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RESEARCH NOTE

Navigating the unknown: Uncertainty moderates the link between visionary leadership, perceived meaningfulness, and turnover intentions

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Email: mabuss@uni-potsdam.de**Abstract**

Visionary leadership is considered to be one of the most important elements of effective leadership. Among other things, it is related to followers' perceived meaningfulness of their work. However, little is known about whether uncertainty in the workplace affects visionary leadership's effects. Given that uncertainty is rising in many, if not most, workplaces, it is vital to understand whether this development influences the extent to which visionary leadership is associated with followers' perceived meaningfulness. In a two-source, lagged design field study of 258 leader-follower dyads from different settings, we show that uncertainty moderates the relation between visionary leadership and followers' perceived meaningfulness such that this relation is more strongly positive when uncertainty is high, rather than low. Moreover, we show that with increasing uncertainty, visionary leadership is more negatively related to followers' turnover intentions via perceived meaningfulness. This research broadens our understanding of how visionary leadership may be a particularly potent tool in times of increasing uncertainty.

KEYWORDS

follower turnover intentions, perceived meaningfulness, uncertainty, visionary leadership

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Practitioner points

- Leaders can be most effective in enhancing followers' perceived meaningfulness and reducing turnover intentions when uncertainty is high.
- Whenever uncertainty is high, either temporarily or permanently, leaders should enact more visionary leadership.
- Low uncertainty may render visionary leadership less effective and may even act as a substitute for visionary leadership.

Visionary leadership – that is, the communication of an image of the future with the aim of persuading others to help make this image a reality (van Knippenberg & Stam, 2014) – has been called one of the most important and at the same time one of the least well-understood aspects of leadership (Stam et al., 2014). Both theoretical work (e.g., Shamir et al., 1993; Stam et al., 2014) and empirical studies have demonstrated the potential of visionary leadership to foster performance (Kearney et al., 2019) and decrease turnover intentions (e.g., Kipfelsberger et al., 2022). However, we know a lot less about visionary leadership than one might assume, and our understanding of when and how it affects follower outcomes is still mixed and fragmented (e.g., Kearney et al., 2019; van Knippenberg & Stam, 2014). Arguably a main reason for this is that, for the most part, visionary leadership has been studied by “lumping” (Carton, 2022) it together with other elements into the broader construct of transformational leadership. This approach is unable to identify moderators, mediators, and outcomes that are specific to visionary leadership (van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). By examining visionary leadership by itself, rather than as part of a broader construct (i.e., by employing a “splitting” approach; Carton, 2022), we can advance knowledge of when and how visionary leadership has positive effects in organizations.

Importantly, it remains an open question whether the rising levels of uncertainty in most workplaces today enhance or diminish the potential of visionary leadership to positively affect followers. Although it has been theorized (e.g., Shamir et al., 1993) that visionary leadership should be particularly effective in times of uncertainty, this assumption, to the best of our knowledge, has never been tested empirically. We define uncertainty as the absence of information or situational understanding that would be needed to predict the future (Colquitt et al., 2012). Uncertainty has been shown to be negatively related to job performance (Colquitt et al., 2012), as it causes employees to engage in more defensive behaviours aimed at protecting their own interests, rather than direct their attention and efforts towards behaviours best suited to job success (e.g., Mayer & Gavin, 2005). Uncertainty constitutes a stressor that drains an employee's resources such as cognitive energy (Colquitt et al., 2012). Uncertainty is generally seen as a negative state and the need to reduce uncertainty and enhance predictability may be innate to humans and fundamental to social interactions (Colquitt et al., 2012).

So how does uncertainty influence the effectiveness of visionary leadership? The starting point of our research is that previous work has shown that visionary leadership may enhance followers' perceived meaningfulness of their work (Kipfelsberger et al., 2022). It does so by verbally painting a picture of a future to work towards and thus enabling employees to better imagine the benefits of their efforts. Perceived meaningfulness, in turn, was found to decrease followers' turnover intentions (Kipfelsberger et al., 2022). However, the main and novel contribution of our work is that we propose that these links are amplified by uncertainty. We argue that visionary leadership is most strongly positively related to perceived meaningfulness and, in turn, most strongly negatively related to turnover intentions when uncertainty is high. When it is uncertain how things will develop at work, followers are particularly likely to benefit from a leader who clearly articulates an image of the future to strive towards and thus replaces uncertainty with concrete ideas about what the future will look like. We contend that, given high uncertainty, the more the leader focuses on and articulates images of the future, the more the employees will be able to perceive meaning in their work, which will, in turn,

decrease their turnover intentions. High uncertainty creates a “weak situation” in which the visionary leader's guidance becomes particularly important (Tsui et al., 2006). Moreover, there is also research showing that uncertainty can intensify both positive and negative affective reactions (e.g., Bar-Anan et al., 2009). Thus, to the extent that visionary leadership elicits followers' emotions, this process is bound to be intensified by high uncertainty. When uncertainty is low, by contrast, there is less need for visionary leadership. Given low uncertainty, employees already have a good understanding of their work situation and are better able to predict the future themselves. In this case, their efforts are less impeded by worries about the future. Thus, certainty could even act as a substitute for visionary leadership (Tsui et al., 2006) in the sense that certainty obviates the need for and reduces the positive potential of visionary leadership. We therefore posit:

Hypothesis 1. There is an interactive effect between visionary leadership and uncertainty such that the effect of visionary leadership on followers' perceived meaningfulness is more strongly positive when uncertainty is high, rather than low.

Hypothesis 2. The negative indirect effect of visionary leadership via followers' perceived meaningfulness on turnover intentions is moderated by uncertainty.

METHODS

We conducted a two-wave field study of 258 leader-follower dyads from different sectors such as health care, IT, and financials. Study participants were recruited with the aid of students at a German university. Each study participant was part of only one dyad. At time 1 (T1), followers assessed their leader's visionary leadership behaviour and control variables. Leaders rated the degree of uncertainty at work. At time 2 (T2), two months after T1, followers rated their perceived meaningfulness and turnover intentions.

In total, 695 dyads were contacted, 285 agreed to participate (41%), and 258 dyads provided complete data. Of these, 251 dyads were located in Germany, two in Russia, and one dyad each in Denmark, China, the United States, Saudi Arabia, and France. The mean age was 45.60 years ($SD=11.41$) for leaders and 37.63 ($SD=12.68$) for followers. A total of 151 of the leaders were male (59%) and 107 were female (41%). Among the followers, 93 were male (36%) and 165 were female (64%).

All constructs were measured with 7-point scales ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. To measure visionary leadership, we used five items previously used by Kearney et al. (2019) ($\alpha=.92$). To capture uncertainty, we used three items based on Colquitt et al. (2012): “It is hard to predict how things at work will develop in the future,” “At work, many things are currently uncertain,” and “There are some developments at work whose ultimate outcome is currently unclear” ($\alpha=.79$). For perceived meaningfulness, we used four items from Kirkman and Rosen (1999), adapted to the individual level. Followers assessed the degree to which they perceive that their “work is important,” “tasks are worthwhile,” “job is meaningful,” and “work is significant” ($\alpha=.95$). Moreover, followers rated their turnover intentions with four items from Chen et al. (2011): “I am thinking about leaving this organization,” “I am planning to look for a new job,” “I intend to ask people about new job opportunities,” and “I don't plan to be in this organization much longer” ($\alpha=.97$).

We controlled for the followers' number of actual weekly working hours because they varied considerably in our sample ($M=36.16$, $SD=10.09$). We also included the percentage of virtual, as opposed to face-to-face, interactions between leader and follower to ensure that our findings are applicable in both settings. Finally, we included task complexity (4 items based on Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006; $\alpha=.90$) to control for the effect of different types of tasks.

To assess the validity of our scales, we conducted confirmatory factor analyses. Our proposed four-factor model of all the scales rated by followers – visionary leadership, meaningfulness, turnover

intentions, and task complexity – yielded a good fit to the data ($\chi^2(113) = 173.43$; CFI = .99; RMSEA = .05; SRMR = .04) that was a significantly better fit ($p < .001$) than all alternative models.

RESULTS

Visionary leadership was non-significantly related to uncertainty ($r = -.01, p = .811$), positively related to meaningfulness ($r = .23, p < .001$), and negatively related to follower turnover intentions ($r = -.26, p < .001$). Uncertainty was non-significantly related to both meaningfulness ($r = -.10, p = .115$) and turnover intentions ($r = .05, p = .402$). Meaningfulness was negatively related to turnover intentions ($r = -.48, p < .001$).

To test Hypothesis 1, which predicts an interactive effect of visionary leadership and uncertainty on meaningfulness, we conducted a hierarchical regression analysis. We first entered into our regression equation our control variables, then visionary leadership and uncertainty, and finally the interaction between visionary leadership and uncertainty. In support of Hypothesis 1, the interaction was significant ($b = .11, SE = .04, p = .002$) and explained a significant amount of variance beyond the controls and main effects ($\Delta R^2 = .03, p = .002$). A simple slopes test confirmed that the effect of visionary leadership on meaningfulness was most strongly positive when uncertainty was high (i.e., one standard deviation above the mean; $b = .28, SE = .07, p < .001$). This effect was non-significant when uncertainty was low (i.e., one standard deviation below the mean; $b = -.00, SE = .06, p = .992$). This pattern is depicted in Figure 1.

To test Hypothesis 2, we used the regression-based approach suggested by Hayes (2022). As expected, the negative indirect effect of visionary leadership via meaningfulness on turnover intentions was significant ($b = -.10, SE = .04, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.188, -.019]$). Moreover, this indirect effect was moderated by uncertainty (index of moderated mediation = $-.08, SE = .03, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.134, -.027]$). The results of this analysis are shown in Table 1. The indirect effect was most strongly negative when uncertainty was high (i.e., one standard deviation above the mean; $b = -.21, SE = .06, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.329, -.095]$). This indirect effect was non-significant when uncertainty was low (i.e., one standard deviation below the mean; $b = .00, SE = .05, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.096, .092]$).

DISCUSSION

This study shows that visionary leadership is most strongly positively related to followers' perceived meaningfulness and, in turn, most strongly negatively related to followers' turnover intentions when uncertainty is high. The main contribution of this research lies in identifying a widespread situational boundary condition for the associations of visionary leadership with important outcomes. In light of the rapidly rising uncertainty in today's workplaces fueled by developments such as technological advances (digitalization, automation, AI, etc.), geopolitical tensions, and political turmoil, our research suggests a way in which leaders might constructively respond to such an environment. Uncertainty is seen as an aversive state that people are motivated to reduce (Bar-Anan et al., 2009), and previous research has shown that voluntary turnover can be one way in which employees try to reduce uncertainty (Rafferty & Griffin, 2006). However, employee turnover is costly for organizations. This is especially true for countries with a shortage of skilled labour. Our findings are consistent with the assumption that employees benefit from a leader who provides meaning in the face of uncertainty through visionary leadership, and thereby curtails the adverse effects that uncertainty may engender.

We acknowledge several limitations of our study that could be addressed by future research. Our work should be complemented with experimental research to ascertain the causal links among the variables in our model. Although we collected data at two different time points to reduce the risk of common-method bias, perceptions of meaningfulness and turnover intentions were measured at T2. However, our concerns were partly alleviated by the results of our confirmatory factor analyses.

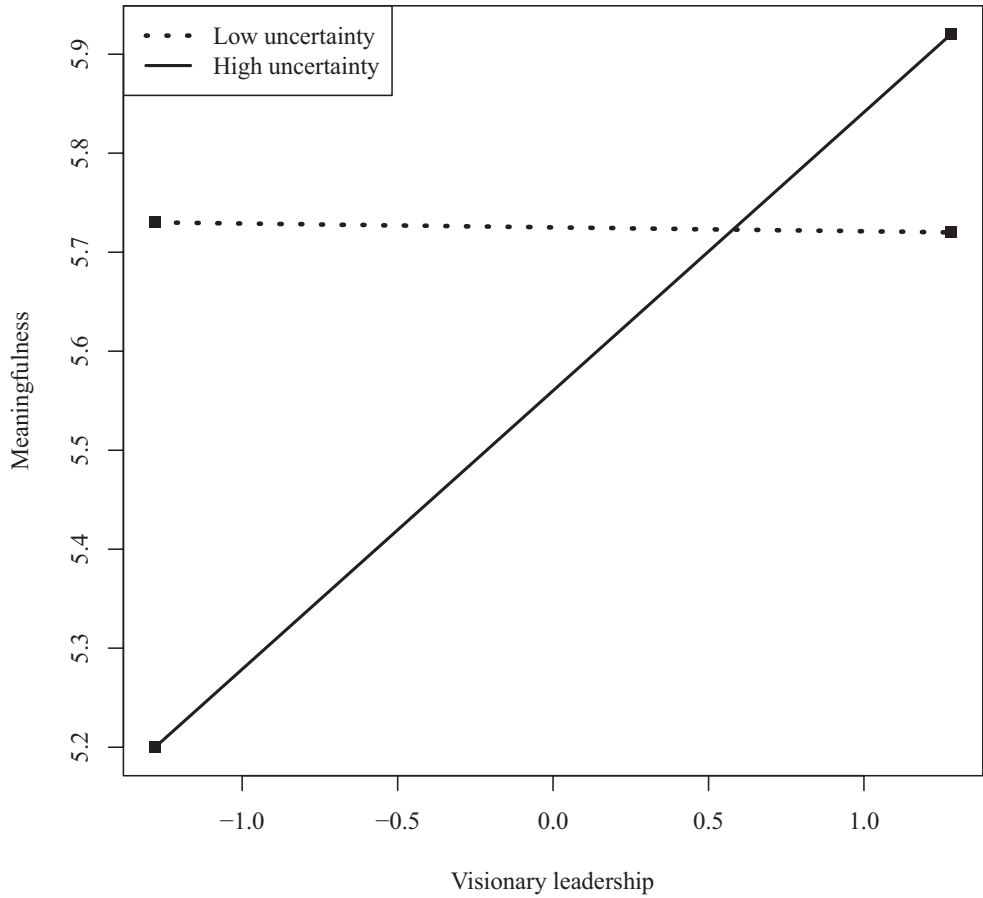


FIGURE 1 The interactive effect of visionary leadership and uncertainty on meaningfulness. Visionary leadership and uncertainty were mean-centred prior to the regression analysis.

TABLE 1 Study 1 conditional direct and indirect effects of visionary leadership.

Conditional direct effects of visionary leadership on meaningfulness				
Uncertainty	Effect	SE	t	p
Low (−1.31)	−.00	.06	−.01	.992
Mean (.00)	.14	.05	3.02	.003
High (1.31)	.28	.07	4.23	<.001
Conditional indirect effects of visionary leadership on turnover intentions				
Uncertainty	Effect	SE	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI
Low (−1.31)	.00	.05	−.096	.092
Mean (.00)	−.10	.04	−.186	−.027
High (1.31)	−.21	.06	−.329	−.095
Index of moderated mediation				
Moderator	Effect	SE	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI
Uncertainty	−.08	.03	−.134	−.027

Note: $n = 258$ dyads. Boot CI = 95% bootstrapped confidence interval. Visionary leadership and uncertainty were mean-centred prior to the regression analysis. Bootstrap sample size = 50,000.

Moreover, most of our dyads were in Germany, and it would be important to replicate our findings in other countries and cultures. In addition, we had the leaders rate uncertainty because relying on their own perceptions better enables leaders to adapt the extent to which they provide visionary leadership to situational requirements. It would arguably be more difficult for leaders to always have to ask their followers first about their perceptions of uncertainty before deciding on how much visionary leadership to provide. However, future research could also examine follower perceptions of uncertainty. In such models, uncertainty might lend itself better to being studied as a mediator, rather than a moderator. Finally, future research could also examine other forms of organizational support such as the provision of resources that could enhance perceived meaningfulness (Demerouti & Bakker, 2023).

In conclusion, although visionary leadership has been a popular construct in the leadership literature for many decades now, our work suggests that it may become even more relevant in the future. Providing visionary leadership may prove to be a promising way to counteract the adverse effects of steadily rising levels of uncertainty by fostering perceived meaningfulness and reducing turnover intentions.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Martin Buss: Methodology; writing – original draft; conceptualization; formal analysis; visualization; writing – review and editing. **Eric Kearney:** Writing – original draft; conceptualization; writing – review and editing.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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