiling effect' of additional change leadership efforts (Dukerich et al., 2002). The depth of commitment in high organizational identification scenarios enhances employees' intrinsic motivation to engage in extra-role behaviors like change-supportive behavior (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Additionally, at high levels of organizational identification, the non-significant effect of change leadership on change-supportive behavior, as proposed in Hypothesis 6, can further be attributed to the influence of high-quality LMX. Research has proven that leaders are 'entrepreneurs', 'impresarios', and 'custodians' of the organizational identity (Haslam & Ellemers, 2011; Schinoff et al., 2016). In a high-quality LMX, the leader might provide a sense of security and bond to the organization, as high LMX implies a robust relationship where the leader is perceived as an effective representative of the organization (Eisenbeiss et al., 2008). This sense of security diminishes the need for additional change leadership efforts, as the leader is already seen as a trustworthy and effective communicator of the organizational vision and goals (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002). Moreover, the exchange relationship provides employees with the motivation to reciprocate positive leader-member interactions through extra-role behaviors, such as change-supportive behavior (Breevaart et al., 2015). On the other hand, at low levels of organizational identification, employees may lack a strong sense of security and identification with the organization, leading to a void during organizational changes (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Change, in such situations, represents instability and uncertainty. Leaders, through effective change leadership behaviors, act as anchors providing guidance and stability during turbulent times (Van Knippenberg et al., 2007). In the absence of an organizational anchor, i.e., organizational identification, employees are more receptive to explicit change leadership behaviors as they strongly seek direction and a sense of purpose. This anchoring effect of change leadership in low organizational identification scenarios is reinforced by the concept of a leader as a sense-maker during change (Aitken & Von Treuer, 2014). Leaders, through their change-oriented behaviors, fill the void of uncertainty and provide a clear narrative that aids employees in making sense of the change, thereby fostering change-supportive behavior (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). The lack of a strong internalized organizational identity at low organizational identification levels intensifies the need for explicit change leadership to serve as guiding principles (Corley & Gioia, 2004; van Knippenberg, 2016). Additionally, the absence of a robust organizational anchor in low

organizational identification conditions accentuates the impact of change leadership, making the behaviors of leaders more influential in shaping employees' change-supportive behavior.

Theoretical Implications

This article builds upon and contributes to the existing literature by providing several novel empirical implications that establish a clear link between the previously rather separate research areas of leadership, organizational change, social identity, and social exchange.

Firstly, this research responded to the call of Herold et al. (2008) to examine the influence of leadership behaviors on change participants' reaction to and support of change by proving the direct relationship between change leadership and employees' change-supportive behavior, thereby advancing this emerging domain of leadership research. While other concepts, such as transformational leadership, are well developed, less is empirically verified about the change-related tactic behaviors that successful leaders display during change and how these affect employees (Hughes, 2018). Hence, this study contributes to research by empirically validating the relevance of change leadership in influencing employee behavioral response to change. As such, the herein-verified construct of change leadership not only allows researchers to gain insights about what constitutes effective management practices but also proves that these practices directly affect employee outcomes. These practices include developing a clear vision for the future, advertising the reason for the change, building coalitions, empowering employees, and constantly communicating the progress (Herold et al., 2008). Thereby, this study extends the findings of Onyeneke and Abe (2021) who could not prove a direct effect of change leadership and only investigated employees' attitudinal outcomes. Moreover, by exploring change leadership as the dependent variable, this study answered the call for further research from Dumas and Beinecke (2018). In their meta-analytical review of hundreds of peer-reviewed journal articles on change leadership over 16 years, these authors stressed the academic need for more empirical evidence of change leadership as an adaptable, complex, and situational leadership style. Furthermore, exploring employee support for change in the form of behavioral dimensions allowed us to uncover the empirical link between change leadership and proactive support. Unearthing this relationship progresses related research a step closer to predicting overt employee behavior toward change.

Secondly, the study reinforces the available literature purporting that LMX is considered an important construct that can yield a range of positive outcomes for individuals and organizations alike (Dulebohn et al., 2012; Gerstner & Day, 1997; Martin et al., 2016). The concept of LMX has long been recognized as a critical factor in understanding leader-employee relationships. This study significantly contributes to the theoretical landscape by exploring the role of LMX in the context of organizational change. Thereby, the findings affirm the direct influence of change leadership on LMX, highlighting the integral role of leaders in shaping high-quality exchanges with their followers during times of change. This finding connects and builds on prior research about other leadership styles that are linked to LMX, such as the findings about transformational leadership by Nandedkar and Brown (2018) or servant leadership by Newman et al. (2017). Beyond this, and even more importantly, we demonstrate what the study by Yukl et al. (2009) could not: change-oriented aspects of leadership behavior have indeed a significant influence on the quality of LMX. Adding on to that, our empirical evidence emphasizes the dynamic nature of LMX, not only as an outcome of effective leadership but also as a precursor to employees' behavioral responses to change. Specifically, by establishing the direct relationship between LMX and change-supportive behavior, this research underscores the importance of fostering positive leader-member relationships for promoting proactive support for organizational change, hence advancing the understanding of how the quality of these exchanges influences employees' willingness to actively engage in change initiatives. This outcome extends prior findings about the linkages between LMX and extra-role behavioral outcomes in diverse research such as by Michel and Tews (2016), Harris et al. (2014) and Bhal et al. (2009). Hence, our article proposes that there is more to leadership in implementing change, such as hybrid working models, than simply the effect of the leadership behaviors, such as change leadership, and change-related outcomes, such as change-supportive behavior (Ford et al., 2021). The study goes a step further and argues that concerning behavioral outcomes and the influence of change leadership thereon, the unique characteristics of LMX make individuals perceive that their leader is not just initiating change but is personally invested in their growth,

well-being, and success. This identification of LMX as a mediator between change leadership and change-supportive behavior enhances the theoretical understanding of the underlying processes through which leadership behaviors translate into tangible outcomes. The mediating role emphasizes the significance of the relational aspect between leaders and employees in mediating the impact of leadership on employees' change-supportive behavior. Despite the ample existing research on LMX, this study is among the very few that investigated and found a statistically significant mediating role of the variable between two behavioral constructs, making this role a novel finding. The mediation effect signifies that the positive influence of change leadership on employees' proactive support for change is not solely a direct result of leadership behaviors but is intricately linked to the quality of the relationship established between leaders and employees, with LMX serving as a facilitator of this crucial connection. In other words, the effectiveness of change leadership in eliciting proactive support is, to a significant extent, channeled through the strength and positivity of the leader-member exchanges. The dynamic and positive interactions shaped by LMX create a foundation that amplifies the impact of change leadership, emphasizing the relational dimension as a critical conduit for translating leadership efforts into tangible employee behaviors that actively support and drive organizational change. Thus, we were able to broaden the knowledge about LMX in both leadership and behavioral sciences realms and contribute to refining and expanding existing theories on LMX, shedding light on its multifaceted role in the context of organizational change.

Thirdly, this study introduces significant theoretical implications about the influence of employees' organizational identification. The unanticipated negative moderation effect challenges prior assumptions and offers new insights into the nuanced dynamics of organizational identification during change. Our findings indicate that at low levels of organizational identification, the impact of change leadership on change-supportive behavior is pronounced but as organizational identification increases, the strength of the effect diminishes. This counters the anticipated positive moderation effect, highlighting the need for a refined understanding of how strong organizational identification may influence the effectiveness of change leadership. The rejection of Hypotheses 5 and 6 challenges conventional wisdom and prompts a reconsideration of the assumed positive relationship between organizational identification and the effectiveness of change leadership. Our findings suggest that as employees develop a stronger sense of identification with their organization, the impact of specific change leadership behaviors becomes less influential in shaping their change-supportive behaviors. Moreover, the non-significant effect at high organizational identification levels, when considering LMX as a mediator, emphasizes the complexity of the relationship between organizational identification, LMX, and change leadership. It also suggests that the influence of organizational identification on the effectiveness of change leadership might be contingent on the quality of leader-member exchanges and that the effect of change leadership on change-supportive behavior through LMX as a mediator is more effective when organizational identification is low. The unexpected findings regarding organizational identification moderation challenge traditional assumptions and pave the way for a deeper exploration of the intricate connections between organizational identification, LMX, and change leadership during organizational change initiatives.

Practical Implications

This study also has several implications for organizations, their HR departments, and leaders. If these stakeholders seek to foster employees' proactive change support during transitions such as moving to hybrid working practices, the influencing patterns leading to such behavior need to be adequately understood and acted upon, whereby the present findings can assist.

From a practical standpoint, our findings underscore the critical importance of aligning change strategies with the distinct levels of employees' organizational identification to optimize the impact of change leadership and LMX. This practical implication not only enhances the effectiveness of organizational change initiatives but also offers a cost-efficient approach by directing training efforts to the segments where they would yield the most significant returns. The first practical element involves a meticulous evaluation of the company-wide organizational identification levels and a more granular approach to conducting an employee mapping of organizational identification, potentially per department or team. By understanding the organizational identification landscape within the organization,

organizations can gain insights into the diverse levels of commitment, allegiance, and identification among their workforces. This involves the strategic identification of highly identified individuals or teams who already showcase a strong alignment with organizational values and those with lower identification levels. This identification of organizational identification levels should become the cornerstone for tailoring change strategies. When organizational identification is low, targeted training initiatives in change leadership are imperative to bridge the gap and foster employee support (Luo et al., 2016). On the other hand, high organizational identification segments may require less intensive change leadership efforts, as the intrinsic motivation to support organizational changes is already prevalent (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). For this purpose, HR departments should utilize surveys, interviews, or already existing organizational data to capture employees' organizational identification. Once the assessment is complete, the workforce should be segmented based on the organizational identification levels, e.g., into two groups of lower and higher identified segments. Building upon organizational identification evaluation and employee mapping, the next step would be to craft tailored change strategies that align with the identified organizational identification segments. Recognizing that highly identified teams and lower identified teams may respond differently to change initiatives, organizations can optimize their resources by tailoring their approaches accordingly. For higher-identified teams, the organization should emphasize continuity and alignment. It should focus on communicating how the proposed changes align with existing organizational values and contribute to the long-term goals. Highlighting the preservation of the organizational identity becomes a key aspect. For lower-identified teams, on the other hand, targeted change leadership becomes central; training initiatives should concentrate on equipping leaders with skills that engage, involve, and motivate employees actively.

The second practical element focuses on targeted change leadership enablement. Recognizing that only a minute fraction of organizations may have organizational identification levels averaging plus one standard deviation, it is imperative to equip leaders with the necessary skills to effectively lead their teams through change. Here, the key lies in enabling leaders to adapt their leadership style to their individual employees, involving them in every step of the change – as subsumed under the umbrella construct 'change leadership'. In the first place, leaders should comprehend the impact and influence of their behavior on the change recipients and hence the overall change success (Jaleha & Machuki, 2018; Wren & Dulewicz, 2005). Concretely, leaders need to be aware of their actions and recognize that their employees are not just passive followers but must be actively involved in the change (Luo et al., 2016). Through leader development initiatives, companies can offer their leaders specific training to learn the skills and behaviors associated with change leadership (Alqatawenah, 2018; Michaelis et al., 2009). Thereby, leaders will not only understand the positive effect their leadership has on employees' change-supportive behavior but also learn how to engage, involve, motivate, and encourage an entire workforce through their behavior. For this purpose, organizations, i.e., their management and HR departments, can draw on a multitude of training programs and educational methods, such as coaching, action learning, and 360-degree feedback (Day & Dragoni, 2015; Day & Harrison, 2007). Content-wise, such training programs should focus on each aspect of change leadership. The seven items that define change leadership can be clustered into three sub-dimensions: communication, networking, and implementation support. A different workshop could be set up for each component. The first workshop about 'communication before change implementation' would focus on developing a clear vision for employees' future, portraying the purpose behind the change, and creating a case of urgency. The second workshop would have 'networking', i.e., how the leader can build a coalition to support the change, as the central theme. Networking techniques could include formal weekly check-in meetings in which the change is discussed to foster connection or informal events such as afternoon drinks and lunch meetings. In the third and final workshop, the focus would be on the actual 'change implementation process'. This training would include leaders' empowerment of their employees, i.e., providing them with the information and skills necessary to cope with the change, monitoring and communicating the progress of the implementation, and ways to give individual attention to those employees who struggle with the change. Importantly, as learning new behaviors does not happen overnight, an appropriate time frame should be provided during these kinds of interventions (Herold et al., 2008). In this vein, it must be acknowledged that change leadership is not the panacea for change success

and optimized employee behavior. Organizations should evaluate this leadership style, in line with other actions, based on individual company characteristics as well as internal and external demands. Moreover, once the organization has successfully mastered the ubiquitous shift to hybrid working models, it should verify which leadership style fits the new status quo best, i.e., foster adaptive leadership (Kniffin et al., 2021).

Moving forward, the third element for organizations to consider is the facilitation of high-quality leader-member exchanges. Extending the aforementioned strategies to incorporate high-quality LMX practices becomes paramount for building robust relationships between leaders and employees, ensuring that the positive impact of change leadership endures throughout various organizational transitions (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002). To help leaders develop such relationships, organizations should best develop an employee-centric culture that encourages information sharing, feelings of respect and trust, autonomy, and mutual support (Michel & Tews, 2016). Typical elements of an employee-centric culture include educational and medical incentives, extensive maternal and paternal leaves, fostered teamwork to achieve results, and community relations programs such as donating to charity or clean-up activities (De Roeck et al., 2016). Creating an employee-centric culture also involves organizing parties that include employees and their families to instill an atmosphere of oneness (Bonsu, 2020), which again links to organizational identification. Lastly, creating an employee-centric organization requires effective communication to ensure information dissemination through frequent information sharing between diverse departments and levels of the hierarchy (Men & Yue, 2019). For this purpose, the top management should also share information with lower-echelon employees and allow bottom-up opinions to form strong relationships (Bonsu, 2020). Following from there, high-quality LMX relationships have the proper space to develop (Lee et al., 2020). Within the leaders' responsibility to then foster these relationships (Moye & Henkin, 2006), they should not expect all employees to respond similarly to their influence attempts but instead assume that employees whom they trust, respect, and like more will, in turn, be more receptive to their change leadership and more motivated to reciprocate as a result in the form of change-supportive behavior (Michel & Tews, 2016). Specifically, leaders can enhance employees' feelings of competence and control by allowing them to be more involved, providing opportunities to participate in decision-making processes, and encouraging new ideas and continuous improvement (Ertürk, 2010). Moreover, leaders should support their employees in solving work-related problems, recognize their development potential, and invest time and effort in building employees' skills and knowledge by empowering them to learn new and innovative talents for their growth (Zhao et al., 2019).

Our study's emphasis on the moderating role of organizational identification suggests that different levels of organizational identification require distinct change strategies. These findings resonate with the idea that one-size-fits-all approaches may not be optimal, urging organizations to embrace flexibility in their change management endeavors. By seamlessly integrating organizational identification evaluation, employee mapping, tailored change strategies and change leadership training, thereby keeping an eye on the implementation timeframe and not neglecting the importance of ongoing engagement, organizations can strategically position themselves to navigate the complexities of current change and the ones to come. This approach not only optimizes the impact of change leadership and LMX but also ensures that training efforts are directed where they are most needed, resulting in a more efficient and impactful change management process.

Limitations and Further Research Avenues

As inherent to every form of empirical research, the present study exhibits several limitations. Firstly, the data was collected through snowball sampling, starting within the authors' professional and personal networks. While this approach led to a relatively fast data collection, it also constrained the generalizability of the main findings. As people within one's close network typically display similar characteristics, this may result in a selection bias of the sample. Moreover, the anonymity of the data could hurt the validity and truthfulness of the responses. Additionally, the lack of control for nationality or industry limits the study's generalizability, as these variables might have also influenced the results. Hence, the study cannot draw conclusions about cultural or industrial differences. Also, the sample size ($n = 282$) can lead to lower

statistical power and may cause a type II error (Burns & Burns, 2013). Lastly, the sample showed an imbalanced gender distribution (female = 64%) and is relatively young ($M = 29$ years) with a rather short tenure ($M = 4$ years). Derived from there, future research should target a larger, more diverse, and objective population, thereby enhancing possible generalizations of study findings.

Secondly, the data was gathered using only self-reported measures from a single source. This approach bears the potential limitation of common method bias. Specifically, there could be a bias in the relationship between the different variables as respondents tend to overestimate their behaviors and attitudes (Jakobsen & Jensen, 2015). Even though the results of the Latent Common Factor approach and the correlation matrix suggest no such bias, it cannot be entirely ruled out. Especially the sample's high level of change-supportive behavior could be a case of such lenient self-assessment. However, as the constructs of organizational identification and LMX are based on self-views, this self-reporting is considered adequate for our study. To counteract this limitation, future studies are advised to use multiple respondents to increase the assessment's accuracy by pairing employees with their respective leaders to validate their perceptions of change leadership and change-supportive behavior.

Thirdly, as only variables at the individual level of analysis were examined, investigating boundary conditions within a multilevel study could add valuable insights. For instance, future research could explore work climate, social support, or diversity on the team level and learning culture on the organizational level, thereby enhancing knowledge about the social context in which employees actively support change (Tran & Choi, 2019). Relatedly, the nature of the control variables' influence, especially the effects of gender and age, would be insightful to investigate in the future. A possible starting point could be the work by Hackett et al. (2018), who investigated the effect of gender on the relationship between transformational leadership and OCB and showed that differences in societal expectations and underlying motivation combine to make leadership of lesser importance to OCB among females than males. Similarly, the present analyses showed that although LMX was a significant mediator, the direct relationship between change leadership and change-supportive behavior was also significant. This finding implies that there might be other individual-level variables that influence this relationship and need investigation, such as trust and job satisfaction (Nasra & Heilbrunn, 2016), psychological empowerment and proactive personality (Newman et al., 2017), emotional intelligence (Khalili, 2017), or perceived organizational support (Asgari et al., 2008).

Fourthly, reverse causality between the different tested variables cannot be ruled out (Hughes et al., 2018). For instance, some employees may identify more strongly with their organization because they actively support the change it is going through. Furthermore, based on academic theory and evidence, it was assumed that LMX and change leadership influence employees' proactivity. However, it is also possible that change-supportive behavior influences the leader's treatment of employees, so the variables' relationship could be reciprocal. This raises important concerns regarding the direction of causality (Lazarus, 2003). Since the answers are a recollection of past events and perceptions, memory bias might have inflated the results. Hence, scholars should examine alternative theories to inductively comprehend this study's findings related to the relationship between LMX and change leadership. Moreover, change processes, especially ones such as a broad organizational transition to new working models, often take time, and employees' and leaders' behaviors and perceptions might change between the beginning of the transition and its end. A future longitudinal study could explain the variables' development over time.

CONCLUSION

Many myths exist about change: it comes from control about every managerial detail; its prediction is possible; it begins at the top – to name only a few (Dawson, 1997; Jarrett, 2003). Instead, change often has unanticipated consequences and is enabled bottom-up through front-line employees. In change situations, the order is emergent and not hierarchical. This implies that researchers have to move from a 'puzzle solving' to a 'mystery solving' perspective as the organizational members, i.e., leaders and employees, iteratively interact within the system so that new working patterns emerge over time (Dumas & Beinecke, 2018). Facilitating this process requires a form of a 'container' to hold it all together, i.e., address differences and hurdles, amplify communication, motivate and engage employees, and strengthen the

overall relationships and identification processes. Our article proposes that this ‘container’ is impersonated by the leader and his/her related change leadership behaviors. Adapting to temporary crises and successfully managing the subsequent long-term transitions towards new organizational states – such as the implementation of hybrid working models – hinges on the proactive support of every employee involved. Considering typically high failure rates of change programs, the question arose whether and which leadership behaviors can effectively foster such support and meet employees’ needs. The results of our study suggest that change leadership is suitable for facilitating the transition, working partially through LMX. This work addressed other authors’ calls for a new practical framework and empirical evidence of change leadership. The key to changing is to transform from a hierarchical, leader-centric management to one that is participative and employee-centric. Creating such a culture that supports interpersonal engagement, leading, and development of people affected by the change should be the organizations’ focus to enable change success. In summary, our article meaningfully contributes to an enhanced understanding of change leadership and employees’ behavioral response to their organizations’ transition to new ways of working – thus providing valuable insights for research and practice. Our findings reinforce and link the social exchange theory and social identity approach and consummate leadership and organizational change literature.

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