



Curve Effect of Benevolent Leadership on Employees' Innovation Behaviour in Dynamic environment The Moderating Effect of Leaders' Innovation Expectation

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Abstract. Based on activation theory and social exchange theory, this paper empirically tests the curve effect of benevolent leadership on employee. The results show that: (1) Benevolent leadership has an inverted U-shaped effect on innovation behavior. (2) Leadership innovation expectation regulates the relationship between benevolent leadership and employee innovation behavior. The article enriches the study of curve effect to a certain extent, which has a certain reference significance for giving full play to the positive role of benevolent leadership, improving the level of innovation expectation of leaders and promoting employees' innovation behavior.

Keyword: benevolent leadership · innovation expectation · curve effect · inverted U-shape

1 Quotes

In recent years, the external environment faced by companies has become more and more dynamic due to the impact of the epidemic and the rapid development of the information age. The dynamic nature of the external environment makes it more difficult for companies to survive, and innovation is essential for companies to maintain their survival and long-term competition. The key to maintaining a competitive advantage is to increase the innovation capacity of individual employees and to bring innovation from the employee level to the organisational level, but as innovation is largely a conscious choice of the individual, how to effectively motivate employees to innovate has become a hot topic [1]. Compassionate leadership is an important topic of research [2], especially in dynamic environments where it provides employees with more resources and a sense of belonging, providing a better basis for innovative behaviour and therefore greatly facilitating the emergence of innovative behaviour [3]. The relationship has been studied by scholars [4], such as Wang Ping et al. who discuss the influence of face on benevolent leadership and innovative behaviour [5]. Although existing research confirms a positive linear effect between benevolent leadership and innovative behavior, it does not further discuss whether there is a curvilinear relationship between the two?

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In addition, employees will hold different attitudes towards innovative behavior under benevolent leadership because the level of innovation expectations of leaders varies depending on the leader's individual characteristics, job identity, and other internal and external contexts. Carmeli et al. [6] showed that leadership innovation expectations are internalized into employees' self-innovation expectations, which in turn facilitate the involvement of employees in the innovation process and can ultimately influence employees' This can ultimately influence employees' organisational behaviour [7]. So, do different levels of leadership expectations differ in their ability to behave innovatively when faced with different levels of benevolent leadership?

In summary, this paper introduces leadership innovation expectation as a moderating variable to explore the curvilinear relationship between benevolent leadership and innovative behaviour and the moderating role of leadership innovation expectation between the two [8], which provides new ideas to better enhance employees' innovative behaviour.

2 Literature Review and Research Hypothesis

Benevolent leadership means that business leaders show genuine, practical care and benevolence to their employees in their own work or in their non-work areas, providing them with work guidance and life advice [9, 10]. Specifically, the leadership style affects the employees' attitude to work, innovative behaviour, etc., because the choice of leadership style is determined by the leader himself, and for the employees, the leadership style is the external expression of the leadership attitude.

2.1 Benevolent Leadership and Employee Innovation Behaviour

Attention to benevolent leaders focuses on the positive influence values such as facilitation and motivation of employees, while the negative traits they carry receive little attention. Firstly, it is known from social exchange theory that leaders show kindness and concern [11, 12], which employees will exchange for good work attitudes and behaviours at work, such as creativity [13]. Secondly, benevolent leaders give employees a degree of autonomy at work, when they are also more willing to take risks in trying new approaches and ideas, which in turn stimulates their innovative behaviour [14].

Current research suggests that benevolent leadership can have a positive impact on employees' innovative behaviour [15–17]. For example, Lu Hui et al. confirmed that benevolent leadership has a significant positive impact on employees' innovative behaviour [12], but they only elaborated their analysis in terms of the positive aspects of benevolent leadership and did not fully focus on the negative issues it may bring. Because benevolent leaders think about their employees and lead them in a caring manner, they increase their sense of purpose and obedience to a certain extent, and under their influence, employees tend not to consider creative thinking to solve problems, but rather to follow their leaders' instructions, so they need to be motivated by them. As activation theory suggests, individuals need the optimum level of activation to function most effectively [8, 10], too high or too low will affect the performance of their potential. Specifically, moderate benevolent leadership will make employees feel comfortable

and at ease, which in turn will promote innovative behaviour, but according to the over-exaggeration effect [18, 19], excessive benevolent leadership, such as excessive concern and tolerance from the leader, may cause employees to feel that even if they do not engage in innovative behaviour, the results will be minimal, which in turn will result in low innovative behaviour.

This paper therefore suggests that there is likely to be an inverted U-shaped curvilinear relationship between benevolent leadership and innovative behaviour. In summary, hypothesis H1 is proposed.

H1: Benevolent leadership has an inverted U-shaped effect on innovative behaviour, with excessive benevolent leadership reducing employee innovative behaviour.

2.2 The Moderating Role of Leadership Innovation Expectations

The concept of leadership innovation expectations is mainly derived from the “Pygmalion” effect. The Pygmalion effect states that external expectations of individual performance or motivation to perform will lead to higher performance in the future [4]. In companies, employees pay close attention to and respond to the expectations of their leaders because they have legitimate decisions about their pay, promotions, etc. Leaders have different expectations of innovation based on their ability to innovate and the need for innovation in their positions [20]. In studies related to leadership innovation expectations, they are often closely related to employees’ innovation performance and innovation behaviour. Yuan Ling et al. confirmed the positive moderating effect of leadership innovation expectations in their exploration of the relationship between work engagement and employees’ innovation behaviour [21]. According to Ford’s theory of innovation in action, leadership innovation expectations show that leaders value and support innovative behaviour, which is about whether the innovation is legitimately meaningful and thus promotes innovative behaviour among employees [20]. Specifically, employees with high levels of leadership innovation expectations are more willing to use their talents, and when faced with a moderately benevolent leader, employees are more likely to believe that the benevolent leader is an affirmation of their work and trust, and will then actively work to improve their capabilities, thus promoting innovative behaviour. Conversely, when leaders show lower innovation expectations, employees will consider innovative behaviour as a task outside of work and refuse to invest time and energy in innovative behaviour. In summary: Hypothesis H2 is proposed.

H2: Leader innovation expectations positively moderate the relationship between benevolent leadership and employee innovation behaviour. The inverted U-shaped relationship between benevolent leadership and employee innovation behaviour exists at higher levels of leader innovation expectations.

The research hypothesis model is illustrated in Fig. 1.

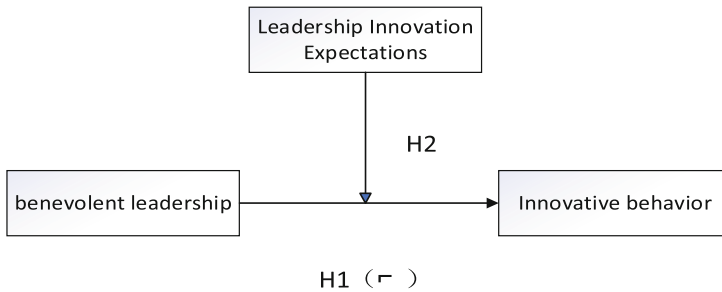


Fig. 1. Research hypothesis model

3 Study Design

3.1 Sample Selection and Data Sources

The study used a questionnaire survey method with 25 companies in the regions of Beijing, Tianjin and Hebei. The questionnaire was distributed by a combination of field and mail distribution. The time-series method was used to avoid homogenous error, i.e. the questionnaire module was divided into two parts, with questionnaire 1 being distributed first and questionnaire 2 being distributed to the same subjects a week later [8].

A total of 460 questionnaires were distributed in the study and 397 were returned, with a return rate of 86.3%. After screening and eliminating the defective and extreme questionnaires, 341 valid questionnaires were obtained, with an effective rate of 74.1%, and the sample was representative. Preliminary analysis of the sample was conducted through SPSS 25.0 and the results are shown in Table 1.

3.2 Measurement of Variables

Proven scales from national and international journals were used, following the translation back translation process [22] to ensure their accuracy. The scales were all scored using the Likert 5-point scale.

- (1) The independent variable is the Compassionate Leadership Scale developed by Zheng Bo Ocarina et al. [23]. The scale consists of five questions including “Besides work, my supervisor cares about my daily life”. The higher the score, the higher the degree of benevolent leadership perceived by the employees.
- (2) Moderating variables, mainly based on the Leadership Innovation Expectation Scale developed by Carmeli and Schaubroeck [24], with four questions including “My immediate supervisor expects me to be a creative employee”. The higher the score, the more innovative the leader expects the employee to be.
- (3) The dependent variable is the Employee Innovation Behaviour Scale revised by Yu Chuanpeng et al. There are four questions, including “I often come up with novel ideas related to my work” [25]. The higher the score, the stronger the innovative behaviour of the employees.

Table 1. Basic information analysis results

Indicators	Basic features	Sample	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	136	39.9
	Female	205	60.1
Age	25 years and under	16	4.7
	26–35 years old	200	58.7
	36–45 years	99	29
	46 years and over	26	7.6
Academic qualifications	High school diploma and below	69	20.2
	Tertiary and below	75	22
	Undergraduate	186	54.5
	Master and above	11	3.2
Years of work	Less than 1 year	35	10.3
	1–3 years	103	30.2
	4–6 years	114	33.4
	7–9 years	60	17.6
	10 years and above	29	8.5
Business size	Under 100 people	51	15
	101 to 500 people	34	10
	501 to 1000 people	56	16.4
	Over 1000 people	200	58.7
Nature of the company	Private enterprises	52	15.2
	State-owned enterprises	34	10
	Foreign-owned or joint ventures	56	16.4
	Institutional/Institutional	88	25.8
	Other	111	32.6
Staff positions	Grassroots staff	140	41.1
	Grassroots management	110	32.3
	Middle Management	41	12
	Senior Management	50	14.7

4 Empirical Analysis

4.1 Discriminant Validity and Common Method Tests

A validated factor analysis of benevolent leadership, leadership innovation expectations and innovation behaviour was conducted using Amos 24.0 software [26] and the results are presented in Table 2. From Table 2 it can be seen that the fit of the theoretically

Table 2. Results of the validation factor analysis

Models	Factors included	χ^2/df	CFI	GFI	SRMR	RMSEA [90% CI]
Model 1	Factor IV: IB; BL; IE; CMV	1.656	0.989	0.967	0.0201	0.044 [0.026,0.060]
Model 2	Three factors: IB; BL; IE	1.820	0.984	0.954	0.0260	0.049 [0.034,0.063]
Model 3	Two factors: IB + BL; IE	5.293	0.911	0.825	0.0583	0.112 [0.101,0.124]
Model 4	Two factors: IE + BL; IB	9.721	0.819	0.675	0.1051	0.160 [0.149,0.172]
Model 5	Two factors: BL; IE + IB	12.473	0.762	0.648	0.1041	0.184 [0.172,0.195]
Model 6	Single factor: BL + IE + IB	14.592	0.713	0.623	0.1112	0.200 [0.189,0.211]

Note: Benevolent Leadership (IB); Leading Innovative Expectations (IE); Innovative Behaviour (BL); Communal Factor (CMV)

hypothesised three-factor model ($\chi^2/df = 1.820$, CFI = 0.984, GFI = 0.954, SRMR = 0.0260, RMSEA = 0.049) was better than the other two-factor models with the one-factor model, indicating good discriminant validity between the three-factor variables and suitable for the next step of the study [27].

In order to avoid the problem of common method bias [8], the common method bias was tested using the unmeasurable potential method factor effect control method, i.e. adding the common method factor to the original three-factor model to test whether there was a significant improvement in model fitness. As can be seen from Table 2: the model fit did not improve significantly with the addition of the common factor [8, 28] ($\Delta\chi^2/df = 0.164$, $\Delta CFI = 0.005$, $\Delta GFI = 0.013$, $\Delta SRMR = 0.0059$, $\Delta RMSEA = 0.005$), indicating that there is no significant common method bias and that it is suitable for the next step of the study.

4.2 Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

SPSS25.0 software was applied to analyse the correlation between benevolent leadership, leadership innovation expectation and innovation behaviour, and the results of the analysis are shown in Table 3. From Table 3, it can be seen that: benevolent leadership and leadership innovation expectation (correlation coefficient $r = 0.486$, significant probability value $p < 0.01$) and innovation behaviour ($r = 0.690$, $p < 0.01$) were significantly positively correlated, and leadership innovation expectation and innovation behaviour were significantly positively correlated ($r = 0.558$, $p < 0.01$), which initially verified the relationship between benevolent leadership and innovation behaviour.

Table 3. Results of correlation analysis

Variables	Mean M	Standard deviation SD	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Gender	1.601	0.490	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Age	2.396	0.698	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Academic qualifications	2.408	0.844	-0.355**	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Years of work	2.839	1.098	-0.339**	0.274**	-	-	-	-	-	-
Size of business	3.188	1.119	0.059	0.012	0.008	-	-	-	-	-
Nature of the company	3.504	1.422	0.059	0.029	0.020	0.949**	-	-	-	-
Position	2.003	1.059	0.253**	-0.176**	-0.194**	-0.025	-0.044	-	-	-
IB	4.265	0.694	0.097	0.147**	0.141**	0.106	0.129*	-0.170**	-	-
BL	4.300	0.651	0.027	0.064	0.071	0.145**	0.161**	-0.048	0.690**	-
IE	4.384	0.695	0.183**	-0.035	0.053	0.144**	0.194**	0.032	0.486**	0.558**

Note: * denotes $p < 0.05$, ** denotes $p < 0.01$

4.3 Hypothesis Testing

Hierarchical regression was used to test the research hypotheses. To avoid the problem of multicollinearity, mean-centred regression was conducted on benevolent leadership and leadership innovation expectations prior to regression and the regression results are presented in Table 4. As shown in Table 4, it is evident from Model 2 that benevolent leadership has a significant positive correlation on innovation behaviour [29] (regression coefficient $\beta = 0.670$, significance probability value $p < 0.001$), in addition, it is evident from Model 3 that benevolent leadership squared has a significant negative correlation ($\beta = -0.156$, $p < 0.001$) and a significant change in the fit index ($\Delta R^2 = 0.519$, $p < 0.001$), representing a significant increase in the explanatory power of the model with the inclusion of benevolent leadership squared, i.e., benevolent leadership has an inverted U-shaped effect on innovative behaviour, and hypothesis H1 holds. From model 5, there is a negative relationship between the interaction term of benevolent leadership and leadership innovation expectancy and innovation behaviour ($\beta = -0.115$, $p < 0.01$), while the interaction term of benevolent leadership squared and leadership innovation expectancy is significantly negatively related to innovation behaviour ($\beta = -0.085$, $p < 0.001$) as shown in model 6, demonstrating that leadership innovation expectancy moderates the inverted U-shaped relationship between benevolent leadership and innovation behaviour. U-shaped relationship.

In order to better present the inverted U-shaped relationship between benevolent leadership and innovation behaviour and the moderating role of leadership innovation expectations, regression coefficients were used to depict the changing trends of employees' innovation behaviour under different levels of benevolent leadership and the changes in the relationship between benevolent leadership and innovation behaviour under different levels of leadership innovation expectations, as shown in Figs. 2 and 3. From Fig. 2, it can be seen that: when the level of benevolent leadership is moderate, benevolent leadership has a positive impact on innovation behaviour; while when the level of benevolent leadership is too high, innovation behaviour decreases as the level of benevolent leadership increases, which further verifies hypothesis H1: benevolent leadership and innovation behaviour show an obvious inverted U-shaped relationship. From Fig. 3, it can be seen that: with the same level of benevolent leadership, high leadership innovation expectation brings about higher innovation behaviour than low leadership innovation expectation, which indicates that employees with high leadership innovation expectation will respond positively to leadership expectation when faced with moderate benevolent leadership, which in turn promotes innovation behaviour, and hypothesis H2 holds.

5 Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Key Findings

Based on questionnaire data from 25 companies in Beijing, Tianjin and Hebei, this paper empirically analyses the curvilinear relationship between benevolent leadership and innovative behaviour to provide a reference for more effective improvement of employees' innovative behaviour. The following conclusions were obtained:

Table 4. Regression analysis results

Variables	Innovative behaviour					
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Gender	-0.128	-0.019	-0.038	0.010	0.000	-0.004
Age	0.056	-0.094	-0.083	-0.107	-0.125	-0.129
Academic qualifications	0.038	-0.043	-0.052	-0.033	-0.012	-0.029
Years of work	0.042	-0.019	-0.042	-0.047	-0.049	-0.041
Size of business	-0.043	0.007	-0.063	0.009	0.030	0.022
Nature of the company	0.099	0.031	0.084	0.015	0.000	0.006
Position	-0.015	0.054	0.017	0.006	0.014	0.001
IB	-	0.670***	0.450***	0.376***	0.402***	0.363***
IB ²	-	-	-0.156***	-0.126***	-0.044	-0.087*
IE	-	-	-	0.254***	0.238***	0.320***
IB x IE	-	-	-	-	-0.115**	-0.290***
IB ² x IE	-	-	-	-	-	-0.085***
R ²	0.046	0.495	0.532	0.581	0.594	0.610
ΔR ²	0.026*	0.483***	0.519***	0.568***	0.581**	0.596***

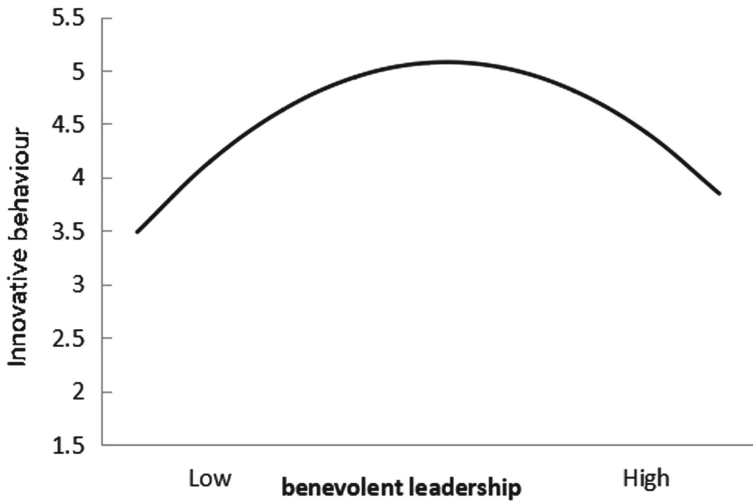


Fig. 2. The inverted U-shaped relationship between benevolent leadership and innovative behaviour

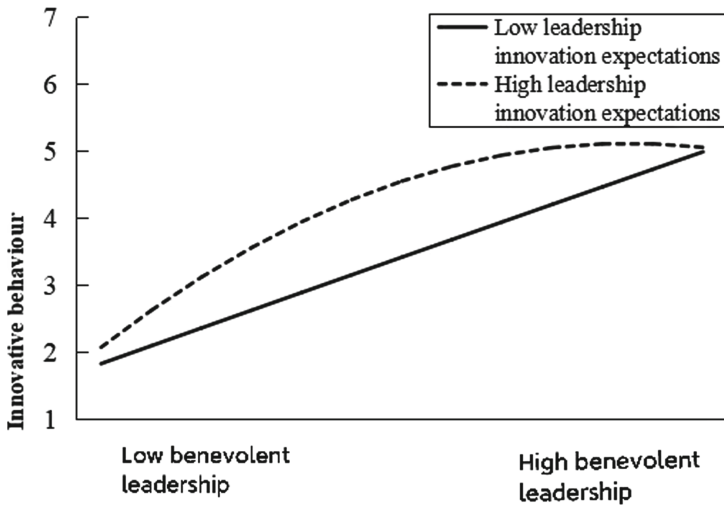


Fig. 3. The moderating role of leadership innovation expectation between benevolent leadership and innovative behaviour

(1) There is an inverted U-shaped relationship between benevolent leadership and innovative behaviour. The findings respond to the call of scholars for research on the curvilinear relationship between complex management variables [8, 30], warn that positive leadership styles may also have negative effects, deepen the understanding of benevolent leadership, and provide a new focus for promoting innovative behaviour. (2) Leadership innovation expectations moderate the relationship between benevolent leadership and innovative behaviour, i.e. its inverted U-shaped effect exists only when the level of leadership innovation expectations is high. High levels of leadership innovation expectations have a positive effect, and vice versa, a negative effect. The study reveals the relationship between the influence of benevolent leadership on innovation behaviour, enriching the inverted U-shaped research.

5.2 Related Recommendations

(1) As one of the many leadership styles, benevolent leadership has its roots in Confucianism. A moderate degree of benevolent leadership can promote employees' efforts to learn, to perform positively and to improve their own innovative behaviour. Therefore, it is important to pay attention to the "degree" of benevolent leadership and to grasp the "degree" while caring for employees to promote their innovative behaviour; at the same time, companies should actively build an innovative environment and create a good working atmosphere for employees. (2) As an external factor that is not under the control of employees, the differentiation of leadership innovation expectations will have an impact on employees' psychology and behaviour. With lower leadership innovation expectations employees are reluctant to spend their extra time on innovative behaviour because it is outside the scope of employees' work, causes greater costs and is less likely to achieve results. Therefore, it is important to value the relationship between leaders and

their subordinates and to encourage innovative behaviour by giving employees support and recognition for innovation through advocacy and rewards.

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