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Pircher Verdorfer, A.; Arendt, J.F.W.

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Mindful together: examining the effect of mindfulness congruence on the quality of leader-follower relationships

Armin Pircher Verdorfer[1] · **Johannes Arendt**[2]

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Abstract
Extensive research has demonstrated the positive effects of mindfulness on individual well-being and performance within organizational settings. Yet, its impact on interpersonal dynamics, particularly between leaders and followers, has not been thoroughly explored. Drawing upon research in mindfulness and person-supervisor (P-S) fit, this study examines the congruence effect of leader and follower dispositional mindfulness on their relationship quality, conceptualized here as leader-member exchange (LMX) quality. Moreover, we explore the question of which pro-relationship behavior on part of the follower carries the proposed mindfulness congruence effect. Using cross-level polynomial regressions across 189 leader-follower dyads, our findings corroborate a theoretical framework that associates the congruence of leader-follower mindfulness with enhanced relationship quality. This relationship is mediated by followers' engagement in relationship-directed voice behavior—a form of upward influence behavior specifically investigated for its role in this context and validated across three further samples ($N = 434$). By examining both the joint effects of leader and follower mindfulness and the behavioral mechanisms underlying these effects, our research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of mindfulness's role in shaping leadership dynamics and improving leader-follower relationships.

Keywords Mindfulness · Person–supervisor fit · Relationship quality · Leader-member exchange (LMX) · Relationship-directed voice behavior · Polynomial regression

Introduction

In recent years, mindfulness—the capacity of nonelaborative, nonjudgmental attention and awareness, oriented to the present moment (Bishop et al., 2004; Brown & Ryan, 2003)—has gained vast interest in organizational scholarship and practice. This interest is driven by a growing body of literature documenting its positive effects on important workplace outcomes, including various indicators of well-being and performance (Good et al., 2016; Lomas et al., 2017). Accounting for these effects, researchers have argued that mindfulness helps individuals view events more objectively and promotes more effective self-regulation of thoughts, emotions, and behaviors (Glomb et al., 2011; Shapiro et al., 2006).

Given this prominence, one might expect mindfulness and its effects in the workplace to be by now well understood. This, however, is not the case, as there remain several questions that current research in this field has not answered. Much of the research on mindfulness in this field has predominantly investigated its effects within individuals, focusing on how employees deal with stress and how well they execute their job responsibilities (Good et al., 2016; Lomas et al., 2017). However, our understanding of effects beyond the individual and how mindfulness affects social relationships at work remains scant (Good et al., 2016; Reina et al., 2022). This gap is particularly unfortunate when it comes to the dynamics between employees and their leaders, a relationship often deemed as "the single most important workplace relationships that employees form" (Bono & Yoon, 2012, p. 43). Scholars commonly frame this relationship in terms of leader-member exchange (LMX) theory, characterizing high-quality LMX relationships by mutual respect,

✉ Armin Pircher Verdorfer
a.pircherverdorfer@uva.nl

[1] Amsterdam Business School, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

[2] Department of Psychology, University of Munich, Munich, Germany

loyalty, and support (Dulebohn et al., 2012). There is abundant evidence showing that such high-quality relationships between employees and their leaders bring vast benefits for organizations and employees, including well-being, performance, and career development (Dulebohn et al., 2012; Kraimer et al., 2015).

It is, therefore, surprising that the interpersonal implications of mindfulness for such a pivotal area remain under-investigated.

Moreover, the few studies that do address the interplay between mindfulness and the quality of leader-follower relationships predominantly focus on the mindfulness of leaders, largely overlooking how followers' mindfulness might influence this dynamic (Reb et al., 2018). This oversight is further compounded by an ambiguity regarding the specific behaviors through which mindful employees can foster their relationships with leaders. While existing evidence suggests that mindful leaders can improve relationship quality through mindful communication and an other-oriented leadership style (Arendt et al., 2019), the behaviors on the part of mindful employees remain unclear. These gaps are particularly concerning, as a full appreciation of mindfulness's potential in bolstering leader-follower relations remains incomplete without adequately considering the followers' contribution.

Against this background, the central research question of this paper is how leader and follower mindfulness interact to enhance relationship quality, and to what extent follower behaviors contribute to this effect. With this question guiding our work, we have two main goals. First, using person-supervisor (P-S) fit theory (Vianen, 2018), we examine the joint effect of leader and follower mindfulness on LMX quality. P-S fit is commonly defined as compatibility between a supervisor and their subordinates. This compatibility has been consistently linked to positive work outcomes, including enhanced psychological well-being and job performance, as well as more effective working relationships (Klaic et al., 2018; Marstand et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2012). On this basis, we propose that LMX quality is a function of leader-follower congruence in mindfulness, particularly when both exhibit high levels of mindfulness. When leaders and followers share a strong propensity for attention and acceptance, the interpersonal dynamics are likely to be most effective.

Second, we address the behavioral mechanism puzzle by shedding light on actual follower behaviors that may carry the proposed mindfulness congruence effect on LMX quality. To determine the nature of these behaviors, it is first important to note that mindfulness is commonly understood to facilitate more adaptive and flexible responding to one's environment, including challenging or unpleasant situations (Shapiro et al., 2006). On this basis, we introduce followers' relationship-directed voice behaviors and propose that when a leader and a follower are congruent at a high level of mindfulness, followers will more likely speak up with not only suggestions, but also concerns, for improving their relationship with the leader—which, in turn, is expected to foster LMX quality. This proposition is supported by empirical evidence from the broader mindfulness literature, which highlights its association with improved communication and more effective interpersonal conflict resolution (Jones & Hansen, 2015; Karremans et al., 2017; Leavitt & Karremans, 2023).

Our article offers several meaningful contributions to the existing literature. By investigating the joint influence of followers' and leaders' mindfulness, we expand on emerging evidence of positive interpersonal effects of mindfulness in leader-follower relationships, yet challenge the dominance of the leader in this process. We spotlight followers' relationship-oriented behaviors as key to understanding LMX quality, moving beyond top-down, leader-centric perspectives. This shift redefines followers from passive recipients of leader mindfulness to active contributors, enriching our comprehension of leadership as an interactive process.

Theory and hypothesis development

Mindfulness

While mindfulness originated from Eastern meditation practices, it has been adapted by Western psychology as a secular strategy to improve psychological functioning. Within this tradition, mindfulness is defined as a "kind of nonelaborative, nonjudgmental, present-centered awareness in which each thought, feeling, or sensation that arises in the attentional field is acknowledged and accepted as it is" (Bishop et al., 2004, p. 232). While initially conceptualized as a psychological state, there is consensus that the average frequency with which individuals experience states of mindfulness varies from person to person, suggesting that there is a dispositional tendency towards mindfulness wherein individuals naturally differ (Good et al., 2016). In light of this understanding, the present paper concentrates on examining dispositional, or trait mindfulness and its impact on the outcome variables being investigated. This emphasis is in line with previous research on mindfulness and leader–follower relations as they "reflect experiences and behaviors over extended time periods, making a state-level approach less suitable" (Reb et al., 2018, p. 2).

Fit between a follower und their leader

In the fit literature, the degree of compatibility or match between an employee and their direct supervisor is described as person-supervisor (P-S) fit (Vianen, 2018). Several studies have found that dyadic congruence in specific psychological characteristics, such as personality traits or values, between leaders and followers promotes positive work outcomes (Marstand et al., 2017; Schaubroeck & Lam, 2017; Zhang et al., 2012). This phenomenon is often explained by the similarity-attraction paradigm (Byrne, 1971), which suggests that people naturally gravitate towards those who are similar to them because it validates their own perspectives and beliefs. This affirmation, in turn, is thought to satisfy a person's need for certainty, predictability, and belongingness, thereby facilitating interpersonal interactions (Vianen, 2018).

Scholars have used different approaches to study fit. In this research, we conceptualize leader-follower congruence in mindfulness in terms of actual or objective fit as outlined by Kristof-Brown et al. (2005). That is, we compare the match between subordinates' self-rated mindfulness scores with that of their leader's self-rated mindfulness scores. This approach, which relies on direct ratings from both followers and leaders, is distinct from subjective fit assessments where fit is assessed indirectly via only follower-derived ratings (i.e., of their own and their leader's mindfulness). Given that subordinates may not always accurately gauge their leader's characteristics (Hewlin et al., 2015), adopting a subjective fit approach would not provide a strong empirical basis and limit the depth of our investigation into how leader-follower mindfulness affects their relationship.

Figure 1 depicts our theoretical model linking leader-follower dispositional mindfulness congruence to relationship quality. In what follows, we provide a theoretical rationale for the various links in the proposed model.

The role of leader- follower congruence in mindfulness for LMX quality

Expanding on the concept of P-S fit, we propose that the similarity in mindfulness levels between leaders and followers can significantly enhance their interpersonal relationship. Even when leaders and followers are congruent at low levels of mindfulness, they may perceive each other as similar, thereby resulting in less conflict, misunderstanding, and a fairly good relationship quality. Yet, it is important to clarify that we do not predict a "perfect" or "strict" congruency effect, where the level of congruency does not matter (Barranti et al., 2017). As low mindfulness is associated with lower interpersonal attunement (Parker et al., 2015), leaders and followers with low levels of mindfulness are less likely to reach the level of relationship quality that we expect for leader-follower dyads that are congruent at high levels of mindfulness.

Mindfulness emphasizes attention and acceptance, enabling individuals to approach situations with greater objectivity. This observant approach is facilitated by what is often described in mindfulness theory as *reperceiving* or *decentering*— a shift in perspective associated with decreased attachment to one's thoughts and emotions (Bernstein et al., 2015; Shapiro et al., 2006). By moving focus away from self-centric views, individuals exhibit more adaptive responses, characterized by increased empathy (Dekeyser et al., 2008) and distress tolerance (Bernstein et al., 2015). Therefore, we argue that the beneficial effects of mindfulness in a leader-follower dyad best unfold when both the leader and the follower score high on mindfulness. The conscious intention of mindful leaders and followers to remain open and accepting may particularly enable them to provide each other with socio-emotional support, eventually resulting in higher levels of mutual respect, trust, and reciprocation, typifying a high - quality LMX relationship. Hence, the following prediction was specified:

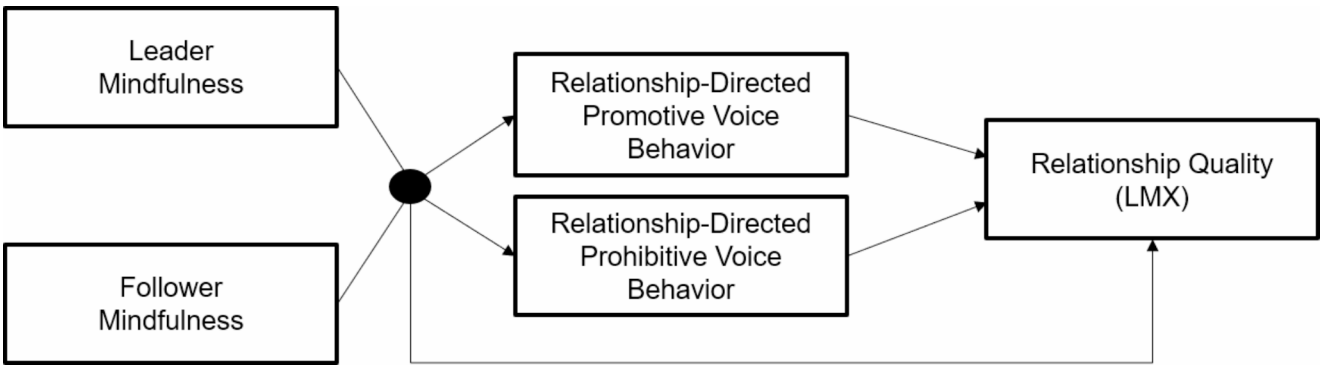

Fig. 1 Hypothesized model

Hypothesis 1: The more a follower is aligned with a leader at a high level of mindfulness, the better the LMX quality.

Besides congruence, two scenarios of leader-follower incongruence in mindfulness can be distinguished: the follower's mindfulness is higher than the leader's mindfulness, and vice versa. We propose that it is less disadvantageous for LMX quality when the leader's mindfulness scores are lower than the follower's, compared to the reverse scenario. When leaders score lower on mindfulness than followers, the followers' increased mindfulness and its benefits may mitigate or even offset the negative incongruence effect. This perspective aligns with trait activation theory (Tett et al., 2013) according to which traits are expressed in response to trait-relevant situational cues. Therefore, in situations where leader-follower mindfulness is misaligned—particularly when leaders show lower mindfulness levels—followers with higher mindfulness may employ their increased capacity for empathy and understanding to navigate potential challenges, such as the leader's inattentiveness or judgmental behavior, more effectively. Conversely, when followers score lower on mindfulness than their leaders, these followers may generally show less interest in the intricacies of their relationship with and the approaches of the leader. On this basis, we specified the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: LMX quality is higher when a follower's level of mindfulness is higher than a leader's rather than when a leader's level of mindfulness is higher than a follower's.

The mediating role of relationship-directed voice behaviors

While leader-follower congruence in high mindfulness is expected to enhance LMX quality, we propose that this relationship is not appropriately described solely as a direct effect. In this study, we aim to explore the specific behaviors of mindful followers that act as mediators in this relationship.

We argue that the interplay of high leader and follower mindfulness represents a particularly valuable resource for followers, enabling them to proactively engage in relationship-enhancing upward influence behaviors, which in turn, positively affect LMX quality. Specifically, we build on the concept of employee voice which refers to discretionary communication of ideas, suggestions, concerns, or opinions about work-related issues with the intent to make constructive changes and to promote organizational functioning (Morrison, 2023). On this basis, we introduce the notion of *relationship-directed voice behaviors* and, aligning with established voice literature (Liang et al., 2012), categorize it into two distinct types: R*elationship-directed promotive voice* refers to employees' upward communication of suggestions and ideas for how to improve the relationship with the leader. *Relationship-directed prohibitive voice* describes the degree to which followers communicate concern about negative aspects and problems that may impede the relationship with the leader. Importantly, both voice types challenge the status quo with the aim of improving the relationship with the leader.

Mindfulness facilitates more adaptive and flexible responding to one's environment, including challenging or unpleasant situations (Shapiro et al., 2006). This adaptability is crucial for enhancing communication skills in both leaders and followers. Supporting evidence of this concept is indirectly found in research on romantic relationships, linking partners' mindfulness to improved communication and regulation of emotions, and more constructive ways to respond to relationship stress (Karremans et al., 2017).

Mindful followers are more attentive to the various nuances in their social relations and this attunement will likely help them to identify opportunities for improvement. This is supported by a recent study linking employee mindfulness to increased levels of constructive voice in organizations (Zhang et al., 2024). Moreover, mindfulness reduces the habitual tendency to avoid difficult or unwanted emotional states, encouraging mindful followers to address rather than evade challenging situations with their leaders actively. On the other hand, mindful leaders, through their openness and acceptance, are more apt to welcome followers' ideas and feedback on relational matters. This perspective is supported by research showing that mindfulness improves accurate self-knowledge, while decreasing defensiveness in response to self-relevant information (Shapiro et al., 2006).

Taken together, we propose that when the levels of mindfulness of leaders and followers are aligned at a high level, followers will more likely speak up with suggestions (i.e., promotive voice) but also concerns (i.e., prohibitive voice) for improving the relationship with their leader. These behaviors of upward influence are proactive efforts by followers to improve their relationship quality with leaders and are thus expected to predict LMX quality (Dulebohn et al., 2012). Hence, the following mediational hypotheses were specified:

Hypothesis 3a: The effect of leader-follower congruence in higher mindfulness on LMX quality is mediated by followers' relationship-directed promotive voice.

Hypothesis 3b: The effect of leader-follower congruence in higher mindfulness on LMX quality is mediated by followers' relationship-directed prohibitive voice.

Furthermore, we again posit an asymmetrical incongruence effect, expecting that relationship-directed voice behaviors are less adversely affected when the follower's level of mindfulness is higher than the leader's, compared to the reverse scenario. Naturally, the propensity for followers to engage in such behaviors is largely influenced by their own disposition, i.e., mindfulness. Moreover, mindful followers will move into more appropriate and skillful responding when faced with potential difficulties resulting from mindfulness incongruence. In contrast, followers with lower mindfulness levels than their leaders may not recognize the need or opportunities to actively voice their thoughts and concerns, partly because mindful leaders contribute significantly to relationship quality. Consequently, these followers may generally engage in less investigation and exploration of their relationships, thereby missing opportunities for improvement.

Hypothesis 4a: Relationship-directed promotive voice is higher when a follower's mindfulness is higher than a leader's rather when leader's mindfulness is higher than a follower's.

Hypothesis 4b: Relationship-directed prohibitive voice is higher when a follower's mindfulness is higher than a leader's rather when leader's mindfulness is higher than a follower's.

In summary, our theoretical model builds on existing research by addressing the gap in understanding how leader and follower mindfulness jointly influence positive interpersonal outcomes. By examining followers' relationship-directed voice behaviors as a key mechanism in this dynamic, we also highlight the important role that mindful followers play in the relationship-building process. To test these hypotheses effectively, it is essential to use data from both leaders and followers, ensuring we can capture the proposed mindfulness congruence. Our model specifies not only the degree of congruence (i.e., alignment at high or low mindfulness levels) but also the direction of mismatches (i.e., whether leaders or followers have higher mindfulness scores). Therefore, the study design and analytical strategy must accommodate all possible combinations of leader and follower mindfulness. In the following sections, we outline our methodological approach, focusing on polynomial regression with response surface analysis—a robust statistical tool suited to testing these complex relationships (Barranti et al., 2017; Tsai et al., 2022).

Method

Sample and procedures

For this study, we recruited leader-follower dyads from various organizations and industries in Germany. The research team reached out to 295 leaders from their professional networks (e.g., via Linkedin, and executive teaching) of whom 130 (44%) consented to participate. These leaders were asked to provide a list of their direct reports, who were then approached for the study via personalized emails. The prerequisites for participating in the survey were that direct reports were employed full-time and had been working for the leader for at least 3 months. All participants were guaranteed confidentiality in a cover letter, ensuring that no personal information would be reported to the company. Furthermore, it was explicitly stated that the participation in the survey was voluntary and that participants were free to decide not to participate or to terminate their participation at any time without consequences. This procedure resulted in valid responses from 189 followers nested in 66 leaders. The average group size was 3.86 ($SD = 1.65$). Among the leaders, 89% were male and their mean age was 49.26 years ($SD = 7.61$). Followers' mean age was 41.67 years ($SD = 11.41$); 67% were male and the average tenure with the leader was 4.89 years ($SD = 5.20$). In terms of industry, the majority of participants come from sectors such as electrical engineering, energy and natural resources, and automotive, collectively accounting for 45%. Smaller segments are represented from healthcare (10%) and retail (6%). The remainder is distributed across various fields, such as IT and telecommunications, transport and tourism, financial services, education, and the public sector, each comprising less than 5%.

Measures

Dispositional mindfulness was assessed for both leaders and followers, along with several control variables such as age, gender, and Big Five personality traits. Furthermore, followers reported their dyadic tenure with their respective leaders as well as ratings of the focal outcome variables (i.e., relationship-directed voice and LMX quality).

Mindfulness

Leaders and followers provided self-ratings of dispositional mindfulness, using the 15-item-Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS, Brown & Ryan, 2003). Sample items were "I find it difficult to stay focused on what's happening in the present" and "I do jobs or tasks automatically, without being aware of what I'm doing". Responses were

given on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *almost always* to 6 = *almost never*, so that higher scores reflect higher levels of mindfulness.

Relationship-directed voice

To assess followers' relationship-directed voice behaviors, we adapted the 10-item measure of promotive and prohibitive voice by Liang et al. (2012). Instead of directing followers to the degree to which they voice suggestions and concerns regarding the procedures and performance in their work unit, the modified items assessed the extent to which followers communicate upward with suggestions (e.g., "I raise suggestions to improve how we work together") and concerns (e.g., "I dare to point out problems when they appear in our relationship") for relationship improvement with their leader. Responses were scaled from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*.

Because the relationship-directed voice measure was adopted for this study, additional data from three separate samples were collected, comprising a total of 434 respondents, to help demonstrate its construct validity (Flake & Fried, 2020). Factorial validity was assessed by means of exploratory (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Convergent and discriminant validity were established through linking the adopted relationship-directed voice measure to a number of theoretically meaningful validation criteria such as personal initiative and conflict style. Due to space constrains, we report the results of these procedures as supplementary material, including a full list of items (Supplement 1).

Relationship quality (LMX)

Followers' ratings of LMX quality were assessed with Graen and Uhl-Bien's (1995) LMX-7 scale. Sample items include, "I have a good working relationship with my leader" and "I can count on my leader to 'bail me out', even at his/her own expense, when I really need it." Responses were scaled from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*.

Control variables

Numerous studies have explored how demographic similarities between leaders and followers, particularly in terms of gender and age, might relate to LMX quality (Nahrgang & Seo, 2015). The findings from this body of research have been inconclusive—while some studies suggest that such similarities play a minimal role, others argue they can be significant under specific conditions. Consequently, we incorporated age and gender (dis)similarity into our analysis for exploratory purposes. Following the procedures outlined by Zhang et al. (2012), we calculated an absolute difference score for dissimilarity in age. For gender, a dummy variable was used (0 = different gender, 1 = same gender). To consider potential familiarity effects, we also controlled for dyadic tenure.

Finally, we also examined personality alignment among leaders and followers using Rammstedt and John's (2007) BFI-10, a concise measure for capturing the Big Five traits.

Although existing research suggests that sharing similar Big Five personality traits can improve LMX quality, it is less clear whether this effect is consistent across high and low trait levels, except in the case of neuroticism, where high levels in both leader and follower may negatively affect their relationship (Schyns, 2015). Therefore, our analysis also takes an exploratory look at how (dis)similarity in these personality traits might impact LMX quality.

Analytical strategy

To test the proposed congruence effects, we employed polynomial regression with response surface modeling (Barranti et al., 2017; Tsai et al., 2022). All analyses were conducted using the RSA (Response Surface Analysis) package in R (Schönbrodt & Humberg, 2020). Given the nested structure of the data (i.e., followers nested in leaders), the polynomial regression was included in hierarchical linear modeling to control for nonindependence among followers. In this procedure, the dependent variable (z) was regressed on five polynomial terms, that is, follower mindfulness (F), leader mindfulness (L), follower mindfulness squared (F^2), follower mindfulness x leader mindfulness (FxL), and leader mindfulness squared (L^2). In line with prior research using this method (Zhang et al., 2012), both predictors (i.e., F and L) were grand mean-centered before the second-order terms were calculated. The equations on level 1 (followers) and level 2 (leaders) were specified as follows:

Level 1:

$$z = b_0 + b_1F + b_2F^2 + e.$$

Level 2:

$$b_0 = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01}L + \gamma_{02}L^2 + \mu_0$$

$$b_1 = \gamma_{10} + \gamma_{11}L + \mu_1$$

$$b_2 = \gamma_{20} + \mu_1$$

After performing the polynomial regressions, the four surface test values (a_1, a_2, a_3, and a_4) were computed (Barranti et al., 2017). A significant congruence effect requires that a_4 (i.e., the curvature of the line of incongruence) is significantly different from zero and negative. It is the critical test to determine whether misfit matters overall by indicating if the outcome variable increases or decreases more sharply as predictors (i.e., leaders' and followers' mindfulness) diverge. A negative a_4 coefficient indicates a concave (i.e., downward) surface, suggesting that the outcomes

Table 1 Descriptive statistics and correlations

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
1. Age difference	7.67	10.20								
2. Gender similarity	-	-	0.16*							
3. Dyadic tenure	4.86	5.20	−0.22**	−0.03						
4. Leader Mindfulness	4.52	0.69	0.14	0.030	0.05	(0.89)				
5. Follower Mindfulness	4.31	0.62	−0.15*	−0.13	0.00	0.01	(0.84)			
6. Relationship-Directed Promotive Voice	3.47	0.74	−0.02	−0.11	−0.08	0.03	0.26**	(0.87)		
7. Relationship-Directed Prohibitive Voice	3.44	0.71	−0.10	−0.06	0.04	−0.02	0.26**	0.67**	(0.83)	
8. LMX	3.77	0.59	−0.02	0.01	−0.03	0.04	0.01	0.33**	0.23**	(0.82)

$N = 189$. Numbers in parentheses on the diagonal are the Cronbach's Alpha. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$

Table 2 Comparison of measurement models

Model		$\chi^2_{(df)}$	χ^2/df	CFI	RMSEA	$\Delta\chi^2_{(df)}$	ΔCFI
Model 1	4-factor model	32.129 $_{(29),ns}$	1.107	0.997	0.024		
Model 2	3-factor model: mindfulness and LMX merged into a single factor	246.721 $_{(32)}$***	7.710	0.766	0.118	214.600 $_{(3)}$***	. 231
Model 3	3-factor model: relationship-directed promotive and prohibitive voice merged into a single factor	76.754 $_{(45)}$***	1.705	. 951	0.086	44.633 $_{(3)}$***	0.046
Model 4	2-factor model: LMX, relationship-directed promotive and prohibitive voice merged into a single factor	240.681 $_{(34)}$***	7.078	. 775	0.179	208.56 $_{(5)}$***	0.222
Model 5	1-factor model: all variables merged into a single factor	599.238 $_{(35)}$***	17.121	. 385	0.292	567.120 $_{(6)}$***	. 612

$N = 189$. *ns* = not significant, *** $p < .00$

variable decreases more sharply as the degree of discrepancy increases. Furthermore, when the a_1 coefficient (i.e., the slope of the line of congruence) is significant and positive, we can conclude that congruence at high levels of mindfulness is associated with higher outcomes, as compared to congruence at lower levels. The a_3 coefficient (i.e., the slope of the line of incongruence) indicates whether the direction of discrepancy matters, that is, whether leaders' or followers' mindfulness is higher than the other. Finally, a_2 (i.e., the curvature of the line of congruence) indicates whether the congruence effect is linear versus non-linear and was assessed only for exploratory reasons.

To test the proposed indirect effect of mindfulness congruence on LMX quality through the mediating effects of relationship-directed voice behaviors, the block variable approach described by Edwards and Cable (2009) was applied. This approach allows to obtain a single coefficient representing the joint effect of the five polynomial terms (i.e., F, L, F^2, FxL, and L^2). Specifically, a block variable is "a weighted linear composite of the variables that constitute the block, in which the weights are the estimate regression coefficients for the variables in the block" (Edwards & Cable, 2009, p. 660). The indirect effect of mindfulness congruence on LMX quality via the mediator variable (i.e., relationship-directed voice) is the product of the coefficient of the block variable on the mediator and the coefficient of the mediator predicting the outcome variable, while controlling for the direct effect.

Results

Descriptive statistics

Table 1 reports the means, standard deviations, correlations, and reliability coefficients among the variables in our main study.

Measurement model

A series of CFAs was conducted to examine the distinctiveness of the follower self-reported variables (i.e., mindfulness, promotive relationship-directed voice, prohibitive relationship-directed voice, and LMX). Item parcels were used as indicators for latent variables. Using the single factor algorithm (Landis et al., 2000), three parcels were created for mindfulness and LMX. Relationship-directed promotive and prohibitive voice were each modeled with two parcels. The hypothesized four-factor model showed an excellent fit and was preferably over all alternative models (Table 2). These results indicate that our measures captured distinct constructs and represented valid tools to measure our target variables.

Hypothesis testing

Before testing our main predictions, we assessed the impact of our control variables. Neither sociodemographic similarity nor Big Five personality trait congruence predicted our

Table 3 Cross-level polynomial regressions

	Relationship-Directed Promotive Voice	Relationship-Directed Prohibitive Voice	LMX	
			Model 1	Model 2
Intercept	3.62***	3.60***	3.78***	3.74***
F	0.28***	0.25**	0.00	−0.07
L	−0.03	−0.08	0.01	0.04
F^2	−0.14	−0.18*	−0.11	−0.08
F x L	0.19	0.11	0.08	0.04
L^2	−0.18	−0.15	0.07	0.12
Relationship-Directed Promotive Voice				0.24***
Relationship-Directed Prohibitive Voice				0.01
R^2	0.11	0.11	0.02	0.11
ΔR^2				0.09
a_1	0.24*	0.17	0.00	−0.03
a_2	−0.13	−0.22	0.04	0.09
a_3	0.31*	0.33*	−0.01	−0.12
a_4	−0.52*	−0.46*	−0.12	−0.01

$N = 189$. F = Follower Mindfulness. L = Leader Mindfulness. Unstandardized regression coefficients are reported. R^2 was calculated according to Nakagawa and Schielzeth (2013). ΔR^2refers to the inclusion of voice behaviors in the prediction of LMX. * $p < .05$.** $< p$ 0.01.*** $< p$ 0.001

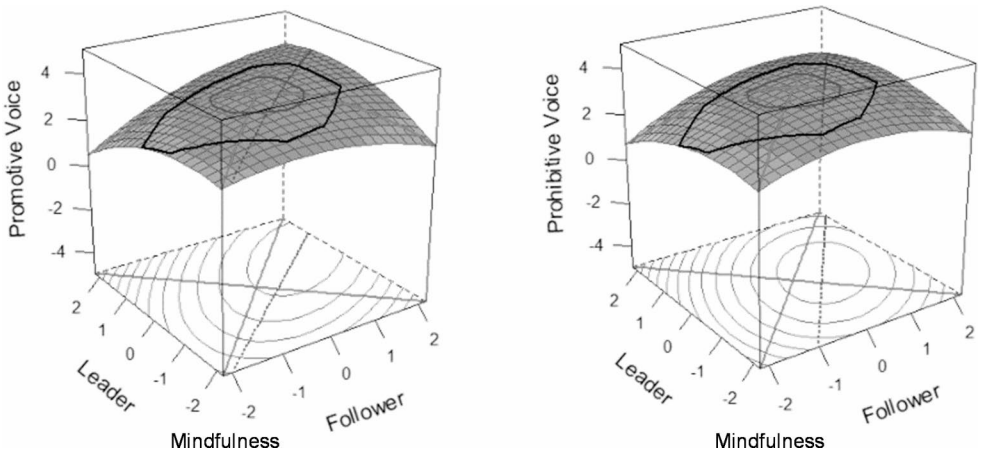

Fig. 2 Response surface graphs for relationship-directed promotive voice and relationship-directed prohibitive voice predicted by leader-follower congruence in mindfulness

focal outcomes, leading us to exclude these variables from further analysis for clearer result interpretation (Becker et al., 2016). Detailed coefficients, slopes, and curvatures from the analyses on the Big Five personality traits are reported in supplementary material (Supplement 2).

Hypothesis 1 proposed a direct congruence effect of leader and follower mindfulness on LMX quality, while requiring matches at high levels of mindfulness. The results of the cross-level polynomial regression analysis are reported in the third column of Table 3 (Model 1), showing that neither the a_4 nor the a_1 coefficient was different from zero and therefore, Hypothesis 1 was not supported. The a_3 coefficient was also not significant, indicating that LMX quality was not higher when followers scored higher on mindfulness than their leaders. Thus, Hypothesis 2 was not supported.

The next set of hypotheses refers to the intervening role of relationship-directed promotive (Hypothesis 3a) and prohibitive voice (Hypothesis 3b). The a_4 coefficient was negative and statistically significant for both relationship-directed promotive ($a_4 = -0.48$, $p < .05$) and prohibitive voice ($a_4 = -0.47$, $p < .05$). Figure 2 presents the response surface graphs, which demonstrate a downward curvature along the lines of incongruence. For promotive voice, also the a_1 coefficient was positive and significant (0.23, $p < .05$), indicating that it was predicted by congruence at higher mindfulness levels, as opposed to lower levels. In turn, while the a_1 coefficient for prohibitive voice pointed in the expected direction, it was not statistically significant (0.17, *ns*). These patterns are visualized as an upward slope of the response surfaces along the line of congruence (Fig. 2).

Next, the effects of the two types of relationship-directed voice on LMX were assessed. To this aim, we built on Model 1 (Table 3) in which the five polynomial terms predict LMX and added the two voice variables to the regression (Model 2). We found that only relationship-directed promotive voice predicted LMX ($b = 0.23$, $p < .001$), while no such effect was found for relationship-directed prohibitive voice ($b = 0.10$,

ns). Therefore, only promotive voice was used to assess the proposed mediation effect. To this end, the block variable approach was applied to obtain a single coefficient representing the combined effect of leader-follower mindfulness on relationship-directed promotive voice. The unstandardized coefficient of this combined effect was 1.01 ($p < .001$), while relationship-directed promotive voice predicted LMX ($b = 0.28$, $p < .001$). The indirect effect of mindfulness congruence on LMX via promotive voice was significant, $ab = 0.29$ (95% CI = [0.14. 47]). In summary, the obtained pattern lend support to Hypothesis 3a, while Hypothesis 3b was not supported.

Finally, we tested the proposed asymmetrical incongruence effects pertaining to relationship-directed promotive (Hypothesis 4a) and prohibitive (Hypothesis 4b) voice. For both variables, the obtained a_3 coefficients were statistically significant and positive ($a_3 = 0.31$, $p < .05$ for promotive voice and $a_3 = 0.34$, $p < .05$ for prohibitive voice). Figure 2 shows the positive slope along the incongruence lines. Both types of relationship-directed voice were higher when the discrepancy was such that follower mindfulness was higher than leader mindfulness than vice versa. Hence, both Hypothesis 4a and Hypothesis 4b were supported.

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the joint effect of leader and follower mindfulness on LMX quality, focusing on the role of followers' relationship-directed voice behaviors in mediating this relationship. While there was no direct congruence effect of leader-follower mindfulness on LMX quality, our analysis revealed an indirect effect. Specifically, while mindfulness congruence predicted both promotive and prohibitive follower voice behaviors aimed at enhancing the relationship, LMX quality was more strongly predicted by promotive voice.

Theoretical implications

Our findings align with the core tenets of P-S fit theory, reinforcing that compatibility between leaders and followers—specifically in terms of mindfulness—leads to positive outcomes (Vianen, 2018). Similarly, this supports the broader narrative in mindfulness research, which suggests that mindful individuals are more adaptable in their responses to their work environment (Glomb et al., 2011; Good et al., 2016). That said, our findings advance an emerging stream of research which seeks to understand how mindfulness might affect relational processes between leaders and followers (Reina et al., 2022). Unlike prior studies that primarily highlighted the positive effects of leader mindfulness on these interactions (Reb et al., 2018), our findings indicate that the real picture is more complex. We uncover that the interplay of mindfulness levels between leaders and followers is critical, suggesting that leadership and its relational quality are co-constructed phenomena influenced by the degree of mindfulness congruence.

A significant insight from our study is the identification of followers' relationship-directed voice behavior as a potential mechanism through which aligned mindfulness levels exert their positive effect. This new understanding helps clarify how followers can actively contribute to enhancing key workplace relationships through direct influence attempts, a dimension not fully captured or explored within traditional concepts of proactivity (Tornau & Frese, 2013). Notably, this advancement extends beyond indirect behaviors, such as ingratiation (Nahrgang & Seo, 2015) or helping leaders in task completion (Xu et al., 2019), offering a new perspective on active engagement in workplace dynamics.

A particularly interesting finding is that leader-follower alignment in mindfulness exhibited different patterns in relation to promotive and prohibitive voice. Specifically, we see that congruence at high versus low levels of mindfulness seems required to facilitate promotive voice. This suggests that in dyads with low levels of mindfulness, followers may be less sensitive to or engaged with opportunities to enhance their interactions with the leader. By contrast, when it comes to prohibitive voice, lower levels of mindfulness in leader-follower dyads do not necessarily prevent followers from speaking up with problematic or harmful aspects in the relationship. This preliminary finding aligns with the notion that individuals in less mindful dyads might experience and therefore report more negative aspects, driven by an increased negativity bias (Kiken & Shook, 2011) and/or challenges stemming directly from the leader's behavior, such as inattentiveness or judgmental attitudes. However, it is important to note that a follower's tendency to speak up increases when their mindfulness level is higher, highlighting the significance of follower mindfulness in mitigating the adverse effects of mindfulness incongruence. This reinforces the notion that mindful followers are not mere recipients in the leadership process but play a much more active role than traditionally assumed (Dulebohn et al., 2012).

Another notable implication from our findings is that relationship-directed prohibitive voice appears less effective in enhancing LMX quality compared to promotive voice. This finding is plausible from both statistical and theoretical perspectives. Statistically, although promotive and prohibitive voice are positively correlated with each other, promotive voice seems to account for more unique variance in LMX quality than prohibitive voice. This suggests that their shared variance is attributed mostly to promotive

voice. Theoretically, this observation aligns with meta-analytic findings that suggest prohibitive voice is often viewed less favorably by managers, potentially leading to lower performance evaluations for the voicer (Chamberlin et al., 2017). A potential explanation for this could be that highlighting relationship issues might inadvertently cast leaders in a negative light or cause embarrassment, which could strain the relationship. Furthermore, prohibitive voice might be perceived as excessive assertiveness, which previous studies have linked to reduced LMX quality (Nahrgang & Seo, 2015). It is, however, important to note that there was no explicit negative correlation in our data but rather, relationship-directed prohibitive voice simply did not yield a higher-than-average relationship quality. Thus, more research is needed to understand this finding and to shed light into potential boundary conditions that may regulate the effectiveness of relationship-directed prohibitive voice.

Practical implications

Our findings suggest that mindfulness congruence is an important resource for promoting follower proactivity and leader-follower relationships. Of course, in organizations, neither leaders nor employees have the luxury of selecting counterparts who match their mindfulness level. However, given that mindfulness is a trainable skill, leadership and human resource development can benefit from incorporating mindfulness practice, provided it is well designed and guided by experts (Vonderlin et al., 2020). Considering that mindfulness was indirectly linked to relationship quality in our data —specifically through voice behavior—our results suggest that organizations should adopt additional strategies to directly promote relationship-directed voice. Creating a supportive environment for feedback and integrating relationship-focused communication into HR practices, such as newcomer socialization, training, and performance reviews, could be effective approaches. This should go hand in hand with providing support to leaders to deal with emotional reactions that may arise as they seek and receive feedback about their relationships with followers (Nesbit, 2012).

Limitations and future research

Besides its contributions, this study is not without limitations. First, we observed a mediation effect of voice behaviors in the absence of a direct effect of mindfulness congruence on LMX quality. However, it is crucial to recognize that the absence of a direct effect does not preclude the possibility of mediation. Methodological literature has shown that mediation can occur independently of a total direct effect (Rucker et al., 2011). One possible explanation for this phenomenon in our study could be the relatively small sample size, which may amplify the statistical power for detecting mediation effects compared to total effects (O'Rourke & MacKinnon, 2015). Alternatively, the presence of sub-groups within our sample or the influence of other mediators exerting opposite effects might account for the lack of a significant total effect. For example, mindful followers may be particularly sensitive to potentially destructive leader behaviors (Tian et al., 2023), which could have a negative impact on LMX ratings. Considering recent research that has identified direct effects of mindfulness congruence on LMX quality (Zhang et al., 2023), future studies should aim to replicate our findings with larger samples and explore the role of competing mediators.

Second, our study's design does not capture the likely reciprocal nature of the relationship between relationship-directed voice behaviors and LMX quality. Previous research indicates that high LMX quality may promote voice behaviors as it reduces the perceived risk of speaking up (Duan et al., 2019). Future longitudinal research could provide deeper insights into the initial steps towards relationship enhancement by either leaders or followers, the dynamics of reciprocal efforts, and the mutual influence between relationship-directed voice behaviors and LMX quality over time.

Finally, while we assessed mindfulness from different sources, it will be promising in future studies to include also supervisor ratings of followers' relationship-directed voice behaviors and LMX. Research indicates that there is only moderate agreement between leader and follower judgments of LMX quality and that leaders may value different aspects in the relationship than followers (Uhl-Bien et al., 2022). This difference could be particularly relevant with regard to the effects of relationship-directed prohibitive voice. Followers who raise concerns might perceive leaders' responses as potentially harmful to the quality of their relationship. Conversely, leaders might value the initiative shown by followers in voicing concerns, interpreting these prohibitive voice behaviors as constructive contributions to the relationship, which could be reflected in higher LMX ratings from the leaders' perspective.

Conclusion

Research and practice increasingly highlight the importance of mindfulness in the workplace, especially within leadership. While significant progress has been made in understanding the individual effects of mindfulness, its interpersonal effects remain underexplored. Addressing this gap, our study investigated how leader and follower mindfulness jointly influence the quality of leader-follower relationships. Our findings indicate that when leaders and

followers share similar levels of mindfulness, followers are more likely to engage in relationship-directed voice behaviors, strengthening their relationship with their leader. This research advances our understanding of the combined effects of leader and follower mindfulness and the behavioral mechanisms driving these effects. It extends theories on mindfulness and leadership dynamics and underscores the value of organizational initiatives not only to promote mindfulness but also to encourage employees to openly discuss and strengthen their relationships with leaders.

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-024-07080-4.

Data availability The data that support the findings of this study will be shared upon reasonable request.

Declarations

Compliance with ethical standards All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.
Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Conflict of interest All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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