

# **Followers' unclear demands during the COVID-19 pandemic can undermine leaders' well-being: A moderated mediation model from an entrapment perspective**

Zheng, Y., Wu, C. H., Zheng, X., & Pan, J.



UNIVERSITY OF SURREY



**SURREY  
BUSINESS  
SCHOOL**

UNIVERSITY OF SURREY

Since the COVID-19 quickly began spreading across the world, employees worldwide have faced increased uncertainty associated with their jobs and lives. To cope with this uncertainty, employees are likely to become more dependent on leaders than usual (Mayseless & Popper, 2007; Mumford et al., 2007; Yukl, 2002). Although effective leaders are important for reducing employee stress during the COVID-19, limited studies have examined how follower behaviors can influence leader stress and well-being during the COVID-19. What followers demand from their leaders during this period can be ambiguous, inconsistent, or even volatile and infeasible due to the evolving situation as well as the level of uncertainty, threats, and disruption that COVID-19 has caused. This paper seeks to understand how unclear demands from followers during the COVID-19 can affect leaders' well-being and use the defeat-entrapment theory (Gilbert, 2006; Taylor et al., 2011) to guide our theorizing and empirical examination. We focus on the leadership role of frontline leaders who have supervisory responsibilities, such as those working alongside staff and the day-to-day administration.

Defeat-entrapment theory posits that defeat due to the failure to achieve important goals can give rise to feelings of entrapment (Griffiths et al., 2018; Siddaway et al., 2015) Because an essential goal is to “satisfy—or appear to satisfy—specific needs of the followers” (Burns, 1978, p. 294), unclear demands from followers can trap leaders in feelings of defeat due to their failure to meet essential leader goals (i.e. leading by addressing followers' demands and engaging in effective social exchanges with followers). Furthermore, because perceptions of being trapped in stressful situations where no hope of changing the situations exists can lead to lower levels of wellbeing (Ehlers & Clark, 2000; Taylor et al., 2011), we expect entrapment to impact leader wellbeing. We focus on frustration at work and burnout to capture the negative side of the loss of interest and energy in work activities. We also focus on work valence and job satisfaction to represent leaders' impaired positive psychological states due to entrapment.

Further, defeat-entrapment theory posits that perceived lower escapability can strengthen the relationship between stressors and entrapment, which has been empirically supported (Galhardo et al., 2016; Minkler et al., 1997; Ng et al., 2016). We suggest that leaders with more leadership responsibility are more likely to perceive lower escapability relative to their leadership duties; thus, they are more likely to feel trapped by unclear follower demands. Leaders who have higher levels of leadership responsibility tend to view providing care, guidance and security for followers as their own duty (Chan & Drasgow, 2001). This tends to prevent leaders from fulfilling their duty because they want to be reliable to their followers, but they face severe difficulties in actually addressing their demands.

We recruited 400 working professionals in the United Kingdom through Prolific Academic. We sent out the first survey on May 18th, 2020, approximately two months after the government had first imposed strict lockdown measures on March 26th and people had started to work from home. We sent out the third survey on June 29th (three weeks after time 2) when some lockdown measures had been eased and people were allowed to leave the house for any reason but were still asked to work from home if possible. We had a matched sample of 281 responses at time 3.



UNIVERSITY OF SURREY

Path analysis in Mplus 8 suggests that found that followers' unclear demands positively relate to leader entrapment, leading to decreased levels of wellbeing outcomes in leaders. Importantly, leaders who have higher levels of leadership responsibility during the COVID-19 are likely to feel trapped by followers' unclear demands. The overall moderated mediation model of leader responsibility moderating the indirect effect of leader entrapment linking follower unclear demands and leader wellbeing outcomes is supported. Our results show that although leaders are expected to take good care of

their followers, the costs of managing followers' needs in an unpredictable environment such as during the COVID-19 are high and therefore should not be ignored. Organizations could help leaders better receive the messages and concerns from their followers by improving leaders' active listening skills (Lloyd et al., 2015). To reduce leaders' stress, organizations could facilitate interpersonal connections and support among leaders, improving the flow of messages and the quality of solutions (Detert et al., 2013).



UNIVERSITY OF SURREY



UNIVERSITY OF SURREY