



Fostering individual entrepreneurial orientation among employees: the role of leaders communicating entrepreneurial visions and goals

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on insights from construal level theory, this study examines the cognitive process linking leader communication to individual entrepreneurial orientation (IEO) among employees. Testing our theory on data obtained from an online vignette experiment with 719 employees, we find that employees' perceived construal fit mediates the influence of construal (mis)fit between their social distance of leaders and the abstractness of the communicated message on employee IEO. In an additional analysis, we refine our theory by showing that being a managerial or non-managerial employee influences our results. We contribute to prior research by taking a cognitive perspective on IEO formation and introducing the effect of leader communication of entrepreneurial visions and goals into the emerging literature on IEO. Further, we advance research on construal level theory by explaining why managerial and non-managerial employees react differently to coherent leader communication.

1. Introduction

Individual entrepreneurial orientation (IEO) encompasses employees' willingness to act innovatively, be proactive, and take risks (Clark, Covin, & Pidduck, 2024; Covin et al., 2020). Employee IEO can benefit firms by encouraging employees to explore new opportunities for the firm, optimize existing processes or products, or engage in firm-internal entrepreneurial projects (Kraus et al., 2019; Rigtering et al., 2024; Rigtering & Weitzel, 2013). As such, promoting employee IEO as part of the overall firm strategy enables firms to continuously adapt to rapidly changing environments (Clark, Covin, & Pidduck, 2024; Clark, Pidduck, Lumpkin, & Covin, 2024; Ireland, Covin, & Kuratko, 2009). However, shaking up the status quo could also negatively impact employees' image and career (Afsar et al., 2017; de Jong et al., 2015; Sauermann, 2018) and entrepreneurial projects can exhaust firm resources and have severe financial consequences for the firm (Gali et al., 2024). As these downsides may discourage employees from aligning with their firm's IEO strategy, it is important to gain a deeper understanding of the underlying process by which firms can promote employee IEO. Following recent theorizing suggesting that IEO is an inherently cognitive construct, which "manifests when individuals think

and behave entrepreneurially" (Clark, Covin, & Pidduck, 2024), taking a cognitive perspective to examine this process will be particularly valuable.

Nevertheless, research taking such a cognitive perspective to explain how firms can influence their employees' IEO as part of their firm strategy is limited. We do know from prior studies that leader communication is an effective means for firms to transfer their strategies to employees (Rigtering et al., 2019) and that leaders play a central role for employee IEO (Covin et al., 2020; Rigtering & Weitzel, 2013). Leaders can use firms' visions (i.e., abstract motivational statements of a firm's direction; Baum & Locke, 2004; Gupta et al., 2004) and personal goals (i.e., concrete expectations of work behavior; Latham & Locke, 1991; Locke & Latham, 2002) to convince employees. Yet, leadership communication is unlikely to directly influence employee IEO, as prior research shows that employees are more inclined to comply with a message if they embrace it (Uhl-Bien et al., 2022). In this regard, construal level theory (CLT) (Berson et al., 2015; Trope & Liberman, 2010) emphasizes the importance of employees' perceptions in embracing a communicated message. Thus, accounting for employees' perceptions may also help to better understand the underlying cognitive process by which leader communication influences employee IEO. To further

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untangle these complexities, the present study asks: *How does the communication of entrepreneurial visions and goals by leaders from different hierarchical levels shape employees' perceptions, which ultimately influences their IEO?*

This paper maps out the cognitive process underlying the relationship between leader communication of entrepreneurial visions and goals and employee IEO. Specifically, we draw on insights from CLT (Berson et al., 2015; Trope & Liberman, 2010) to examine how *construal fit* and *misfit situations* in leader communication influence employees' *perceived construal fit* and how perceived construal fit ultimately affects employee IEO. Our core argumentation is as follows: Employees form mental representations (construals), i.e., they categorize how abstractly (high-level construal) or concretely (low-level construal) they perceive leader communication. Perceived construal fit results from the evaluation of construal (mis)fit situations and refers to whether employees perceive a fit between *what* (abstract level vs. concrete level) and *who* (socially distant vs. close leader) communicates a message encouraging IEO (Berson & Halevy, 2014; Vanderstucken et al., 2019), which creates a feeling of rightness (or wrongness). This perception ultimately shapes the willingness to comply with the communicated message. We test our research model on data from an online vignette experiment with 719 employees.

Our study provides two contributions. First, we contribute to the emerging literature on antecedents of employee IEO by taking a cognitive perspective on IEO formation. As research on antecedents of employee IEO is generally limited in this relatively new field of research, prior studies rarely acknowledge that promoting employee IEO involves a cognitive process (Bachmann et al., 2024; Rigtering & Weitzel, 2013) or do not account for firms' role in influencing such cognitive processes (Rigtering et al., 2024). We advance the existing conversation by untangling the cognitive process underlying the influence of leader communication on employee IEO. Thus, our study suggests that it is insufficient to examine an antecedent's effect on employee IEO without considering how and by whom the antecedent was communicated and, in turn, perceived by employees. In addition, our study advances knowledge on the central role of leaders for employee IEO. We introduce leader communication of visions and goals as a tangible means for firms to foster employee IEO in line with their firm strategy, which advances prior studies highlighting that particularly leader trust can be helpful to initiate and benefit from IEO (Covin et al., 2020; Rigtering & Weitzel, 2013).

Second, we advance prior studies drawing on CLT (e.g., Chen et al., 2018; Gray et al., 2024; Tumasjan et al., 2013) by identifying an important contextual factor that affects the perception of leader communication (Wiesenfeld et al., 2017). That is, insights from our additional analysis reveal that communication strategies should not be applied indiscriminately to managerial and non-managerial employees (Soltanifar et al., 2023). Instead, our results show that non-managerial employees, in particular, benefit from coherent leader communication and react with an increased IEO, whereas managerial employees tend to react more to abstract vision communication. We discuss the (theoretical) implications of these interesting and novel findings for future research.

2. Theory & hypotheses

Employee IEO means that individuals are willing to go beyond formal work requirements and demonstrate independent initiative (Clark, Covin, & Pidduck, 2024; Covin et al., 2020; Gawke, Gorgievski, & Bakker, 2019; Kang, Matusik, Kim, & Phillips, 2016). Employee IEO encompasses three central dimensions. First, IEO encompasses employees being willing to act innovatively, which ranges from introducing incremental efficiency-enhancing changes to routines to searching for and exploiting new opportunities (Covin et al., 2020). Second, it encompasses employees being willing to act proactively, which varies from improving a situation for oneself to identifying threats to the firm

(Bolton & Lane, 2012; de Jong et al., 2015) as well as questioning the status quo (Covin et al., 2020). Third, IEO encompasses employees being willing to take risks, meaning they are aware of the risk of failure and its ensuing consequences, yet they are nonetheless willing to behave entrepreneurially (Gawke et al., 2018; Rigtering et al., 2024). Recent theory highlights the cognitive component of employee IEO by describing it to include employees' beliefs and attitudes towards acting proactively, being innovative, and taking risks (Clark, Covin, & Pidduck, 2024).

Employees with IEO are willing to shake up the status quo and overcome resistance to promote change. As such, employees are likely to be aware that failed entrepreneurial initiatives may negatively influence their careers (Afsar et al., 2017; de Jong et al., 2015; Sauermann, 2018). Particularly in larger established firms, employees highly value job security (Sauermann, 2018) and, thus, may be deterred by the associated risk (Cabral et al., 2021; Monsen & Boss, 2009). Hence, when the firm strategy involves being entrepreneurial, understanding how to influence employee IEO is crucial, especially as it can increase employees' likelihood to participate in firm-internal entrepreneurial projects as well as the quality of such projects (Kraus et al., 2019; Rigtering et al., 2024; Rigtering & Weitzel, 2013).

Despite the importance of understanding how firms can foster employee IEO, studies examining the antecedents of IEO are still limited. As one of the few notable exceptions, Rigtering and Weitzel (2013) consider firm-level antecedents and show that firms can promote employee IEO by, for example, providing broad job descriptions or sufficient resources for innovative projects. Moreover, research suggests that trust in leaders is relevant for fostering employee IEO, mitigating the negative impact of formalized structures on employee IEO, and ensuring that employees ultimately act on their IEO in the workplace (Covin et al., 2020; Rigtering & Weitzel, 2013). Additionally, specific competencies, such as employees' digital competencies, can foster IEO (Bachmann et al., 2024). Finally, Rigtering et al. (2024) are the first to acknowledge the cognitive element of IEO formation by theorizing how employees' belief that they can successfully master entrepreneurial activities (i.e., entrepreneurial self-efficacy) positively shapes their IEO. However, as the study focuses on an individual-level antecedent of employee IEO, the results do not provide insights into the cognitive process explaining how *firms* can influence employee IEO.

Given the need for a cognitive perspective to understand how firms can foster employee IEO and the importance of leaders for employee IEO (Covin et al., 2020; Rigtering & Weitzel, 2013), we focus on leader communication (O'Reilly et al., 2010; Renko et al., 2015; Rigtering et al., 2019). Our focus on leader communication as a central lever for firms to influence employee IEO is consistent with Rigtering et al. (2019), who suggest that managerial communication is an important link between a firm's entrepreneurial strategy and employees' tendency to act. Moreover, prior research indicates that employees' receptiveness to the communicated message is crucial (Hansbrough, 2012; Lord & Emrich, 2000), as employees will only internalize the message if they fully embrace it (Uhl-Bien et al., 2022). Thus, to thoroughly explore the cognitive process underlying firms' influence on employee IEO formation, we investigate how employees' perceptions of leader communication ultimately affect their IEO.

We draw on CLT (Berson et al., 2015), a framework that classifies individuals' thought processes into different types of mental representations, so-called *construals*. According to CLT, the perception of objects, situations, or persons can be rather abstract and vague (i.e., high-level construal) or concrete with many details (i.e., low-level construal) (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Whether an object, situation, or person is thought of in abstract or concrete terms depends on the individual's perceived *psychological distance* from the object, situation, or person as well as the abstractness of the representation. For example, the language used to describe an object, situation, or person (e.g., vague vs. concrete) can affect the associated construal level (Joshi et al., 2016). Moreover, psychological distance can be perceived in different dimensions:

temporal, spatial, and social distance as well as hypotheticality, which are interrelated and can separately, jointly, or even contrastingly affect the associated construal level (Trope & Liberman, 2010). When people think of situations that lie in the distant future, spatially distant objects, socially distant others, or hypothetical events, they perceive them as being *abstract*. In contrast, when people refer to temporally close events, spatially close objects, socially close persons, or concrete objects, they think about *specifics and details* (Trope & Liberman, 2010). An example of a concrete construal is an entrepreneur pursuing their day-to-day business, thinking about specific actions they need to perform. An example of an abstract construal is an entrepreneur envisioning how they can revolutionize their industry and thinking about their future impact on the community.

Construal interpretation also determines how employees perceive leader communication. Specifically, *social distance* affects every social interaction when working in a firm. Due to the hierarchical nature of companies, employees are confronted with leaders from different hierarchical levels and with different social statuses (O'Reilly et al., 2010). Typically, employees feel more removed from hierarchically distant leaders, such as the manager or CEO, than from close leaders, such as a team or project leader (Berson & Halevy, 2014). Consequently, employees may have a more informal and open relationship with close leaders with whom they have day-to-day interactions. In contrast, distant leaders such as CEOs, whom employees might not know personally or from whom they only receive impersonal communication, can appear socially further removed, and the interaction may be more formal. Hence, employees' psychological distance and associated construal level vary with the perceived distance from the leader.

Furthermore, in the course of leader communication, employees will receive different messages from leaders, which vary in their level of abstractness (construal level). Visions and goals are motivational tools that are commonly used and archetypically represent opposite levels of abstractness used by both distant and close leaders (Berson et al., 2015; Carton & Lucas, 2018; Newton et al., 2020). Visions are motivational statements of a firm's direction, highlighting the firm's core values and setting guidelines for behavior by creating a compelling image of the future (Baum & Locke, 2004; Carton & Lucas, 2018; Gupta et al., 2004). Typically, visions are crafted by companies' leaders (Preller et al., 2020), and they are a common leadership tool used to motivate employees to change (Christensen et al., 2006). As visions often refer to *hypothetical end states* that may or may not be realistically achievable, conjure up an idealized *temporally distant* future (Cai et al., 2023), and frequently use vague language and abstract images, they enhance the likelihood that employees will perceive firm visions as being abstract (high construal level) (Berson et al., 2015; Trope & Liberman, 2010; Venus et al., 2019).

In contrast, goals focus on more specific aspects of work behavior (Latham & Locke, 1991; Locke et al., 1981), such as setting performance standards, giving concrete instructions, or providing deadlines. Goals typically focus employees' attention directly on a desired activity (Locke & Latham, 2002). The focus on specific targets, concrete tasks, and references to aspects that lie in the near future (i.e., *temporally proximate*) makes goals *less hypothetical* and more feasible; thus, it increases the likelihood that employees will perceive goals as being more concrete (low construal level) (Berson et al., 2015; Trope & Liberman, 2010).

Recent research highlights that visions and goals are particularly pertinent forms of communication to encourage entrepreneurship in firm settings (Simsek et al., 2015). An entrepreneurial vision inspires while highlighting the entrepreneurial direction of the firm and the commitment to entrepreneurial processes (Ireland et al., 2009; Preller et al., 2020). In particular, aspects such as action orientation, exploration, and risk-taking are essential elements of an entrepreneurial vision (Ruvio et al., 2010). Moreover, entrepreneurial visions help mobilize a "supporting cast" that is committed to pursuing an opportunity (Fisher et al., 2020; Gupta et al., 2004, p. 242; Simsek et al., 2015), and they are crucial to persuade employees to embrace innovation (van Balen et al.,

2019). Furthermore, empirical evidence shows that a vision can increase employees' entrepreneurial behavior (Afsar et al., 2017; Cai et al., 2023). Goals in an entrepreneurial context, e.g., encouraging entrepreneurial initiatives such as exploiting new opportunities or introducing new products, are also highly valuable (Baum & Locke, 2004; Cai et al., 2023; Ireland et al., 2003). They help to reduce the increased stress and anxiety that occur due to the high requirements and challenges imposed on employees in a highly dynamic and uncertain environment (Gawke et al., 2018; Reid et al., 2018). Goals can create a feeling of security, which is necessary for employees to be willing to engage in entrepreneurial behaviors (Cabral et al., 2021; Sauermann, 2018).

To uncover how the communication of leaders from different hierarchical levels can encourage employee IEO, we draw on the concept of *construal fit* (Berson et al., 2015; Wiesenfeld et al., 2017). A construal fit occurs if the abstractness of different aspects (such as the abstractness of a message and the social distance from its communicator) are aligned (Berson & Halevy, 2014; Vanderstikken et al., 2019). Referring to leader communication and employee IEO, a *construal fit* occurs if the *abstractness of the entrepreneurial message* (abstract vision/concrete goal) and the *social distance* from the leader (distant/close leader) are aligned (Berson et al., 2015). To create construal fit, distant leaders should communicate abstract visions, while socially proximal leaders should communicate concrete goals (see Fig. 1).

Investigating how employees perceive leader communication of entrepreneurial messages is crucial to understanding how it affects their IEO (c.f., Cable & DeRue, 2002). Prior research indicates the need not only to assess situations objectively (fit vs. misfit) but to also include people's subjective experiences (perceived construal fit vs. perceived construal misfit) (Chen et al., 2018; Mischel, 2009). Berson and Halevy (2014), for instance, experimentally show that manipulation of social distance and message content affects individuals' *perceived construal misfit*. In construal misfit situations, individuals feel that the situation is at odds with what they are used to, as it is inappropriate and uncomfortable. Camacho et al. (2003) argue that individuals experience fit violations as wrong and show that misfit situations can enhance emotions of guilt, while fit situations can create a feeling of rightness and are perceived as consistent. In addition, employees' behavioral decisions frequently build on the recognition of accepted behavioral patterns within firms. Construal misfit situations violate these typical behavioral patterns, and employees will perceive such situations as being inappropriate, which will be reflected in their perceived construal misfit (March 1994; Weber et al., 2004). If leaders convey entrepreneurial visions and goals that are inconsistent with their social distance towards the employees, employees will notice this deviation from the behavioral norm, resulting in a feeling of surprise, oddity, and wrongness.

In line with prior research (Berson & Halevy, 2014), we thus argue that in construal misfit situations (i.e., when distant leaders communicate concrete goals or when close leaders communicate abstract visions), employees' *perceived construal fit* is lower than in construal fit situations (i.e., when distant leaders communicate abstract visions or when close leaders communicate concrete goals). Thus, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1. *Construal fit situations lead to a higher perceived construal fit than construal misfit situations.*

Further, consistent with prior research on construal fit/misfit (Berson et al., 2015), we argue that, in leader communication situations, perceived construal fit predicts the willingness to comply, as it delineates employees' receptiveness to the communicated message. Hence, we argue that, in communication situations of entrepreneurial visions and goals, a *perceived construal fit* represents employees' receptiveness of the entrepreneurial message and *positively influences employee IEO*. Prior research shows that experienced fit is a strong predictor of individuals' willingness to engage in actual behavior (Ahmadi et al., 2017; Cable & DeRue, 2002; Higgins, 2005; Wiesenfeld et al., 2017). Furthermore, in communication situations, messages are more appealing and persuasive when framed as a construal fit (Kim et al., 2009), and leaders are

<i>Message Abstractness</i> <i>Social Distance</i>	Abstract Vision	Concrete Goals
Distant Leader	Construal Fit Situation (1)	Construal Misfit Situation (2)
Close Leader	Construal Misfit Situation (3)	Construal Fit Situation (4)

Fig. 1. Construal Fit/Misfit Situations in Leader Communication.

perceived as being more effective in construal fit situations (van den Broeck et al., 2013; Vanderstucken et al., 2019). In sum, construal fit has many positive consequences for shaping individuals' engagement and motivation because individuals look for consistency in their environmental cues and accept congruent information more readily (Jin & He, 2013).

We, therefore, argue that in leader communication situations of entrepreneurial visions and goals, a construal fit increases employees' perceived construal fit (i.e., when the abstractness of the entrepreneurial message and the perceived social distance from the leader match). The construal fit increases employees' feeling of rightness and, by increasing perceived construal fit, encourages employee IEO in a manner that is consistent with the communicated entrepreneurial message. In contrast, a construal misfit decreases employees' perceived construal fit (i.e., when the abstractness of the entrepreneurial message and the perceived social distance from the leader do not match). Employees' feeling at odds with the situation then reduces their readiness to comply with the prescribed entrepreneurial message. Ultimately, employees are less committed to the entrepreneurial message, which lowers their IEO. In summary, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 2. *The relationship between construal fit/misfit and employee IEO is mediated by perceived construal fit.*

Fig. 2 summarizes our research model.

3. Methods

3.1. Procedure & sample

We conducted an online vignette experiment with a sample of 719 employees in German companies following a two-stage design. That is, the participants completed two anonymous questionnaires at two different points in time (t_0 and t_1) with a one-week break in between. First (t_0), in an online survey, we collected information about demographics, traits, and baseline variables. One week later (t_1), we performed the online vignette experiment. This two-stage approach avoids any potential confounding effects between the manipulation and trait variables that we collected to test successful randomization. Moreover, by conducting an online vignette experiment, our study benefits from the high internal validity of experimental designs, which allows, for example, for causal inference due to the manipulation of the independent variable (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014). At the same time, the careful construction of realistic vignette scenarios still ensures the external validity of our findings (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014).

We used a fieldwork panel called "Consumerfieldwork" to recruit our participants (Consumerfieldwork GmbH, 2024). The platform offers participants fixed remuneration per survey. To ensure high-quality answers, participation in surveys is limited to twice per month. We randomly invited individuals who were currently working in companies of different sizes and from various industrial backgrounds. We further applied a stratification technique to obtain an equal representation of gender and age groups. We matched individuals' questionnaires from t_0

and t_1 via anonymized identifiers provided by the fieldwork panel.

In the survey (t_0), we administered 1,156 questionnaires. To identify low-quality participants who are a typical problem in online samples (Ipeirotis et al., 2010; Mason & Suri, 2012), we used quality checks: "Please select the option on the far left" and "Please select 'completely disagree' to show that you are reading the text". Eighty-eight participants failed the quality checks for attention, and 59 participants did not complete the survey and were thus deleted, leaving us with 1,009 questionnaires for the experiment.

One week later (t_1), we invited these 1,009 participants to take part in the experiment. The re-response rate for the two-stage design was 92%. Of the 926 participants who responded to our invitation, 65 quit at various points in the experiment, and 42 failed the quality checks. In addition, we deleted 49 questionnaires because the respondents did not complete the questionnaire in one step, which likely threatened the experimental manipulation. As a final quality check, we examined whether the respondents spent a reasonable amount of time completing the questionnaires (min. 4 min) and deleted an additional 15 questionnaires. We further excluded 36 questionnaires with missing information about firm size, which left us with 719 fully completed and usable questionnaires from both the survey and the experiment. The dropout rates of 15% at t_0 and 22% at t_1 are comparable to those of other experimental studies (Ahmadi et al., 2017; Hsu et al., 2017). We conducted several tests for sample attrition, which did not suggest any systematic bias between our samples.¹

3.2. Experimental design

For the online vignette experiment (t_1), we conducted a 2 (*social distance*: high vs. low) x 2 (*message abstractness*: abstract vision vs. concrete goals) between-subjects design. We used a deception approach and a passive role-playing design (Hsu et al., 2017) and randomly assigned participants to the four scenarios (see Online Appendix B). The four scenarios described a situation wherein the person had just started working at the described firm. Following a setup by Berson and Halevy (2014), we created *social distance* by varying the hierarchical level of the leader, the form of interaction (personal vs. impersonal), and the language used (informal vs. formal). In the *close leader scenario*, the team leader addressed the person face to face and in informal language. In the *distant leader scenario*, the CEO of the firm addressed the person via email and in formal language (c.f., Joshi et al., 2016). We manipulated the *message abstractness* by varying temporal distance, hypotheticality, and language used (vague vs. concrete). In the *concrete goal scenario*, employees learned about concrete, personal entrepreneurial goals with a specific deadline (c.f., Förster et al., 2004; Trope & Liberman, 2010). In the *abstract vision scenario*, employees learned about the abstract, temporally distant entrepreneurial vision of the firm.

To test the random distribution of the participants across the four

¹ For complete transparency, we provide in-depth information on the experimental setup and collected variables in Online Appendix A.

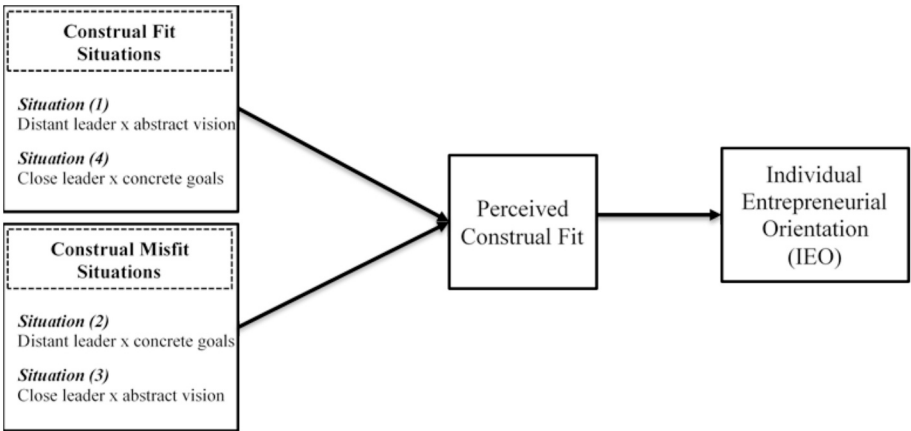


Fig. 2. Theoretical Model.

scenarios, we conducted a univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) for age on the experimental scenarios and found no significant effects. In addition, we conducted a χ^2 test for gender and found an even distribution over the scenarios. This result suggests that the random distribution of the participants across the four scenarios was successful. Further testing (proactive personality, promotion focus, and prevention focus) also supported this result.

3.3. Measures & measure validation

We derived all construct measures from previous studies and used 7-point Likert scales. We calculated indexes for perceived construal fit and IEO. Following standard practice, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using maximum likelihood estimation and removed items with factor loadings below 0.4 (Stevens, 1992). Table C.1 (Online Appendix C) provides an overview of the items used to measure the core constructs.

Perceived Construal Fit (t_1). After the participants had read one of the four experimental scenarios, we measured perceived construal fit to assess the degree to which the participants felt that the communicated message (abstract vision vs. concrete goals) matched by whom it was delivered (high vs. low social distance) (Berson & Halevy, 2014). We used six items describing how employees perceived their leader in the scenario, which were previously used to assess employees' perceived construal fit of leadership behavior (Berson & Halevy, 2014). Cronbach's α was 0.90, suggesting good construct reliability.

IEO (t_1). We measured employee IEO as consisting of three dimensions: the willingness to act innovatively, be proactive, and take risks. Our focus on these three central dimensions of IEO is in line with prior research (Rigtering et al., 2024; Rigtering & Weitzel, 2013). We relied on pre-validated subscales, which were explicitly developed to assess each IEO dimension at the individual level to mitigate construct stretching concerns (Covin et al., 2020). Similarly to Rigtering and Weitzel (2013), we used the scale by de Jong and den Hartog (2010) to measure the innovation dimension. To measure the proactivity dimension, we used a scale by Frese et al. (1997), as it considers aspects that are a crucial part of entrepreneurial action, such as self-starting behavior and persistence in overcoming barriers (Kraus et al., 2019). Finally, to measure the risk-taking dimension, we used a scale by Stull and Singh (2005) that was recently validated when researching leader influence on employee behavior (e.g., Edú Valsania et al., 2016). Cronbach's α for the overall IEO scale was 0.94.

Control Variables (t_0). We included variables to test randomization and to use as controls in our moderated mediation model. Consistent with prior research, we included variables that can influence individuals' IEO and entrepreneurial behavior (Afsar et al., 2017; de Jong et al., 2015). We controlled for age and its squared term (measured in

years). While age increases the experience and ability of the individual, risk aversion increases with age, leading to an inverted U-shaped relationship (de Jong et al., 2015). We included promotion and prevention focus (Lockwood et al., 2002), which both affect creativity and various work outcomes (Brenninkmeijer et al., 2010; Sacramento et al., 2013). We further controlled for proactive personality (Bateman & Crant, 1993), which is positively related to individuals' willingness to be innovative and proactive (Parker & Collins, 2010; Parker et al., 2006). Prior research shows that employees with a higher education level, more experience, and a higher hierarchical position tend to be more entrepreneurial due to easier access to firm resources (de Jong et al., 2015; Kuratko et al., 2005). Hence, we included individuals' type of education (up to industrial training = 1, professional qualification = 2, university degree = 3), individuals' work experience (in years), and a variable indicating whether the person is a managerial employee (1) or a non-managerial employee (0). We also controlled for gender (female = 0, male = 1) (Afsar et al., 2017) and for the size of the firm (small, medium,

Table 1
Overview of Validity Measures Undertaken.

Measure	Sample	Issues Addressed	Aim
Pilot Test	Colleagues (n = 6)	Construct Validity/ Comprehensibility	Construction of manipulations similar to the previous experiment by Berson and Halevy (2014) Testing the comprehensibility of the translated scales and the manipulations
Pretest	Student Sample (n = 87)	Construct Validity/ Robustness Test	Testing whether manipulations had the intended effects: testing the interactive effect of social distance and message abstractness on perceived construal fit
Validation Study	Clickworker Sample (n = 48)	Construct Validity/ External Validity	Did manipulations have the intended effect concerning leader distance, message abstractness, and perceived construal fit? Testing scenarios' realism
Manipulation Checks	Main Study Sample (n = 719)	Construct Validity	Were the participants attentive? Did the participants perceive leader distance and message abstractness as intended?

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics and Spearman Nonparametric Correlation.

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1 Message ^a	0.50	0.50						
2 Social Distance ^b	0.50	0.50	0.00 (0.97)					
3 IEO	5.23	0.90	0.06 (0.08)	-0.05 (0.20)				
4 Perceived Construal Fit	4.28	1.40	-0.25 (0.00)	-0.08 (0.04)	0.29 (0.00)			
5 Age	42.92	12.12	0.00 (0.95)	0.02 (0.51)	-0.01 (0.73)	-0.20 (0.00)		
6 Gender ^c	0.48	0.50	0.04 (0.28)	-0.03 (0.39)	0.03 (0.41)	-0.02 (0.66)	0.24 (0.00)	
7 Promotion Focus	4.32	1.17	0.04 (0.31)	-0.03 (0.40)	0.26 (0.00)	-0.03 (0.48)	-0.24 (0.00)	0.02 (0.58)
8 Prevention Focus	3.34	1.31	0.06 (0.13)	-0.03 (0.44)	-0.08 (0.03)	-0.12 (0.00)	-0.32 (0.00)	-0.10 (0.01)
9 Proactive Personality	4.98	0.88	0.02 (0.68)	-0.03 (0.44)	0.48 (0.00)	0.02 (0.62)	-0.03 (0.44)	0.00 (0.94)
10 Education – up to industrial level	0.38	0.49	-0.01 (0.81)	0.04 (0.29)	-0.03 (0.42)	-0.02 (0.52)	0.03 (0.42)	-0.07 (0.07)
11 Education – professional qualification	0.32	0.47	0.01 (0.75)	-0.07 (0.06)	0.11 (0.00)	0.02 (0.67)	0.01 (0.70)	-0.02 (0.54)
12 Education – university degree	0.31	0.46	0.00 (0.94)	0.03 (0.44)	-0.08 (0.04)	0.01 (0.81)	-0.05 (0.22)	0.09 (0.01)
13 Work Experience	19.63	12.39	-0.01 (0.86)	0.02 (0.56)	0.02 (0.53)	-0.16 (0.00)	0.87 (0.00)	0.18 (0.00)
14 Management Position ^d	0.37	0.48	-0.01 (0.75)	-0.03 (0.48)	0.17 (0.00)	0.03 (0.44)	0.14 (0.00)	0.29 (0.00)
15 Company size – small	0.29	0.46	0.11 (0.00)	0.03 (0.44)	-0.03 (0.42)	-0.04 (0.29)	-0.04 (0.26)	-0.13 (0.00)
16 Company size –medium	0.24	0.43	0.00 (0.95)	-0.02 (0.68)	-0.03 (0.43)	0.00 (1.00)	0.00 (0.93)	0.01 (0.89)
17 Company size – large	0.46	0.50	-0.10 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.73)	0.05 (0.16)	0.04 (0.34)	0.04 (0.27)	0.12 (0.00)

Note: n = 719. P-values in parenthesis. ^a1 = goals, 0 = vision. ^b1 = high distance, 0 = low distance. ^c1 = male, 0 = female. ^d1 = managerial employees, 0 = non-managerial employees. IEO – individual entrepreneurial orientation.

and large²) as well as for 14 industries following the NAICS.

Measurement Validation. We examined the factor structure of our model by comparing the fit of different structural models in a CFA.³ A two-factor model in which all items of the focal constructs perceived construal fit and IEO loaded onto their intended factors exhibited an average fit ($\chi^2 = 783.93$; $\chi^2/df = 3.24$; RMSEA = 0.06, TLI/NNFI = 0.95, CFI = 0.95, AIC = 899.93) (Bentler, 1990; Browne & Cudeck, 1993; Hu & Bentler, 1999). A two-factor model, excluding two items from the IEO scale due to poor factor loadings, exhibited a very good fit ($\chi^2 = 570.29$; $\chi^2/df = 2.85$; RMSEA = 0.05, TLI/NNFI = 0.96, CFI = 0.97, AIC = 676.29). In line with prior research (Deutscher et al., 2016; Gawke et al., 2019), we chose the purified scale for all the following analyses. Compared to a model in which all items loaded onto a single factor ($\chi^2 = 2928.43$; $\chi^2/df = 14.57$; RMSEA = 0.14, TLI/NNFI = 0.71, CFI = 0.75, AIC = 3032.43), the two-factor model exhibited a superior fit, with the lowest Akaike information criterion (AIC) and a χ^2 -difference test confirming this result.

Table C.1 (Online Appendix C) depicts the CFA factor loadings of the two-factor model, the exact wording of the core constructs, Cronbach's α , composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE) values. The standardized factor loadings of all items were statistically significant ($p < 0.00$) and above 0.4, indicating convergent validity (Stevens, 1992). The CR of the constructs exceeded 0.6, supporting internal consistency (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). We also examined discriminant validity and compared the AVE with the interfactor correlation. For all constructs, the AVE exceeded the cutoff value of 0.5, and the square root of the AVE exceeded the interfactor correlation supporting discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

3.4. Construct & external validity of the experiment

We conducted several measures to improve the quality and reliability of our experimental study (Grégoire et al., 2011), which we briefly outline in the following (see Table 1). First, we conducted a pilot test with colleagues to ensure that the experimental manipulations, which we constructed in line with a setup described in Berson and Halevy

(2014), as well as the translated items are easily comprehensible. Second, following some minor adaptations, we conducted a pretest with a student sample to test the robustness of our hypothesized effects (see Online Appendix D for further details on the pilot and pretest) before we collected data for the main study. Third, we qualitatively validated the construct validity of our manipulations (i.e., whether leader distance, message abstractness, and construal fit were indeed perceived as intended) and tested whether our four scenarios are realistic to confirm external validity (see Online Appendix E for detailed information). Finally, to ensure that the manipulations had the intended effects in the main study and to identify inattentive respondents, we included manipulation checks. All of the above measures support good construct and external validity of our experimental design.

Manipulation Checks in the Online Vignette Experiment (t₁). In line with prior experimental studies (Hsu et al., 2017; van Dijke et al., 2015), the participants completed *manipulation checks* after reading the scenarios and before responding to our constructs of interest. Specifically, we asked participants how close they felt to the person described in the scenario and how abstract/concrete the message was formulated. Results show that social closeness was perceived significantly higher in the socially close scenario ($M = 3.99$; $SD = 1.31$) than in the socially distant scenario ($M = 3.26$; $SD = 1.41$) ($t(717) = 7.28$, $p = 0.00$). Further, the goal setting scenario ($M = 5.69$; $SD = 1.23$) was perceived significantly more concrete than the vision communication scenario ($M = 4.86$; $SD = 1.45$) ($t(717) = -8.35$, $p = 0.00$).

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive statistics

Table 2 displays descriptive statistics and a Spearman correlation matrix of the final sample. Of the participants, 48 percent were male and on average, were 43 years old. In terms of education, 32 percent of the participants had received a professional qualification, and 31% had a university degree. The participants belonged to various industries and firm sizes.

4.2. Hypotheses testing

We first tested whether construal fit situations led to a higher perceived construal fit than construal misfit situations (Hypothesis 1) by regressing perceived construal fit on the message abstractness, the social distance as well as their interaction (see Table 3 – contrast coded) and

² The classification is consistent with the European Commission cutoff values for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (i.e., staff headcount: small < 50, medium < 250, large > 250).

³ Modification indexes suggested eight pairs of items with correlated measurement errors, which we included in our model (Byrne 2016). Following standard procedure, we included only correlation within constructs.

7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
0.40 (0.00)									
0.46 (0.00)	-0.03 (0.42)								
-0.12 (0.00)	0.02 (0.51)	-0.09 (0.01)							
0.03 (0.48)	-0.01 (0.83)	0.06 (0.11)	-0.53 (0.00)						
0.10 (0.01)	-0.02 (0.64)	0.04 (0.29)	-0.52 (0.00)	-0.45 (0.00)					
-0.20 (0.00)	-0.28 (0.00)	0.02 (0.64)	0.11 (0.00)	0.06 (0.12)	-0.17 (0.00)				
0.12 (0.00)	-0.09 (0.01)	0.25 (0.00)	-0.21 (0.00)	0.03 (0.44)	0.20 (0.00)	0.14 (0.00)			
-0.03 (0.45)	0.08 (0.03)	-0.10 (0.01)	0.07 (0.05)	0.02 (0.59)	-0.10 (0.01)	-0.06 (0.12)	-0.09 (0.01)		
-0.03 (0.44)	-0.03 (0.43)	0.03 (0.48)	-0.05 (0.16)	0.03 (0.45)	0.03 (0.48)	-0.04 (0.25)	0.07 (0.06)	-0.37 (0.00)	
0.05 (0.17)	-0.05 (0.21)	0.07 (0.08)	-0.02 (0.54)	-0.04 (0.25)	0.07 (0.07)	0.09 (0.02)	0.03 (0.50)	-0.60 (0.00)	-0.53 (0.00)

graphically examining the results (see Fig. 3). Social distance ($b = -0.21$, $p = 0.04$) as well as message abstractness ($b = -0.67$, $p = 0.00$) have a significant negative effect on perceived construal fit. This indicates that distant leader communication as well as concrete goal communication strongly affect employees' perceived construal fit. The interaction is highly significant ($b = -0.71$, $p = 0.00$). Contrary to our theorizing, the graphical inspection of the results suggests no significant difference in the influence on perceived construal fit between visions communicated by a distant leader (construal fit) and visions communicated by a close leader (construal misfit), as the confidence intervals overlap. The graphical inspections regarding the effect of goal communication fully support our theorizing, as goals communicated by a close leader (construal fit) induce a significantly higher perceived construal fit than goals communicated by a distant leader (construal misfit). Further, we can see that vision communication has a significant positive main effect on perceived construal fit, meaning that visions created a higher perceived construal fit than goals independent of whether the vision was communicated by a distant (fit situation) or a close leader (misfit situation). Thus, overall, these results lend partial support to Hypothesis 1. To better understand the results, we conducted an additional analysis (see section "Additional Analysis" below).

Following the procedure by Hayes and Preacher (2014) and Hayes (2017), we then conducted a moderated mediation analysis to test whether combinations of social distance and message abstractness influence employee IEO mediated by perceived construal fit (Hypothesis 2). Therefore, we first conducted a moderated mediation regression for the mediator perceived construal fit and the outcome variable IEO (see Table 4).⁴ The first result column shows that the interaction effect of social distance and message abstractness significantly influences the mediator perceived construal fit ($b = -0.71$, $p = 0.00$). The second result column shows the positive effect of the mediator perceived construal fit on employee IEO ($b = 0.20$, $p = 0.00$). The effect strength lies between the effect of proactive personality ($b = 0.43$, $p = 0.00$) and promotion focus ($b = 0.09$, $p = 0.00$) on employee IEO. In other words, the marginal effect of perceived construal fit increases employee IEO by 2.8%. In comparison, the marginal effect of proactive personality leads to a 6.2% increase in employee IEO, while the marginal effect of promotion focus leads to a 1.3% increase. Overall, these results lend preliminary support for Hypothesis 2.

To finally test Hypothesis 2, we conducted a full moderated mediation analysis by using the PROCESS macro by Hayes and Preacher

(2014) and Hayes (2017). We calculated the conditional indirect effects with bootstrapped confidence intervals (CIs) (5,000 iterations) based on the results in Table 4. The overall moderated mediation model was supported with an index = -0.14: 90% CI = [-0.21, -0.07]. Table 5 presents the group comparisons of the indirect effects.

Consistent with the graphical inspection (Fig. 3 above), there is no significantly different effect whether visions are communicated by a distant leader (construal fit) or a close leader (construal misfit) (indirect effect = 0.03: 90% CI = [-0.02, 0.08]). In contrast, goals communicated by a close leader (construal fit) lead to significantly higher employee IEO than concrete goals communicated by a distant leader (construal misfit) (indirect effect = 0.11: 90% CI = [0.06, 0.16]), supporting our theorizing. Furthermore, results again show that visions influence employee IEO more positively than goals. Specifically, we find a positive effect when a close leader communicates a vision (construal misfit) as opposed to goals (construal fit) (indirect effect = 0.06: 90% CI = [0.02, 0.11]) as well as when a distant leader communicates a vision (construal fit) as opposed to goals (construal misfit) (indirect effect = 0.20: 90% CI = [0.14, 0.27]). In sum, the results partially support Hypothesis 2. That is, regarding the communication of goals, construal fit/misfit situations influence employee IEO, mediated by perceived construal fit. In contrast, regarding the communication of visions, we do not find support for our theorizing that fit situations lead to more perceived construal fit than misfit situations; a finding which we explore further in the following additional analysis.

4.3. Additional analysis

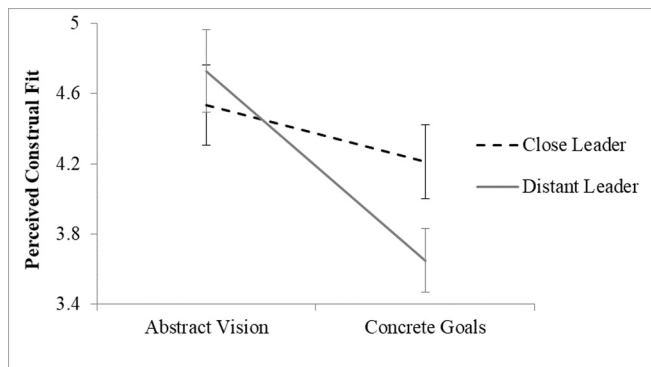
Our results show a strong direct effect of vision communication on perceived construal fit and employee IEO, irrespective of the social distance of the communicator. With this in mind and consistent with the discussion of differences between managerial and non-managerial employees (Soltanifar et al., 2023), we further explored whether our results are potentially related to the positions of the employees. Particularly in the entrepreneurial context, research illustrated how the hierarchical level can differently affect the perceptions and actions of employees and managers (Hornsby et al., 2009; de Jong et al., 2015). In addition, in entrepreneurial firms, managerial employees are frequently involved in the formation of a strategic vision and are responsible for communicating it to non-managerial employees (Rigtering & Weitzel, 2013). While non-managerial employees are more used to receiving concrete work orders, higher-level employees usually have more decision-making autonomy and leeway (Kuratko et al., 2005; Monsen & Boss, 2009; Ren & Guo, 2011). Thus, they might feel more comfortable in vision communication situations. At the same time, non-managerial employees

⁴ We used dummy coding for social distance and message abstractness to be able to make group comparisons when calculating the indirect effects of the moderated mediation model.

Table 3
OLS Regression Predicting Perceived Construal.

	Perceived Construal Fit			
	b	SE	t	p-value
Intercept	4.28	0.05	85.19	0.00
<i>Main effects</i>				
Social Distance ^a	−0.21	0.10	−2.05	0.04
Message ^b	−0.67	0.10	−6.67	0.00
<i>Two-way interaction</i>				
Message x Social Distance	−0.71	0.20	−3.54	0.00
<i>Model</i>				
R ²	0.08			
F-value	20.31	0.00		

Note: n = 719. ^acontrast coded 0.5 = high distance, −0.5 = low distance.
^bcontrast coded 0.5 = goals, −0.5 = vision.

**Fig. 3.** Interaction Effect between Social Distance and the Message with 95% CIs.

might not have a clear preference for either vision or goal communication and even need both forms of communication in order to avoid “aimless” entrepreneurship (Soltanifar et al., 2023).

Table 4
Moderated Mediation Regression Results.

	MEDIATOR PCF				OUTCOME IEO			
	b	SE	t	p-value	b	SE	t	p-value
Intercept	4.54	0.1	45.2	0.00	1.77	0.49	3.61	0.00
<i>Main effects</i>								
Social Distance ^a	0.15	0.14	1.05	0.29	−0.11	0.08	−1.37	0.17
Message ^b	0.315	0.14	−2.22	0.03	0.14	0.08	1.73	0.08
Perceived Construal Fit					0.20	0.02	9.08	0.00
<i>Two-way interaction</i>								
Message x Social Distance	−0.71	0.2	−3.54	0.00	0.16	0.11	1.41	0.16
<i>Controls</i>								
Age					0.00	0.02	0.15	0.88
Age Squared					0.00	0.00	0.32	0.75
Gender ^c					−0.02	0.06	−0.36	0.72
Promotion Focus					0.09	0.03	2.95	0.00
Prevention Focus					−0.02	0.03	−0.90	0.37
Proactive Personality					0.43	0.04	11.29	0.00
Education – Professional Qualification					0.01	0.07	0.11	0.91
Education – University Degree					−0.21	0.07	−2.84	0.00
Work Experience					0.00	0.00	−0.82	0.41
Management Position ^d					0.08	0.06	1.27	0.21
Company Size – Medium Sized					−0.12	0.08	−1.54	0.12
Company Size – Large					0.00	0.07	0.07	0.95
<i>Model</i>								
Industry Dummies					Yes			
R ²	0.08				0.36			
F-value	20.31	0.00			13.59	0.00		

Note: n = 719. Dependent Variables: PCF – Perceived Construal Fit; IEO – Individual Entrepreneurial Orientation. ^adummy coded 1 = high distance, 0 = low distance.
^bdummy coded 1 = goals, 0 = vision. ^c1 = male, 0 = female. ^d1 = managerial employees, 0 = non-managerial employees.

Following this rationale, we conducted a subgroup analysis to explore whether the employees' hierarchical level could be the root source of our results. Specifically, we split our sample into two groups: managerial (267 employees) and non-managerial employees (452 employees). Fig. 4 shows the graphical results of the OLS regression of perceived construal fit on the interaction effect of social distance and message abstractness for the split samples. In addition, we calculated the indirect effect paths of the moderated mediation models for the split samples (see Table 6).

The results for non-managerial employees support our theorizing that compared to construal misfit situations, construal fit situations lead to a higher perceived construal fit for both vision and goal communication. Specifically, vision communication leads to higher employee IEO (indirect effect = 0.07; 90% CI = [0.01, 0.15]) if communicated by a distant leader (construal fit) as opposed to a close leader (construal misfit). Likewise, goals lead to a higher employee IEO (indirect effect = 0.14; 90% CI = [0.08, 0.22]) if communicated by a close leader

Table 5
Conditional Indirect Effects of Construal Fit/Misfit Situations on IEO with 90% Confidence Intervals – Main Analysis.

Group Comparisons	Indirect Effect	SE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
<i>Abstract Vision</i>				
Distant Leader (1)	0.03	0.03	−0.02	0.08
vs. Close Leader (2)				
<i>Concrete Goal</i>				
Close Leader (4)	0.11	0.03	0.06	0.16
vs. Distant Leader (3)				
<i>Close Leader</i>				
Abstract Vision (2)	0.06	0.03	0.02	0.11
vs. Concrete Goal (4)				
<i>Distant Leader</i>				
Abstract Vision (1)	0.20	0.04	0.14	0.27
vs. Concrete Goal (3)				

Note: n = 719. Construal Fit (1) = Abstract Vision x Distant Leader; Construal Misfit (2) = Abstract Vision x Close Leader; Construal Misfit (3) = Concrete Goal x Distant Leader; Construal Fit (4) = Concrete Goal x Close Leader. IEO – Individual Entrepreneurial Orientation.

(construal fit) as opposed to a distant leader (construal misfit). The difference in whether a close leader communicated a vision (construal misfit) or goals (construal fit) is not significant (indirect effect = 0.00; 90% CI = [-0.06, 0.06]). Moreover, employee IEO was significantly higher (indirect effect = 0.22; 90% CI = [0.14, 0.30]) when a distant leader communicates a vision (construal fit) as opposed to goals (construal misfit). In contrast, managerial employees strongly prefer vision to goal communication and are less susceptible to incongruence due to construal fit and misfit. The evaluation of the conditional indirect effects for the manager sample reveals that both vision scenarios lead to more IEO than the two goal scenarios (see Table 6).

Overall, the results of the additional analysis refine our theory by revealing different insights for non-managerial and managerial employees. On the one hand, and in line with our theory, it is particularly non-managerial employees who react to construal fit and misfit in leader communication situations and who need congruence in order to translate a communicated message into their IEO. On the other hand, for managerial employees, it is particularly the communication of visions that positively influences their IEO, irrespective of the social distance of the communicator.

5. Discussion

We examined how close and distant leaders influence employee IEO through abstract vs. concrete communication of entrepreneurial strategies and how employees' perceived construal fit mediates this relationship. While our empirical findings lend support to our theorizing regarding the influence of goal communication, the insights regarding the effect of vision communication were less straightforward. We therefore conducted an in-depth additional analysis to inspect our results further. In the following, we discuss our findings in detail.

5.1. Theoretical implications

We advance prior research on antecedents of employee IEO, which rarely acknowledges that IEO formation involves a cognitive process (Bachmann et al., 2024; Rigtering & Weitzel, 2013). So far, only Rigtering et al. (2024) have provided an initial theory on the role of cognition for employee IEO. However, as the study focuses on individuals' entrepreneurial self-efficacy, it is limited in explaining how firms can influence their employees' cognitions to foster employee IEO in line with their entrepreneurial firm strategy. Thus, we advance the nascent debate on cognitive antecedents of IEO formation by explaining how firms can use leader communication to foster employee IEO and by highlighting the importance of paying attention to who communicates what to whom. Specifically, by examining the mediating role of employees' perceived construal fit, our study highlights the importance of considering employees' perceptions to account thoroughly for the underlying cognitive process of IEO formation. Based on these insights, we advise future research to consider how employees *perceive* antecedents, including firm-level antecedents, such as job design, resources, or

Table 6

Conditional Indirect Effects of Construal Fit/Misfit Situations on IEO with 90% Confidence Intervals – Additional Analysis.

Group Comparisons	Sample	Indirect Effect	SE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
<i>Abstract Vision</i>					
Distant Leader (1)	Non-managerial	0.07	0.04	0.01	0.15
vs. Close Leader (2)	Managerial	-0.02	0.04	-0.09	0.04
<i>Concrete Goal</i>					
Close Leader (4)	Non-managerial	0.14	0.04	0.08	0.22
vs. Distant Leader (3)	Managerial	0.07	0.05	0.00	0.15
<i>Close Leader</i>					
Abstract Vision (2)	Non-managerial	0.00	0.04	-0.06	0.06
vs. Concrete Goal (4)	Managerial	0.14	0.05	0.06	0.23
<i>Distant Leader</i>					
Abstract Vision (1)	Non-managerial	0.22	0.05	0.14	0.30
vs. Concrete Goal (3)	Managerial	0.19	0.06	0.09	0.29

Note: Non-managerial sample n = 452. Managerial sample n = 267. Construal Fit (1) = Abstract Vision x Distant Leader; Construal Misfit (2) = Abstract Vision x Close Leader; Construal Misfit (3) = Concrete Goal x Distant Leader; Construal Fit (4) = Concrete Goal x Close Leader. IEO = Individual Entrepreneurial Orientation.

formalized structures (Rigtering & Weitzel, 2013).

Our study also contributes to the IEO literature by advancing knowledge on the central role of leaders for employee IEO. Prior research particularly investigated the role of leader trust in fostering employee IEO or how leader trust can alleviate the performance-related benefits of IEO (Covin et al., 2020; Rigtering & Weitzel, 2013). Our focus on leader communication introduces an additional, more tangible leadership-related antecedent of employee IEO, which may be less fragile and time-intensive to develop (Dirks and de Jong, 2022). As current knowledge on leaders' role for employee IEO is still nascent, we also call for future research to explore leadership-related antecedents of employee IEO in more depth. For example, it would be interesting to determine whether leader communication can also help mitigate employees' reluctance to act on their IEO due to career-related concerns (Covin et al., 2020; Rigtering & Weitzel, 2013). Moreover, it is important that future research also considers how other leadership-related factors (e.g., leader-follower-similarity or leaders' role modeling) may influence employee IEO.

While entrepreneurship research drawing on CLT is still rare (with some notable exceptions (Chen et al., 2018; Gray et al., 2024; Tumasjan et al., 2013)), we demonstrate the applicability of this theory and further identify employees' position as an important contextual factor that affects employees' perception of leader communication of entrepreneurial

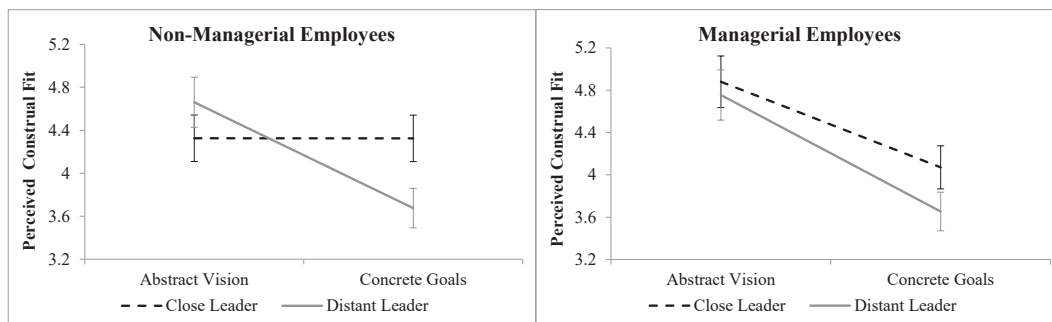


Fig. 4. Interaction Effect between Social Distance & the Message for Split Samples with 95% CIs.

messages (c.f., [Wiesenfeld et al., 2017](#)). Specifically, the results for managerial and non-managerial employees help refine CLT by suggesting that employees' perception of leader communication is highly dependent on their position within a firm. Non-managerial employees particularly benefit from coherent leader communication to translate entrepreneurial messages into their IEO, i.e., communication that is in line with construal fit situations. Thus, in line with current research on differences between managerial and non-managerial employees ([Hornsby et al., 2009](#); [Soltanifar et al., 2023](#)), we illustrate the importance of taking employees' positions within their firm into account when studying the cognitive process by which different antecedents foster employee IEO.

In addition, we advance prior research ([Hornsby et al., 2009](#); [Kuratko et al., 2005](#); [Ren & Guo, 2011](#)) by improving the understanding of why managerial employees seem to prefer vision communication to goal communication. Managerial employees have distinguishing characteristics such as greater resource availability and decision-making latitude, and they are highly involved in strategy formation and its translation to lower firm levels ([Rigtering et al., 2019](#); [Soltanifar et al., 2023](#)). Further, current research shows that leaders who have a high leader self-identity are more likely to communicate abstractly than concretely ([Venus et al., 2019](#)). Our finding suggests that managerial employees prefer more autonomy and, thus, less concrete instructions and are more amenable to vision communication, highlighting the need to untangle further the complexities concerning how a message is communicated as well as how employees perceive leader communication to obtain an even more nuanced picture of the influence on employees from various hierarchical levels.

5.2. Practical implications

By taking a cognitive perspective on employee IEO formation, our study has important societal and practical implications. From a societal perspective, entrepreneurship plays a key role in creating innovative and radical solutions to help tackle the global challenges of the 21st century, such as poverty, inequality, or the climate crisis ([Doh et al., 2019](#); [Markman et al., 2019](#)). However, as entrepreneurship is not limited to small, young start-ups, it is important that larger, more established firms also aim to become entrepreneurial by fostering employee IEO. Hence, explaining how to foster employee IEO may be a small piece of the puzzle for firms to help solve current societal problems and to compete in dynamic work environments. In addition, fostering employee IEO within firms is also likely to positively shape the public's perception of entrepreneurship, as it allows more individuals to become familiar with entrepreneurship 'on the job' and to learn about and appreciate entrepreneurship's benefits.

From a practical perspective, our study allows us to infer specific, actionable steps for firms to take when aiming to foster employee IEO as part of their firm strategy. For example, firms could implement a leadership training program focusing on how leaders can foster employee IEO through communication, which should consider at least the following three aspects. First, the training program needs to sensitize leaders to the fact that they can increase employee IEO by creating construal fit situations, meaning that their style of communication should match their social distance to employees. That is, socially distant leaders should communicate abstract visions, while socially close leaders should focus on concrete goals. Moreover, leaders need to be aware that "conflicting" communication, however, may create construal misfit situations for employees, which, in turn, could mean that the communicated message does not achieve the intended effect and may even discourage employees. Second, the training program needs to highlight the importance of how employees perceive the communicated message. Following our finding that leader communication influences employee IEO *through perceived construal fit*, leaders need to be aware that messages are not automatically received as intended. Hence, it is important that leaders not only pay careful attention to what they say

but also make sure that employees receive the message accordingly. Third, the training program needs to highlight that leaders consider with whom they communicate. Particularly, leaders must understand that non-managerial employees are highly susceptible to construal fit/misfit situations. In contrast, managerial employees show a stronger preference for "the big picture" (i.e., abstract leader communication of visions), which does not curtail their scope of action. While our recommendations are predominantly valuable for firm communication strategies and related leadership training programs, the identified mechanisms through which communication can increase IEO may also inform other stakeholders aiming to increase entrepreneurship, such as universities, incubators, accelerators, or public policy programs.

However, it is important to note that these practical implications may vary across organizational and cultural settings. For example, employees' social distance from leaders may be significant in organizational or cultural settings with higher power distance ([den Hartog & de Hoogh, 2024](#); [Lee et al., 2020](#)). In contrast, goal communication of socially distant leaders may induce less perceived misfit in settings with lower power distance and, ultimately, influence employee IEO less. Similarly, message abstractness may be less relevant in smaller firms where close leaders are more involved in developing the firm's strategy and, therefore, more likely to communicate visions. Finally, the implications of our study may depend on the cultural setting of a firm with regard to uncertainty avoidance. That is, employees from cultures who tend to be particularly uncomfortable in uncertain, ambiguous situations may be particularly susceptible to misfit situations, making it even more important to ensure that leaders communicate fitting messages in these contexts.

5.3. Limitations & future research directions

Our paper has several limitations opening avenues for future research. First, we acknowledge some concerns related to conducting online vignette experiments. The first concern relates to the fact that an online setting limits control over participants. Hence, despite including attention checks and considering participants' response times, we cannot entirely rule out that our participants were distracted or not serious about participating in the study ([Gosling et al., 2004](#)). The second concern relates to the ecological validity of the hypothetical scenarios in the vignettes, which we addressed by checking the external validity of the vignettes in a validation study (see [Table 1](#)) as well as by conducting the main experiment with employees. However, it is still possible that our participants' statements in the hypothetical scenario and actions in a real work context (where they face actual and not hypothetical consequences) could differ. Nonetheless, conducting an investigation of our model in a real firm setting or developing an IEO measure usable in an active role-playing experiment to substantiate our results would be valuable. A final concern relates to conducting an online vignette experiment based on a crowdsourcing sample. Using a crowdsourcing platform allows us to collect a greater sociodemographic variance ([Woo et al., 2015](#)), and there is no indication that crowdsourcing respondents are less honest or attentive than respondents from other samples ([Keith et al., 2017](#)). However, as participants are monetarily incentivized or may have experience with similar questionnaires, they may also be more susceptible to the researcher's aim. As our fieldwork panel is typically used for marketing surveys, it is less likely that our participants have encountered similar constructs before our study. Yet, even though "our" respondents may be less likely to be biased by recognition or experience effects, we still cannot exclude such a possibility.

Second, our study faces limitations regarding our conceptualization of IEO. That is, our IEO measure captures only the intention to behave entrepreneurially. In line with previous research (e.g., [Chen et al., 2018](#); [Kraus et al., 2019](#); [Tumasjan et al., 2013](#)), we assume that intention, and as such IEO, is a good predictor of actual entrepreneurial behavior. Moreover, we acknowledge that recent studies highlight alternative

conceptualizations of IEO, including additional dimensions such as *autonomy* and *competitiveness* (Clark, Covin, & Pidduck, 2024) or *perseverance* and *entrepreneurial passion* (Santos et al., 2020). Thus, we call for future research to validate our theory with these conceptualizations and measurements of IEO.

Third, manipulating the construal level involved a trade-off between increasing realism and decreasing confounding effects. We used different aspects to manipulate the construal level: To manipulate the abstractness of the message, we used temporal distance, hypotheticality, and the language used. With our experimental design, we could not discern whether hypotheticality or temporal distance drives the results, as doing so would require two distinct scenarios. Similarly, we manipulated leaders' social distance in three ways (hierarchical distance: CEO vs. team leader; communication channel: personal vs. email communication; the language used: formal vs. informal language). Still, we decided to combine all aspects and tested the overall concept of leader communication to increase the external validity of the scenarios by presenting the participants with situations that they can easily relate to. Nonetheless, future research could unpack which construal level aspect has the strongest effect or whether all aspects jointly influence employees' perceived construal fit.

Finally, we acknowledge that relying on a single national sample (i. e., Germany) may limit the generalizability of our findings across cultures, as cultural settings are likely to determine how individuals react to construal (mis)fit situations. Next to differences in power distance and uncertainty avoidance, which we previously discussed in the practical contribution section, prior research also suggests that individuals from more individualistic cultures (such as the German or other West-European or North American cultures) particularly respond to abstract, distant construals (Kim et al., 2018). As such, our finding that visions communicated by distant leaders increase employee IEO through perceived construal fit might suggest that our theory is specific to our German, more individualistic participants. However, the fact that we also find that goal communication by close leaders increases employee IEO (which is rather typical for collectivistic cultures) suggests that our results are more likely to be driven by construal fit situations than culture. Still, we call for future research to validate our findings across cultures and to elaborate on our theory by considering the role of cultural dimensions more explicitly.

6. Conclusion

We examined how leader communication of entrepreneurial goals and visions shapes the underlying cognitive process of employees that ultimately influences their IEO. Validating our theory with an online vignette experiment, we found support for our theory but also detected some notable exceptions, encouraging us to delve deeper and conduct additional analyses. Based on our findings, we discussed how introducing the effect of leader communication of entrepreneurial visions and goals into the emerging literature on IEO advances prior literature. Moreover, we showed and discussed how managerial and non-managerial employees react differently to coherent communication. Our study has implications for practice and future research.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Gertraud M. Gänser-Stickler: Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Katrin Burmeister-Lamp:** Writing – original draft, Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Conceptualization. **Johanna Kuske:** Writing – review & editing. **Christian Schwens:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2025.115637>.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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