

**Antecedents and Effects of Visionary Leadership: When and How Leader Work Centrality
is Linked to Visionary Leadership and Follower Turnover Intentions**

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Abstract

Scholars have argued that visionary leadership is an effective tool to motivate followers because it provides them with meaning and purpose. However, previous research tells us little about which leaders and under which circumstances leaders engage in visionary leadership. We draw on theories of human and social capital to argue that leader work centrality is an important antecedent of visionary leadership, and especially so for leaders with low organizational tenure. Moreover, we propose that visionary leadership then provides followers with meaningfulness and thereby decreases their turnover intentions. Our predictions were confirmed by data from a two-wave, lagged-design field study with 101 leader-follower dyads. Overall, our research identifies an important antecedent of visionary leadership, a specific situation in which this antecedent is particularly important, and provides empirical evidence for why visionary leadership can bind followers to an organization.

Keywords: visionary leadership; leader work centrality; leader organizational tenure; follower meaningfulness; follower turnover intentions

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Scholars have argued that vision communication is one of the most effective leader behaviors (Lewis & Clark, 2020). In the past, vision communication has mostly been studied within the charismatic-transformational leadership literature, where it is combined with other leadership elements to form a broader measure of transformational leadership (van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). Such “lumped” conceptualizations of leading have been criticized on the basis of conceptual and methodological flaws, and scholars have called for studying “split” conceptualizations of leading instead – that is, examining isolated leadership behaviors and their specific and unique effects (e.g., Carton, 2022). In an attempt to study visions independent of and unconfounded with other charismatic-transformational leadership elements, scholars have begun to focus on the more circumscribed construct of visionary leadership, which refers to “the communication of a future image of a collective with the goal of persuading others to contribute to its realization” (van Knippenberg & Stam, 2014: 241). When viewing the literature that is specific to visionary leadership, it becomes evident that, somewhat surprisingly, we still know relatively little about which characteristics determine whether leaders engage in visionary leadership and which effects it has on followers (van Knippenberg & Stam, 2014; Venus, Johnson, et al., 2019). Thus, it is the overall goal of the present research to broaden our understanding of visionary leadership’s specific antecedents and its consequences for followers.

In this research, we propose that a leader’s level of work centrality is an antecedent of visionary leadership. Work centrality refers to an attitude that describes the extent to which individuals believe that work plays a major role in their life (Paullay et al., 1994). Scholars have argued that individuals with high work centrality identify strongly with their work, care deeply

about it, and attach more importance to the work role than do other people (Bal & Kooij, 2011; Volery & Tarabashkina, 2021; Ziegler & Schlett, 2016). Correspondingly, it has been argued that they use their work for self-definition, allocate more time and energy towards the work domain, and are more willing to make personal sacrifices for it (Bagger & Li, 2012; Reb et al., 2018). In fact, empirical research has shown that individuals with high work centrality experience higher levels of work engagement (Bal & Kooij, 2011; Petrou et al., 2017; Ugwu et al., 2015) and job satisfaction (Bal & Kooij, 2011; Tziner et al., 2014), are more committed to their organization (Hirschfeld & Feild, 2000; Jiang & Johnson, 2018), and have lower turnover intentions (Bal & Kooij, 2011).

However, despite such evidence for its positive effects, it is unclear whether work centrality influences visionary leadership behaviors, which are deemed to be particularly important in times of high uncertainty (e.g., Shamir et al., 1993) that many, if not most, organizations are currently facing. Shedding light on this link between work centrality and visionary leadership would enable both scholars and practitioners to better predict which individuals are most likely to exhibit leadership behaviors that are arguably particularly appropriate in today's workplace (e.g., Kearney et al., 2019). We draw on theories of human and social capital (Becker, 1964; Kwon & Adler, 2014) to argue that leaders with high work centrality care so deeply about their work that they are more willing than others to engage in visionary leadership – a leader behavior that is often seen as extraordinary and as an act of unconventional risk taking (Halevy et al., 2011) – and thus test and potentially strain their relationships with others in the organization.

Moreover, we argue that work centrality is more important for leaders with low, rather than high organizational tenure. Organizational tenure refers to the length of an individual's

employment in an organization (Ng & Feldman, 2010). Previous work has suggested that a leader's organizational tenure influences the resources available to him or her and therefore shapes the situation in which the leader operates (Li & Patel, 2019). We propose that while leaders with high organizational tenure have already acquired large amounts of organization-specific knowledge and many social contacts, which makes visionary leadership less difficult and risky for them, leaders at the beginning of their organizational tenure need high levels of work centrality to compensate for their lack of these resources and thus be willing to engage in visionary leadership.

Regarding its consequences for followers, we propose that visionary leadership then enhances followers' perceived meaningfulness and thereby reduces their turnover intentions. Work meaningfulness refers to the degree to which one perceives work as generally valuable, meaningful, and worthwhile (Aguinis & Glavas, 2019). Meaningfulness is a fundamental human need and finding meaning in one's life is an important aspect of human nature (Lambert et al., 2013). Because people spend significant amounts of time and energy at work, a large part of their search for meaning happens in this context (Robertson et al., 2020). Indeed, previous research has shown that for many employees, work meaningfulness is one of the most central work features and even more important than income or job security (Carton, 2018). If employees perceive a lack of meaningfulness, they often become frustrated and start thinking about finding more meaningful work elsewhere (De Clercq & Belausteguigoitia, 2017). We propose that visionary leadership embeds followers' efforts in a bigger picture that helps them to better understand the overall purpose of their work. Thereby, it increases their perceptions of meaningfulness and reduces their turnover intentions.

In short, we argue that leader work centrality is positively related to visionary leadership, and that this relationship is more strongly positive for short-tenured than for longer-tenured leaders. Moreover, we propose that visionary leadership then transmits the interactive effect of leader work centrality and organizational tenure onto follower meaningfulness to decrease followers' turnover intentions. We found support for our model (shown in Figure 1) in a two-wave, lagged-design field study with 101 leader-follower dyads.

----- Insert Figure 1 about here -----

We make three important contributions to the leadership literature. First, while previous research has examined visionary leadership's positive effects on followers (e.g., Kearney et al., 2019; Kohles et al., 2012; Sully de Luque et al., 2008) and how visions must be configured to be communicated effectively (e.g., Carton et al., 2014; Partlow et al., 2015), few studies have investigated which leaders actually engage in visionary leadership. Our research complements and extends research on the antecedents of visionary leadership (e.g., Kim et al., 2023; Venus, Johnson, et al., 2019) by highlighting the importance of leader work centrality. Second, our study shows that work centrality is particularly important for visionary leadership when leaders are still new to their organization. While the strategic management literature has long recognized the importance of leader organizational tenure as a defining feature to distinguish executives (Bergh, 2001), the leadership literature has mostly considered it as a control variable (Bernerth et al., 2018). With our research, we identify the important role of leader organizational tenure as a boundary condition for when leader work centrality influences leader behavior.

Third, it is often argued theoretically that visionary leadership provides followers with meaningfulness (e.g., Carton, 2018; Stam et al., 2010). However, the only empirical evidence for this claim comes from research in which vision communication is combined with other

leadership elements to form a broader measure of transformational leadership (e.g., Frieder et al., 2018) or where visionary leadership is defined partly in terms of its effects (i.e., “behaviors through which leaders [...] inspire others;” Kipfelsberger et al., 2022, p. 1288). The former stream of research tells us little about the specific effects of visionary leadership on followers (Alvesson & Einola, 2019; Carton, 2022; van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). And regarding the latter, it has been argued that it “is a logical flaw to define a concept in terms of its effects and such a definition would disqualify the concept from studying its effects” (van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013, p. 11). Therefore, our study is the first to provide evidence for the specific effect of visionary leadership – as a circumscribed construct whose definition and conceptualization do not already include positive follower reactions – on follower meaningfulness and, in turn, turnover intentions. All in all, our research shows that work centrality is an important leader attribute that predicts visionary leadership, especially for those at the beginning of their organizational tenure, and is thereby linked to positive follower outcomes.

Theory and Hypotheses

Leader Work Centrality and Visionary Leadership

There is only a small, nascent literature on the antecedents of visionary leadership (rather than the broader charismatic-transformational leadership construct). Traits that have been identified as antecedents of visionary leadership behaviors include leader expressivity (Fiset & Boies, 2019), creativity, and self-confidence (García-Vidal et al., 2019). Moreover, research has shown that leaders with high levels of future-oriented construals in the morning and a strong leadership self-identity are more likely to engage in visionary leadership during the day (Venus, Johnson, et al., 2019) and that leaders with a strong tendency for self-projection – that is, mentally projecting themselves into alternative scenarios – tend to act more often as visionary

leaders (Kim et al., 2023). Other research on antecedents has examined tactics that enable leaders to effectively articulate visions. For example, Carton and Lucas (2018) have shown that temporal projection – that is, imagining a future in which the vision is already realized and describing it in vivid, image-laden terms – enhances effective vision communication.

It is likely that there are several states, traits, and behavioral tactics that promote visionary behaviors. However, we argue that it all starts with a leader's degree of involvement in his or her work. To be fully motivated to continuously and authentically communicate a vision, a leader must care deeply and be passionate about his or her work. In other words, work must be a central concern in his or her life. Individuals with high work centrality define themselves through their work (Reb et al., 2018), are more attached and committed to their organizations, and more strongly identify with its values and goals (Bal & Kooij, 2011; Hirschfeld & Feild, 2000; Ziegler & Schlett, 2016). We propose that high work centrality-leaders are willing to engage in visionary behaviors despite the difficulty and potentially negative social consequences of doing so.

Individuals possess certain levels of human and social capital, which influence their behavior and performance in the workplace (Becker, 1964; Kwon & Adler, 2014). While human capital refers to an individual's knowledge and skills, social capital constitutes the sum of resources derived from one's network of relationships with co-workers, other leaders, suppliers, or customers (Ng & Feldman, 2011). We submit that visionary leadership is a challenging behavior that not all leaders use to the same extent because communicating visions is demanding with respect to a leader's human and social capital. When leaders engage in visionary leadership, they communicate an image of the future to persuade their followers to contribute to its realization (van Knippenberg & Stam, 2014). However, research has shown that accurately predicting the future usually exceeds people's abilities and that most predictions about the future

are based on hypothetical assumptions (Camerer & Johnson, 1991; Gigerenzer, 2015). Thus, although visionary leaders often have as little knowledge about the future as those whom they want to persuade, they must nevertheless speak about the future with some certainty to make their message convincing and persuasive. We argue that some leaders might be uncomfortable with this because it involves the risk of being seen as an “irrational dreamer” whose predictions are untethered to reality. Moreover, to communicate a vision of the future, visionary leaders challenge the status quo and make clear what needs to change (Halevy et al., 2011). Naturally, leaders are aware that not everyone will embrace their critique of current organizational routines and advocacy of change, and that they will often face resistance (Venus, Stam, & van Knippenberg, 2019). Articulating a vision means rocking the boat, which some people in the organization may view as threatening. Exhibiting visionary behaviors thus entails the risk that not only will some people not be motivated by the vision, but they may even actively work against it and strive to undermine the leader who communicates the vision. We therefore argue that some leaders will refrain from visionary leadership because they fear that their initiative might not receive enough support and/or because it puts too much of a strain on their social relationships at work.

We argue that leaders with high work centrality are more inclined to talk about what could and should be accomplished in the future because they are more emotionally involved in their work. Given the central place that work occupies in their lives, they are more willing to engage in visionary behaviors despite the difficulties of doing so and despite the resistance they may face. By contrast, if work centrality is low and leaders merely view their work as a means to making a living without being strongly involved in it, they are less likely to leave their comfort

zone and engage in the difficult and risky behavior of communicating a vision. We therefore posit:

Hypothesis 1: Leader work centrality is positively related to visionary leadership.

The Interactive Effect of Leader Work Centrality and Organizational Tenure on Visionary Leadership

Scholars have argued that individuals' levels of human and social capital are strongly influenced by the length of their organizational tenure (Kim et al., 2015). Individuals start at an organization with low organization-specific human and social capital. As their organizational tenure increases, they accrue more of both forms of capital, which helps them to perform and fulfil their role more effectively (Kim et al., 2015).

Because leaders at the beginning of their organizational tenure lack both organization-specific human and social capital, we argue that the degree to which they will engage in visionary leadership will even more strongly depend on their level of work centrality. Low-tenure leaders know little about the organization's existing resources, processes, and challenges and thus have little organization-specific human capital (Li & Patel, 2019). Consequently, many of them will be occupied with trying to make sense of the organization's present state. Under these circumstances, they will not yet have a well-developed view on what could and should change (Bal et al., 2013). It could thus be expected that low-tenure leaders would engage in less visionary behaviors than longer tenured leaders who already have the organization "figured out" and have a better idea of what types of changes are needed and feasible.

However, we propose that low organizational tenure will be less problematic for leaders with high work centrality. Such individuals are motivated to exert more effort, invest more resources, and make personal sacrifices at work (Bal & Kooij, 2011; Mannheim et al., 1997; Reb

et al., 2018). Compared to low work centrality leaders, high work centrality leaders are more likely to more quickly and more fully immerse themselves in their organization and thus more quickly develop organization-specific human and social capital (Lapierre et al., 2018). We argue that because work is so important to them, leaders with high work centrality will gain a better general understanding of the organization more quickly and thus put themselves in a position where they can better articulate what could and should change. At the same time, they will be more willing than low work centrality leaders to take risks and articulate a vision even when they are relatively new to the organization. The work is so central to them that they are willing to articulate what they regard as important in the future even if there are many aspects about the organization they do not yet fully understand.

In comparison to high tenure leaders, leaders with low organizational tenure lack social capital as they are less likely to have developed a high number of strong bonds with other organizational members who could support them in the pursuit of their objectives (van de Brake et al., 2020). Consequently, they will be less sure about their own social position, what behavior is expected of them, and how others will react to their actions (Greenbaum et al., 2015).

Visionary leaders are often seen as exceptional individuals because the communication of strong convictions sets them apart from others (Halevy et al., 2011). But precisely because visionary leadership casts leaders into the spotlight, we argue that especially at the beginning of their organizational tenure, some leaders might refrain from such behavior. Such leaders might be more concerned with blending in and adapting to their new situation, while trying to avoid behavior that is seen as too risky (Greenbaum et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2018). However, because work centrality lets individuals care mostly about their work and its outcomes (Ziegler & Schlett, 2016), rather than about how they are viewed by others, we argue that leaders with high work

centrality will be more willing to “go out on a limb” and articulate a vision, even when they are still highly unsure about their own social position.

In contrast, we argue that work centrality is less important for longer-tenured leaders to engage in visionary leadership. During their employment at an organization, leaders learn important skills and acquire large amounts of organization-specific knowledge (Kim et al., 2015; Li & Patel, 2019; Ng & Feldman, 2011). In addition, they build strong relationships with co-workers, other leaders, suppliers, and/or customers and acquire a thorough understanding of the organization’s political structure (Bergh, 2001; Kim et al., 2015; Ng & Feldman, 2011; van de Brake et al., 2020). Previous research has shown that the acquisition of such human and social capital helps longer-tenured individuals to perform more effectively (Ng & Feldman, 2010). Moreover, it allows them to drive change and innovation because they have a more accurate view of which innovations might be successful, where support can be gained, and how to deal with resistance (Kim et al., 2015; Ng & Feldman, 2013; Steffens et al., 2014). Thus, as longer-tenured leaders can resort to a larger set of practices, skills, and social contacts that help them succeed, we argue that work centrality is less important for these leaders in order to be visionary.

In sum, we argue that work centrality predicts visionary leadership particularly among leaders at the beginning of their organizational tenure because, first, work centrality lets leaders gain an understanding of the organization’s functioning more quickly, which puts them in a better position to formulate a feasible vision; and, second, such leaders care so deeply about their work that they are willing to engage in visionary leadership even when they do not yet fully understand the organization and are still uncertain about their social position in it. In contrast, we argue that long-tenured leaders have already acquired large amounts of human and social capital,

which makes it easier for them to engage in visionary leadership and thereby decreases work centrality's importance as an antecedent. Thus, we posit:

Hypothesis 2: Leader organizational tenure moderates the relationship between leader work centrality and visionary leadership such that this relationship is more strongly positive when leader organizational tenure is low, rather than high.

Visionary Leadership and Follower Meaningfulness

Scholars have argued that visionary leadership is one of the most powerful tools available to leaders (Stam et al., 2014; Venus, Stam, & van Knippenberg, 2019). While some destructive leaders might exploit such leadership to win over followers to their amoral endeavors (e.g., Padilla et al., 2007), most research has highlighted the positive potential that visions have in fostering follower motivation (e.g., Sully de Luque et al., 2008) and commitment (e.g., Dvir et al., 2004; Kohles et al., 2012). Scholars have argued that one of the main mechanisms through which visionary leadership exerts its effects is by providing followers with a sense of meaning (Carton 2018; Kipfelsberger et al., 2022; Stam et al., 2010). It has been argued that perceptions of work meaningfulness are driven by two elements: a work-related purpose that provides a justification for one's work, and the personal importance that one attaches to this purpose (Robertson et al., 2020).

We propose that visionary leadership fosters meaningfulness among followers because it highlights how organizational activities contribute to such a purpose. Visions provide an image of the collective's future and thus increase followers' understanding of what the collective could become in the future (Stam et al., 2010; Stam et al., 2014). Thus, they provide followers with an important mental model, which helps them to make sense of their surroundings and embeds organizational activities in a bigger picture (Carton, 2018; Lewis & Clark, 2020). In other words,

visionary leadership connects followers' work activities with broader organizational objectives (e.g., superior customer satisfaction) or societal purposes (e.g., environmental protection; Peng et al., 2016). As followers then understand the overall purpose of their work, we argue that they will also consider their work as more meaningful compared to a situation in which they lack a general understanding of why they are asked to do their work. Although this sense-making effect should in and of itself provide followers with meaningfulness, we argue that visionary leadership's effect on meaningfulness should be even more pronounced when followers attach great personal value to this purpose (Carton, 2018). In cases where the vision reflects values that are personally important to followers, working towards the vision can then become particularly meaningful and an act of moral commitment and self-expression because it enables followers to realize and enact their inner self (Bono & Judge, 2003; Hoffman, Bynum, et al., 2011; Robertson et al., 2020). Hence, we posit:

Hypothesis 3: Visionary leadership is positively related to follower meaningfulness.

The Conditional Indirect Effect of Leader Work Centrality via Visionary Leadership and Follower Meaningfulness on Follower Turnover Intentions

Finally, we propose that increased levels of meaningfulness subsequently result in reduced follower turnover intentions. Scholars have argued that when individuals perceive their work as meaningful, they feel that their personal resources are used well because their efforts make an important contribution to a valuable purpose (Hernandez & Guarana, 2018). Thus, they become fully engaged in their work for the vision's cause and less likely to end their efforts by leaving the organization (Kohles et al., 2012; Spell et al., 2014). Moreover, it has been argued that followers who see their work as meaningful consider their organization as a vehicle to fulfill their personal needs and a means to contribute to a cause of high personal importance (Allan et

al., 2019). Thereby, they become strongly committed and attached to their organization and feel obligated to continue their work even when other factors, such as unpleasant coworkers, low pay, or more attractive job alternatives would otherwise motivate them to leave (Tse et al., 2013). Indeed, previous research has shown that meaningfulness reduces follower turnover intentions (Kipfelsberger et al., 2022), and that this association can be explained by increased engagement and commitment (Allan et al., 2019; Arnoux-Nicolas et al., 2016; Clausen & Borg, 2010; Leunissen et al., 2018).

We argued above that work centrality is a more important predictor of visionary leadership for short-tenured leaders than for longer-tenured leaders because it helps those with short organizational tenure to overcome barriers that would otherwise prevent them from engaging in visionary leadership. We further argued that visionary leadership subsequently strengthens followers' understanding of how their efforts serve a bigger purpose and thus enhances their perceptions of meaningfulness. We extend this line of reasoning to propose that perceptions of meaningfulness induce followers to become more engaged in and committed to their work, which ultimately reduces their turnover intentions. In contrast, we argue that work centrality is less important among long-tenured leaders because these leaders have already acquired large amounts of organization-specific knowledge and social contacts. This enables them to perform effectively and communicate a vision even when work is less central to them. Hence, we posit:

Hypothesis 4: There is a conditional indirect effect such that visionary leadership and follower meaningfulness transmit the interactive effect of leader work centrality and organizational tenure onto follower turnover intentions. This indirect effect is more strongly positive when leader organizational tenure is low, rather than high.

Methods

Sample and Procedure

We tested our hypotheses with data from a lagged-design field study with 101 leader-follower dyads from a wide range of different industries, including education, information technology and communication, manufacturing, public administration, finance and insurance, retail, and various other types of services. They worked on a variety of different tasks such as procurement, production planning, tax consulting and auditing, teaching, software development, marketing and public relations, sales, administrative services, or banking. We approached either the leader or the follower of the dyads through personal contacts for the support of our research. Each participant was only part of one dyad, which means that there was no overlap among any of our recruited dyads. All the dyads in our sample interacted regularly, with the majority interacting several times a day. Hierarchically, almost all of the leaders in our sample (97 of 101) were at middle levels. Our data can be found in the online appendix (https://osf.io/qu53b/?view_only=a277987eec9146f1b9c5798ce2afc663).

We collected data in two waves. Prior to each wave, participants received from us a link to an online platform, where they were assured anonymity and provided with general information about the study. At time 1 (T1), leaders rated their work centrality and provided information regarding their organizational tenure, demographics, and other control variables (see below). At time 2 (T2), two months after T1, followers completed measures capturing demographics, their leader's visionary leadership behavior, work meaningfulness, and turnover intentions.

We originally contacted 630 dyads, of which 163 agreed to participate (26%). To be included in our final sample, we required complete data from the leader at T1 and from the follower at T2. This yielded a final sample of 101 leader-follower dyads. We did not find

systematic differences between the dyads that provided complete data and those that provided incomplete or no data. In our final sample, 52 dyads were located in Pakistan, 36 in India, six in Germany, two in Thailand, and one dyad each in Australia, Malaysia, Norway, Oman, and the U.S. Of the followers, 70 were male (69%) and 31 were female (31%). Followers were on average 32.46 years old ($SD = 7.17$). Of the leaders, 90 were male (89%) and 11 were female (11%). Leaders were on average 40.44 years old ($SD = 9.28$).

Measures

Unless otherwise noted, we measured all survey items in English with 7-point Likert-type scales that ranged from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*.

Leader Work Centrality (T1). Leaders assessed their work centrality with six items from Hirschfeld and Feild (2000). The items were, “In my view, an individual’s personal life goals should be work oriented,” “Life is worth living only when people get absorbed in work,” “The major satisfaction in my life comes from my work,” “The most important things that happen to me involve my work,” “Work should be considered central to life,” and “I would probably keep working even if I didn’t need the money” ($\alpha = .83$).

Leader Organizational Tenure (T1). We measured organizational tenure by asking leaders about the length (years and months) of their employment at their current organization.

Visionary Leadership (T2). Followers assessed their leader’s visionary leadership behavior on five items from Kearney et al. (2019). Followers rated the degree to which their leader “talks about the future,” “communicates a clear idea about what could be accomplished,” “has a clear idea about what the future should look like,” “communicates his/her vision of the future,” and “states clearly where we are going” ($\alpha = .92$).

Follower Meaningfulness (T2). Followers rated their perceived meaningfulness with four items from Kirkman et al. (2004), which we adapted to the individual level of analysis. Followers indicated the degree to which they think that their “tasks are worthwhile,” “job is meaningful,” “work is important,” and “work is significant” ($\alpha = .95$).

Follower Turnover Intentions (T2). We measured follower turnover intentions with four items from Chen et al. (2011). Followers indicated the extent to which they “think about leaving this organization,” “plan to look for a new job,” “intend to ask people about new job opportunities,” and “don’t plan to be in this organization much longer” ($\alpha = .95$).

Control Variables. We controlled for leader age because previous studies have shown that age is often highly correlated with organizational tenure and should thus be included as a control in research on organizational tenure (Ali & Davies, 2003; Ng & Feldman, 2010). We also controlled for leader gender (coded with 0 = male and 1 = female), as previous research has suggested that, on average, men tend to experience higher work centrality than women (Michel et al., 2011) and because leader gender was unevenly distributed in our sample. Finally, we controlled for leader decision-making autonomy because of our diverse sample with leaders from various organizations with different levels of decision-making autonomy. We measured decision-making autonomy with three items from Morgeson and Humphrey (2006; $\alpha = .75$; sample item: “The job allows me to make a lot of decisions on my own”).

Confirmatory Factor Analysis. We assessed the validity of our measures with confirmatory factor analyses. A two-factor model with the two scales assessed by the leader – leader work centrality and decision-making autonomy – as separate factors was a good fit to the data ($\chi^2(26) = 34.03$; CFI = .98; RMSEA = .06; SRMR = .05; Hu & Bentler, 1999) and a significantly better fit ($p < .001$) than an alternative one-factor model ($\chi^2(27) = 115.68$; CFI

= .74; RMSEA = .18; SRMR = .14). Similarly, a three-factor model with all variables rated by the followers – visionary leadership, follower meaningfulness, and follower turnover intentions – exhibited a good fit ($\chi^2(62) = 103.97$; CFI = .97; RMSEA = .08; SRMR = .06) that was a significantly better fit ($p < .001$) than all alternative two-factor models (e.g., a model that combined visionary leadership and follower meaningfulness into one factor and considered turnover intentions as the other factor: $\chi^2(64) = 348.67$; CFI = .79; RMSEA = .21; SRMR = .12) and a one-factor model that combined all variables into one factor ($\chi^2(65) = 713.87$; CFI = .52; RMSEA = .31; SRMR = .20).

Results

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and correlations among our study variables. Hypothesis 1, which predicts that leader work centrality is positively related to visionary leadership, was confirmed by both the correlation ($r = .22, p = .030$) and the regression analysis ($b = .17, SE = .08, p = .041$). Hypothesis 2 posits that leader organizational tenure moderates the relation between leader work centrality and visionary leadership such that leader work centrality's effect on visionary leadership is more strongly positive when leader organizational tenure is low, rather than high. We tested this hypothesis with a hierarchical regression analysis. In the first step, we entered our control variables leader age, gender, and decision-making autonomy into the regression equation. In the second step, we included leader work centrality and organizational tenure. In the third step, we added the interaction term between leader work centrality and organizational tenure. In support of Hypothesis 2, this interaction was significant ($b = -.03, SE = .01, p = .020$) and explained a significant amount of variance over and above the variance explained by the variables entered in Steps 1 and 2 ($\Delta R^2 = .05, p = .020$). Simple slopes tests revealed that the effect of work centrality on visionary

leadership was positive and significant when leader organizational tenure was low (i.e., one standard deviation below the mean; $b = .35$, $SE = .11$, $p = .002$), but that it was non-significant when leader organizational tenure was high (i.e., one standard deviation above the mean; $b = -.03$, $SE = .12$, $p = .783$). These results are shown in Tables 2 and 3 and in Figure 2.

----- Insert Tables 1-2 and Figure 2 about here -----

Hypothesis 3, which predicts that visionary leadership is positively related to follower meaningfulness, was supported by both the correlation ($r = .59$, $p < .001$) and the regression analysis ($b = .52$, $SE = .07$, $p < .001$). Finally, Hypothesis 4 posits that there is a conditional indirect effect such that visionary leadership and follower meaningfulness act as sequential mediators that transmit the interactive effect of leader work centrality and organizational tenure onto follower turnover intentions. We tested this hypothesis with the approach proposed by Hayes (2022). We calculated 95% bootstrapped confidence intervals from 50,000 bootstrap samples to test whether the index of moderated mediation and the conditional indirect effects at different levels of the moderator were significant. The results are presented in Table 3 and depicted in Figure 3. In support of Hypothesis 4, the index of moderated mediation was significant, as its bootstrap confidence interval did not include zero (index of moderated mediation = .01, $SE = .01$; 95% CI [.0004, .0219]). In line with our expectations, the indirect effect of leader work centrality via visionary leadership and follower meaningfulness on follower turnover intentions was negative and significant when leader organizational tenure was low (i.e., one standard deviation below the mean; $b = -.12$, $SE = .08$; 95% CI [-.2984, -.0112]), but non-significant when leader organizational tenure was high (i.e., one standard deviation above the mean; $b = .01$, $SE = .04$; 95% CI [-.0740, .0813]).

----- Insert Table 3 and Figure 3 about here -----

Discussion

In a two-wave, lagged-design field study with 101 leader-follower dyads, we found that leader work centrality predicts visionary leadership, and especially so for leaders with low organizational tenure. Moreover, we found that when leader organizational tenure was low, leader work centrality, via visionary leadership and follower meaningfulness, was negatively related to follower turnover intentions. Overall, our findings show that leader work centrality is an important antecedent of visionary leadership and subsequent desirable follower outcomes, especially when leaders are new to their organization.

Theoretical Implications

Our work contributes to the literature in several ways. Most research on antecedents of vision communication comes from the literature on charismatic-transformational leadership, where visionary behaviors are combined with other leadership elements to form a broader construct of transformational leadership (van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). However, scholars have pointed out that such “lumping approaches” to the study of leadership tell us little about whether all, some, or just one of the subcomponents of a larger construct are predicted by a certain antecedent and engender certain outcomes (Alvesson & Einola, 2019; Carton, 2022; van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). Our work takes a “splitting” approach to the study of leading (Carton, 2022) and answers calls for work on the antecedents of the more circumscribed construct of visionary leadership (e.g., van Knippenberg & Stam, 2014). We show that it is particularly those leaders high in work centrality who engage in visionary leadership. We regard work centrality as a foundational attitudinal and motivational predictor of vision communication. It seems plausible that it is particularly those leaders for whom work is a central concern in life –

individuals who are passionately immersed in their work and for whom work is a key aspect of self-identity – who communicate visions.

Our findings also show that work centrality's effect on visionary leadership is contingent on the leader's organizational tenure. We thus identify leader organizational tenure as a boundary condition that influences whether leader attributes translate into leadership behavior. For leaders with long organizational tenure, work centrality was not related to visionary leadership. In other words, long-tenured leaders for whom work is not a particularly important part of their lives exhibit just as much visionary leadership as do those for whom work is a central aspect of their identity. It is thus possible that with the human and social capital that leaders acquire in an organization over time, they are able to grow into and play the role that may be expected of them – that is, to articulate visions to provide direction and motivate followers – even if they themselves are not particularly immersed in and passionate about their work. It appears that for these leaders, longer organizational tenure may substitute for work centrality as a driver of engaging in vision communication. By contrast, leaders who are relatively new in their organization may still have a relatively low amount of organization-specific human and social capital. As a result, they may be more hesitant to engage in the somewhat risky behavior of articulating a vision. It seems understandable that leaders who are still in the process of familiarizing themselves with and finding their place within an organization cannot yet be expected to be visionaries. However, low organizational tenure did not detract leaders with high work centrality from engaging in visionary leadership. Regardless of the length of their organizational tenure, high work centrality leaders always appear to be willing to “go out on a limb” and communicate what could and should be accomplished in the future.

In this regard, our work also informs the literature on what employees are the drivers of innovation and change in an organization. For example, some authors have argued that individuals with long organizational tenure lack fresh ideas and are generally more satisfied with the status quo, which makes them less innovative, resistant to change, and more risk averse (Bergh, 2001). By contrast, others have shown that long organizational tenure can also promote innovation-related behavior because the superior knowledge which these individuals have acquired over time helps them to become more effective agents of change and innovation (Ng & Feldman, 2013). Our research provides additional evidence for this latter perspective by showing that it is not the long-tenured leaders, but instead the ones at the beginning of their organizational tenure who are less likely to engage in a change- and innovation-related behavior such as visionary leadership (Venus, Stam, & van Knippenberg, 2019) – if they are low in work centrality.

Finally, our research broadens our understanding of the effects that visions have on followers. Previous studies have shown that transformational leadership can foster perceptions of meaningfulness (e.g., Arnold et al., 2007; Frieder et al., 2018; Meng et al., 2020; Perko et al., 2014). However, these scales combine items about vision communication with items that capture other leadership elements to calculate aggregate scores for the broad construct transformational leadership. As van Knippenberg & Sitkin (2013) noted, such research on the broader construct transformational leadership should not be viewed as direct evidence for the effects of visionary leadership (also see van Knippenberg & Stam, 2014). Moreover, although we acknowledge the contributions of this line of research, including those of the more recent study by Kipfelsberger et al. (2022), especially with regard to theory development, the measures used in these studies blur the distinction between leader vision communication and follower reactions (e.g., by asking

about the extent to which a leader “optimistically” or “enthusiastically” provides a “compelling” or “inspiring” vision). To the best of our knowledge, our study is the first to examine whether “pure” visionary leadership – defined more narrowly by van Knippenberg and Stam (2014) as the communication of a future image for a collective with the intention of persuading others to contribute to its realization – is positively linked to follower meaningfulness and, in turn, negatively related to follower turnover intentions.

Limitations and Future Research

We acknowledge several limitations of our research. First, the data from our field study does not allow for causal inferences. However, it would be difficult to test the moderating role of leader organizational tenure and measure follower turnover intentions in the artificial environment of a typical laboratory experiment. Thus, field experiments would be ideal for ascertaining the internal validity of our results in an experimental setting. Second, we tried to mitigate the risk of a same source bias by collecting data from two sources at two different time points. Nevertheless, our findings are partly cross-sectional in nature – followers rated visionary leadership, meaningfulness, and turnover intentions at the same time. Although this bears the risk that the strength of the discovered effects is inflated, the strong results from our confirmatory factor analyses increase our confidence in our measurement approach.

Third, we used a convenience sample with the majority (87%) of our dyads coming from Pakistan and India. While such a convenience sample entails the risk of limited generalizability, we were less concerned with this issue given that we were able to recruit dyads from a wide variety of different industries. However, Pakistan and India may culturally differ from Western countries. In fact, Hofstede (2001) showed that Pakistan and India score higher than Western countries on the cultural dimensions of collectivism and power distance. Although a more

collectivistic orientation can be associated with higher levels of work centrality (Blakely et al., 2005; Parboteeah & Cullen, 2003), we do not believe that our findings would be different when replicated in a different cultural context because the average level of work centrality in our sample was relatively similar to that typically found in Western samples (e.g., Ziegler & Schlett, 2016). Moreover, it has been argued that visionary leadership can be considered a cross-culturally effective leadership style (Venus, Johnson, et al., 2019). Nonetheless, we recommend that future research tests the generalizability of our findings to other industries and cultural contexts.

Future research could also examine whether there might be a dark side to the process identified in our research. While we have shown that leader work centrality can be an important antecedent of visionary leadership and subsequent positive effects on followers, scholars have suggested that work-centric leaders might sometimes be workaholics who expect the same devotion to work from their subordinates (Bourdeau et al., 2019). Thus, it would be interesting to investigate whether work-centric leaders who communicate an ambitious vision might not only provide followers with meaningfulness, but also cause high levels of stress and work-family conflict for them. Moreover, visions might not always be a powerful force for good, but can also cause serious harm when leaders promote an unethical and destructive vision or when well-intentioned leaders willingly turn a blind eye to transgressions of their followers if these occur in the service of their vision (Mo et al., 2023; Padilla et al., 2007). We believe that more research is needed to investigate when and how visions can tempt followers to use questionable means in the service of a seemingly meaningful cause.

Finally, scholars could also investigate leader traits that could be antecedents to the process we identified or promote visionary leadership through parallel mechanisms. In our

research, we examined the attitude work centrality (Paullay et al., 1994) that is more proximal to leader behavior than more trait-like individual difference variables. Meta-analyses have shown that traits such as achievement motivation, extraversion, and interpersonal skill predict leader emergence and effectiveness (Ensari et al., 2011; Hoffman, Woehr, et al., 2011). Hence, future research could examine whether a trait such as achievement motivation could be an antecedent of work centrality. Similarly, future research could examine whether traits such as extraversion and interpersonal skill also promote visionary leadership through mechanisms that operate in parallel to the one that we identified.

Practical Implications and Conclusion

For most employees, doing meaningful work is of high importance and the perception that one's work lacks meaning and purpose causes many employees to think about quitting their job (Carton, 2018; De Clercq & Belausteguigoitia, 2017; Robertson et al., 2020). Such voluntary turnover is costly for organizations because it requires them to invest significantly in the recruitment, selection, and training of new employees (Rubenstein et al., 2018). Our findings suggest that to prevent turnover, organizations should encourage their leaders to engage in visionary leadership. However, our findings show that not all leaders are equally likely to act as visionary leaders. Especially leaders who are relatively new to the organization and for whom work is not a central part of their lives appear to be disinclined to communicate visions. By contrast, newly hired leaders with high work centrality seem to engage in visionary leadership right from the start. Thus, if organizations would like their leaders to be visionary, they should consider work centrality in their leader selection process. Work centrality appears to decline among members of younger generations, who tend to assign relatively higher priority to their work-life balance and leisure-time activities (Lyons & Kuron, 2014). By trying to focus on

selecting new leaders with high work centrality, organizations stand a greater chance of hiring visionary leaders and can thus benefit from the advantages that this entails in the form of increased follower meaningfulness and decreased follower turnover intentions.

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Table 1*Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Leader age	40.44	9.28	—							
2. Leader gender	0.11	0.31	-.09	—						
3. Leader decision-making autonomy	5.64	1.08	.17	-.08	(.75)					
4. Leader work centrality	4.33	1.26	.13	.02	-.13	(.83)				
5. Leader organizational tenure	9.08	7.34	.57***	-.09	.08	.06	—			
6. Visionary leadership	5.67	1.01	.14	.08	.05	.22*	.13	(.92)		
7. Follower meaningfulness	6.13	0.88	-.01	.05	-.03	.21*	-.07	.59***	(.95)	
8. Follower turnover intentions	3.27	1.74	.03	.03	-.05	.01	-.03	-.33***	-.40***	(.95)

Note. $N = 101$ dyads. Cronbach's alphas are shown in the diagonal in parentheses.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 2*Hierarchical Regression Analysis*

	Dependent variable: Visionary leadership		
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
<i>Control variables</i>			
Leader age	.02 (.01)	.01 (.01)	.01 (.01)
Leader gender	.32 (.32)	.32 (.32)	.28 (.31)
Leader decision-making autonomy	.03 (.09)	.06 (.09)	.08 (.09)
<i>Main effects</i>			
Leader work centrality		.17* (.08)	.40** (.13)
Leader organizational tenure		.01 (.02)	.13* (.05)
<i>Interaction</i>			
Leader work centrality × leader organizational tenure			-.03* (.01)
<i>F</i>	1.06	1.60	2.34*
<i>R</i> ²	.03	.08	.13
ΔR^2		.05	.05*

Note. $N = 101$ dyads. Unstandardized regression coefficients are reported with standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 3*Conditional Direct and Indirect Effects of Leader Work Centrality*

Conditional effects of leader work centrality on visionary leadership					
Leader organizational tenure	Effect	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	
Low (1.74)	.35	.11	3.18	.002	
Mean (9.08)	.16	.08	2.04	.044	
High (16.41)	-.03	.12	-0.28	.783	
Conditional indirect effects of leader work centrality on follower turnover intentions via visionary leadership and follower meaningfulness					
Leader organizational tenure	Effect	<i>SE</i>	<i>Boot LLCI</i>	<i>Boot ULCI</i>	
Low (1.74)	-.12	.08	-.2984	-.0112	
Mean (9.08)	-.05	.04	-.1593	.0051	
High (16.41)	.01	.04	-.0740	.0813	
Index of moderated mediation	.01	.01	.0004	.0219	

Note. $N = 101$ dyads. *Boot CI* = 95% bootstrapped confidence interval. Bootstrap sample size = 50,000.

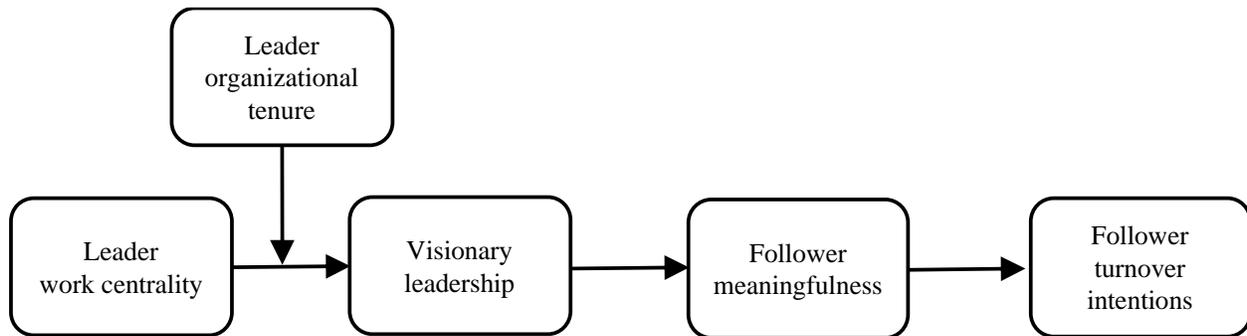
Figure 1*The Conceptual Model*

Figure 2

The Interactive Effect of Leader Work Centrality and Organizational Tenure on Visionary Leadership

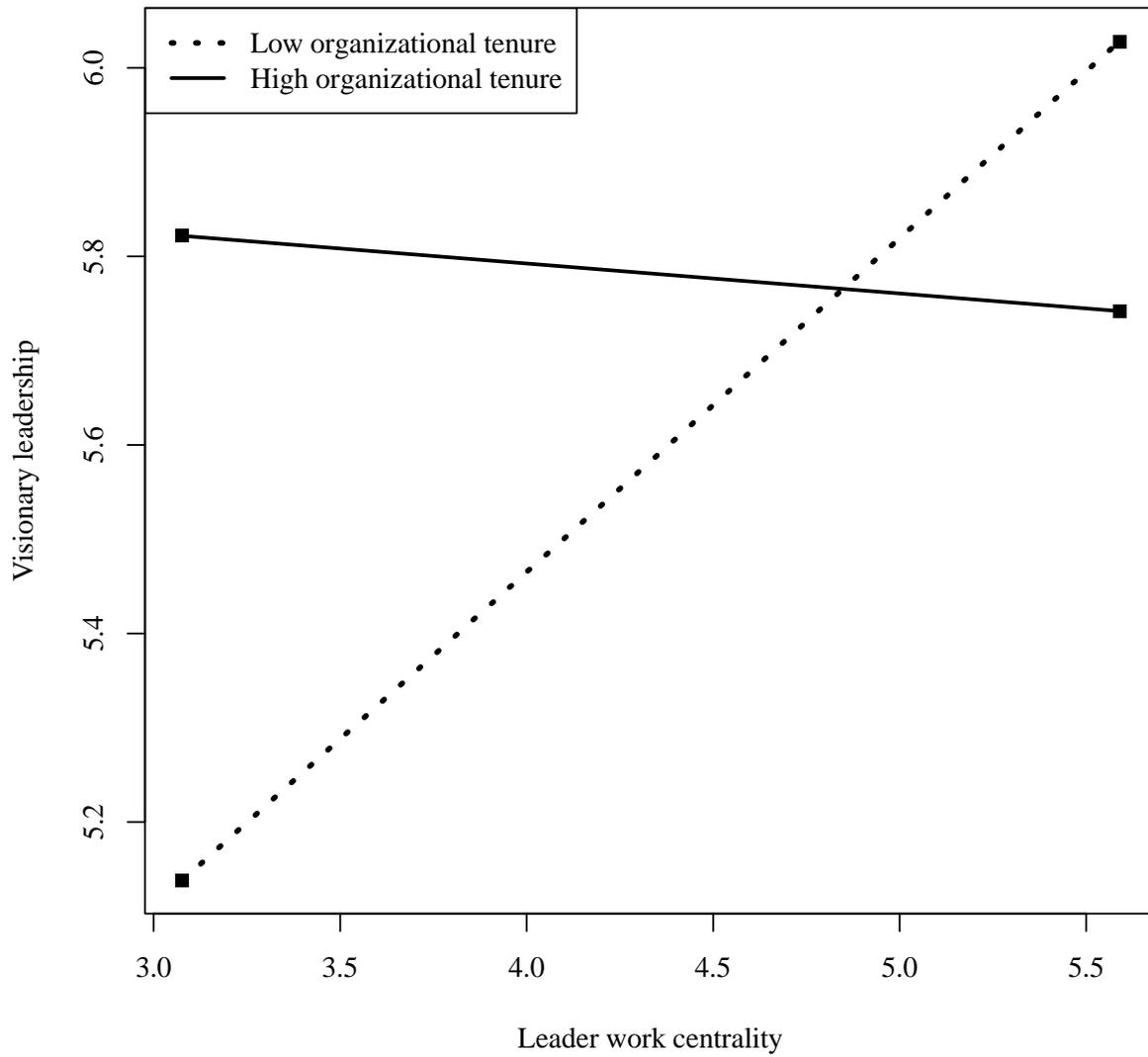


Figure 3

The Conditional Indirect Effect of Leader Work Centrality via Visionary Leadership and Follower Meaningfulness on Follower Turnover Intentions

