

Boss, I am Anxious! Understanding How and When Follower Anxiety Expression Impacts Leader Insomnia and Effectiveness

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Introduction



- 80% of employees anxious about workplace issues such as productivity (AIS, 2024; SRHRM, 2026).
- Anxiety has severe consequences for employee well-being and job performance (Babalola et al., 2023; Cho et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2023).
- One outlet to manage anxiety is to express such emotion to others (Monin et al., 2012; Parkinson & Simons, 2012).
- The *practitioner* literature has encouraged the display of anxiety in the workplace (Forbes, 2020) with much advice on how leaders should manage the expression of anxiety effectively (Riegel, 2021).
- However, how leaders are affected by workplace anxiety expressed by followers is still not well understood in the academic literature

Definition of Workplace Anxiety



- Workplace anxiety is defined as feelings of nervousness and apprehension (McCarthy et al., 2016) related to the completion of work tasks and achievement of high job performance (Cheng & McCarthy, 2018).
- Theory suggests that the expression of anxiety (in general) may be detrimental to the individual's own outcomes (Kouchaki & Desai, 2015; Rosen et al., 2020), but the observers of anxiety may respond positively to anxiety expression (DeCelles et al., 2019; Parkinson et al., 2016).
- The mixed effects of anxiety are supported by a recent study showing that coworkers respond with both helping/ostracizing behaviors to the expression of anxiety (Li, Lin, Cheng, & Tu, 2026).

Anxiety as an emotion



- Anxiety as a supplication emotion (outcomes fall short of one's expectations or desires) impacts other according to the social influence of emotions perspective because it signals neediness and weakness on the part of the individual (van Kleef & Côté, 2022).
- Anxiety differs from other supplication emotions such as fear, sadness, anger, and loneliness because such emotions are typically associated with a clear and identifiable source or target (Lazarus, 1991), while workplace anxiety stems from uncertain contexts making it harder to interpret why anxiety is happening (Cheng & McCarthy, 2018).
- The inherent ambiguity of anxiety directs observers' attention from considering what were the specific triggers of anxiety and towards interpreting its broader implications (Li et al, 2026).

Definition of Follower Anxiety Expression to the Leader



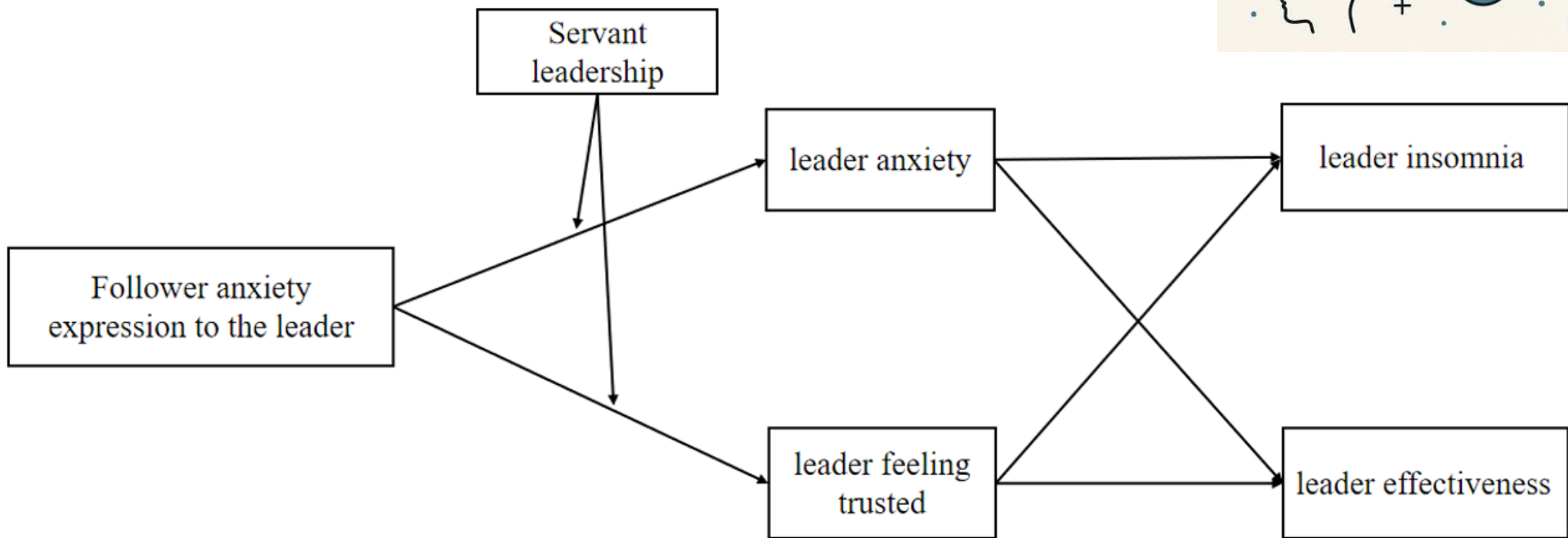
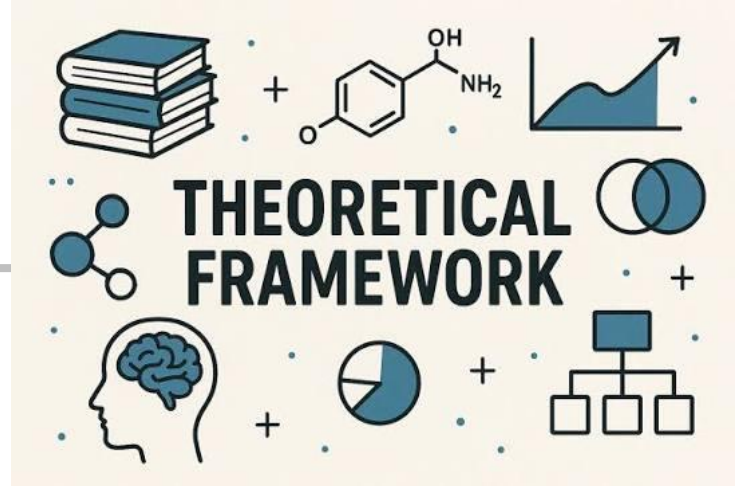
- To advance understanding of how workplace anxiety expression impacts the leader's outcomes, we focus on follower anxiety expression (FAE), defined as the perception that leaders have of their followers' expression of anxiety (either implicitly or explicitly in face-to-face interpersonal interactions)
- FAE can occur in various forms, ranging from implicit non-verbal cues such as a restless voice, rigid posture, or lack of eye contact (Borelli et al., 2017; Feiler & Powell, 2016) to explicit communications about anxiousness on performance tasks. We take an observer-centric perspective to focus on leader's perceptions of FAE.
- Existing research has mostly focused on an explicit expression of anxiety to the leader in non face-to-face interactions such as sharing workplace anxiety through posts on social media platforms (Liu et al., 2022; Psychogios et al., 2023).

Anxiety Expression to Leaders



- Leaders occupy a hierarchical position with the power to reallocate organizational resources, adjust task requirements, and alter unfavorable job conditions (Farmer & Aguinis, 2005; Kloutsiniotis et al., 2022)
- As leader outcomes also have an impact on the follower (Oc, Chintakanada, Bashur & Day, 2023), it is necessary to first understand how FAE impacts the leader's own outcomes.
- We advance the literature beyond which has shown mixed effects for coworker observations of workplace anxiety to focus on how the leader is affected by FAE

Theoretical Model



Study 1 - Data



- We tested our hypotheses by collecting leader-follower dyadic data from 10 companies in China operating in the production, service, and financial industries. We obtained a total list of 370 leader-follower dyads from the 10 firms who volunteered to participate in our research study.
- We collected data at two time points from two different sources (the leader and the follower). To achieve a higher response rate based on existing best practices (Lian et al., 2012), three days after the administration of the survey, the research team sent out a reminder to the participants who had not yet completed the survey (Dillman, 2000).



- We provide an additional study to test the robustness of our model by conducting an experimental study in an alternative cross-cultural context to make stronger causal inferences.
- We conducted a 2×2 between-subject experiment using the Prolific platform to recruit full-time working leaders from United States. Participants were randomly assigned to the manipulated conditions of FAE and servant leadership into high and low conditions. The manipulation material for FAE was based on Kouchaki and Desai's (2015) conceptualization and measurement of anxiety, whereas we adapted Wu et al.'s (2021) material to manipulate servant leadership.

Contributions



- We contribute to the workplace anxiety literature by introducing follower anxiety expression to the leader and unraveling how FAE impacts both the leader's well-being and performance outcomes through dual pathways.
- Drawing on EASI, we theorize and find that leaders respond both affectively and cognitively to FAE through emotional contagion increasing anxiety and cognitively as the leader interprets FAE because the follower trusts the leader.
- We introduce an affective perspective that provides an alternative theoretical lens to explain why servant leadership inhibits the well-being of the leader. Specifically, we show that servant leadership amplifies leader anxiety in the face of FAE because servant leaders are more concerned for their followers, thereby increasing insomnia. Overall, our work advances the servant leadership literature by showing its countervailing effects as a boundary condition to strengthen both the positive and negative effects of FAE.

Practical Implications



- Firms can introduce the concept of FAE to help leaders consider how to respond to FAE in an appropriate manner to increase the benefit and reduce the downside on the leader's own outcomes. By providing this information, leaders increase their awareness that suppressing FAE may not be most effective for their own outcomes, but an expression of anxiety by the follower to the leader can be effective if managed appropriately.
- Firms can provide training to both followers and leaders together where the emphasis is how followers can communicate their anxiety to their leaders and how leaders can receive such communications in a way where the leader feels trusted.
- Firms can provide servant leaders with the resources, support and training that helps them interpret the anxiety expressed by followers in a positive way and to manage the anxiety that stems from their followers, not allowing it to negatively affect their own outcomes.

Limitations and Future Research



- How is FAE expressed (implicitly or explicitly) and does it matter?
- We took an observer-centric perspective (i.e., FAE as observed by the leader), what happens when we focus on whether the follower perceives that they expressed anxiety to the leader? Are the effects the same?
- How does FAE express the follower's outcomes?
- Do these effects vary across culture? For example, a paternalistic leadership style may be more accepted in the east while more direct communication may be more accepted in the west, which can impact the way leaders are affected by FAE.

Thank You!



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