



A Good Leader Reduces Followers' Knowledge Hiding: a Review of Influence and Explaining Mechanisms

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Abstract. This paper examines the influence mechanisms of different leadership styles on employees' knowledge-hiding behavior. A search of CNKI and subsequent screening yielded 21 articles for inclusion. The research revealed that participative, servant, transformational, ethical, and humble leadership can reduce knowledge hiding, while self-serving, exploitative, and differential leadership increase knowledge hiding. The influence of leadership styles on knowledge hiding is mediated by psychological safety, moral norms, and employee emotional exhaustion. Personal characteristics and organizational culture moderate the relationship between leadership styles and knowledge-hiding behavior. Future research should prioritize cross-cultural comparisons and incorporate more moderating variables.

Keywords: employee knowledge hiding; ethical leadership; differential leadership; psychological safety

1 Introduction

Employee knowledge hiding refers to the deliberate concealment or withholding of information by employees when faced with others' knowledge requests. Connelly et al. (2012) categorized knowledge hiding into intentional hiding, evasive hiding and rationalized hiding, thereby elucidating its various forms.^[1] This behavior is pervasive in the knowledge economy and hinders internal organizational knowledge sharing, negatively impacting technological innovation, and consequently garnering attention within Chinese academia. The definition, typologies, and theoretical underpinnings of knowledge hiding have been largely established (He & Jiang, 2014).^[2] Recent scholarship has broadened the scope of knowledge-hiding research to encompass its triggers, influence mechanisms, and consequences. New studies have further explored the role of factors such as leadership styles in knowledge hiding. However, the diversity of leadership styles and the continual emergence of new leadership styles have resulted in a fragmented body of research examining leadership styles as antecedents of employee knowledge hiding. Therefore, this paper reviews the literature published by Chinese scholars over the past decade concerning the influence of leadership styles on employee knowledge-hiding behavior. It systematically presents the mechanisms and effects of

different leadership styles on knowledge hiding across multiple dimensions, aiming to clarify the underlying influence pathways and logical relationships.

2 Literature Search Strategy

This study utilized CNKI as the primary search database, employing "knowledge hiding," "knowledge sharing," and "rationalized hiding" as search terms. The search encompassed publications up to October 2024, focusing on articles published in CSSCI-indexed journals. The PRISMA method guided the literature screening process. Ultimately, this study selected 21 Chinese articles. The specific process is illustrated in Figure 1.

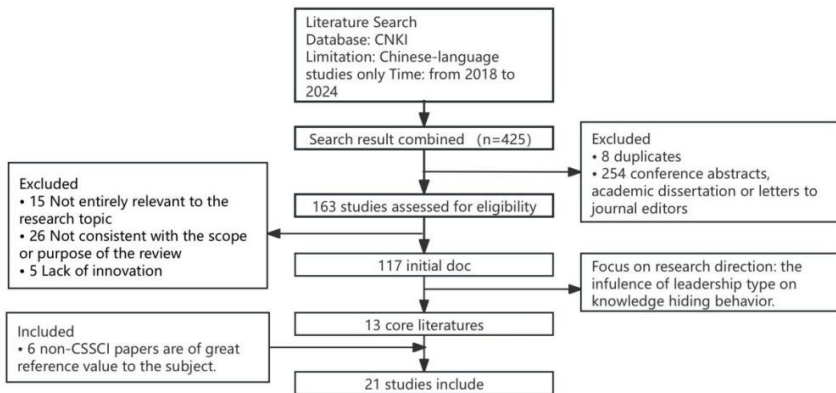


Fig. 1. Flowchart of Literature Search and Screening Process

3 The Influence of Leadership Styles on Knowledge Hiding

Existing research indicates that ethical, servant, and emotional leadership styles, among others, positively influence the reduction of employee knowledge hiding by fostering an organizational climate of trust and support. Conversely, negative leadership styles may incentivize knowledge hiding among employees.

3.1 Leadership Styles Negatively Associated with Knowledge Hiding

Positive and open leadership styles can effectively mitigate employee knowledge-hiding behavior. Ethical leadership, through moral exemplarity and the establishment of ethical norms, positively influences employee behavior, reducing negative reciprocity and the incidence of knowledge hiding (Song Ge, 2022).^[3] Servant leadership cultivates a harmonious and collaborative communication environment by enhancing overall personal qualities and judiciously implementing situational and

psychological empowerment, thereby increasing employees' willingness to share knowledge (Wang Yingdong, 2021).^[4] Jiang Rongping (2020) posited that transformational leadership, through motivating and encouraging innovation, diminishes employees' propensity for knowledge hiding.^[5] Similarly, employees operating under emotional leadership perceive that expressing and sharing knowledge does not entail negative consequences, thereby reducing knowledge-hiding behavior (Zhao Li & Huang Yueyue, 2022).^[6] Humble leadership, characterized by acknowledging personal limitations, valuing employee contributions, and fostering internal organizational interaction, inhibits knowledge hiding (Du Mei, 2018).^[7]

While acknowledging certain contextual limitations, these positive leadership styles offer organizations flexible management approaches, enabling managers to tailor their leadership strategies to organizational needs and employee characteristics to effectively promote knowledge sharing.

3.2 Leadership Styles Positively Associated with Knowledge Hiding

Existing research demonstrates that negative leadership styles contribute to employee knowledge hiding by eroding trust, fostering animosity, and creating perceptions of unfairness. Self-serving leaders prioritize personal gain over employee needs, diminishing employee trust in the organization and increasing negative reciprocity, prompting employees to engage in knowledge hiding as a response to the leader's self-centered behavior (Zhang Jing & Huang Ya, 2020).^[8] Exploitative leadership, characterized by high-pressure management and emotional control, compels employees to hide knowledge to safeguard their emotional resources (Liu Mingwei et al., 2023).^[9] Differential leadership, which entails disparate treatment of "in-group" and "out-group" members, exacerbates feelings of inequity among employees, particularly those in the "out-group," who may resort to knowledge hiding as a consequence of perceived unfair treatment (Yu Yongda & Xue Ying, 2021).^[10] Furthermore, Gong Shun and Chen Zijia (2023) found that abusive leadership, often manifested through public ridicule, insults, belittlement, or other forms of employee denigration, increases knowledge-hiding behaviors.^[11]

While self-serving, exploitative, and differential leadership styles are generally negatively associated with knowledge-hiding behavior, these studies offer valuable insights for organizational management.

3.3 Leadership Styles with Complex Effects on Knowledge Hiding

Different leadership styles can exert bidirectional or nonlinear effects on employee knowledge-hiding behavior within organizations. Narcissistic leaders, often characterized by sensitivity, suspicion, and self-interest, may foster a perception among employees that their resources are being withheld or are inaccessible, leading to increased knowledge hiding. However, the vision, risk-taking propensity, and innovative capacity of narcissistic leaders can also enhance employees' innovative self-efficacy and reduce knowledge hiding (Su Tao et al., 2024).^[12] Guo Yuanyuan et al. (2023) revealed that empowering leadership can bolster team member motivation, benefiting

organizational creativity and performance.^[13] However, differentiated empowerment, whereby empowerment is not uniformly distributed, can lead to perceptions of inequitable resource allocation, impacting trust and team dynamics, and influencing knowledge-hiding behavior. Participative leadership, which encourages employee involvement in decision-making and work-related discussions, generally reduces knowledge hiding. However, research suggests an inverted U-shaped relationship between participative leadership and knowledge hiding, indicating that moderate levels of participation decrease knowledge hiding, while excessive participation can induce role stress and inadvertently increase knowledge hiding (Liu Fang & Wang Han, 2024).^[14]

Although the bidirectional nature of leadership styles' influence has been acknowledged, the relative strength, significance, and hierarchical impact of different styles on employee behavior remain unclear.

4 Mediators of Leadership Styles' Influence on Knowledge Hiding

Multiple mediating mechanisms underlie the influence of leadership styles on knowledge hiding. Recent research has focused on psychological safety, moral norms, and employee exhaustion.

4.1 The Mediating Role of Psychological Safety

Psychological safety refers to the extent to which employees feel comfortable expressing themselves freely within the organization without fear of negative repercussions. High levels of psychological safety are typically associated with lower levels of knowledge hiding (Yu Chuanpeng et al., 2024).^[15] As a mediating variable, psychological safety shapes employees' perceptions of workplace safety, bridging the relationship between leadership styles and knowledge-hiding behavior. Research suggests that leadership styles indirectly influence employee knowledge hiding through their impact on psychological safety. When employees feel empowered to express their opinions without fear of negative consequences, knowledge hiding is less likely to occur. Conversely, negative leadership behaviors can significantly diminish psychological safety, making employees more prone to conceal knowledge to avoid potential negative repercussions (Zhao Linkai et al., 2024).^[16]

4.2 The Mediating Role of Moral Disengagement

Moral disengagement involves employees rationalizing unethical actions, such as knowledge hiding, to mitigate feelings of guilt and diminish their sense of moral responsibility. Ethical leadership, through modeling ethical conduct, encourages employees to adhere to organizational moral norms, thereby suppressing knowledge hiding (Cheng Bao et al., 2023).^[17] Conversely, when supervisors signal that knowledge hiding is acceptable, tolerated, or even expected, it can facilitate moral

disengagement and promote knowledge hiding. Furthermore, when employees perceive a sense of responsibility for organizational success, they are more inclined to share knowledge to support organizational goals (Zhao Hongdan & Jiang Jiarui, 2021).^[18]

4.3 The Mediating Role of Employee Exhaustion

When leadership styles create excessive work pressure, employees' emotional resources become depleted, potentially leading to emotional exhaustion and prompting employees to utilize knowledge hiding as a self-preservation strategy to prevent further emotional resource depletion (Gou Linyi, 2020).^[19] Knowledge hiding, in this context, serves as a coping mechanism employed by employees facing negative leadership styles to maintain their psychological well-being and achieve resource equilibrium. Conversely, when employees experience vitality, growth, and meaning in their work—a sense of work thriving—they are more likely to view knowledge sharing as an expression of self-worth, thereby reducing knowledge-hiding behavior (Wang Yingdong, 2021).^[4]

5 Moderators of Leadership Styles' Influence on Knowledge Hiding

Moderating factors play a crucial role in shaping the relationship between leadership styles and knowledge hiding. Research indicates that individual employee characteristics and organizational culture can moderate the impact of leadership styles on knowledge hiding.

5.1 The Moderating Effect of Individual Psychological Factors on Knowledge Hiding Behavior

Individual characteristics that moderate knowledge hiding include workplace loneliness, proactive personality, moral identity, power distance orientation, and psychological contract. Negative leadership styles can erode psychological safety and promote knowledge hiding, an effect exacerbated by workplace loneliness and psychological contract breach (Gong Shun & Chen Zijia, 2023).^[11] Different leadership styles can either encourage or discourage knowledge hiding by influencing moral disengagement or relationship management mechanisms. Specifically, individuals with a strong moral identity are more likely to adhere to ethical principles, thereby inhibiting knowledge hiding. Power distance orientation influences the degree to which individuals accept leadership authority. In high power distance contexts, employees are more likely to rationalize knowledge hiding through moral disengagement as a protective measure in the presence of authority figures (Zhao Hongdan & Jiang Jiarui, 2021).^[18] Furthermore, when employees perceive leadership styles as self-serving or unjust, it can lead to psychological contract breach, diminished trust, and increased insecurity, which can further amplify distrust, self-protective tendencies, and knowledge hiding (Yu

Chuanpeng et al., 2022).^[20] Additionally, employees with a proactive personality exhibit a more pronounced reduction in knowledge hiding when supported by positive leadership styles (Wang Yingdong, 2021).^[4]

5.2 The Moderating Effect of Organizational Culture on Knowledge Hiding Behavior

Organizational culture, encompassing trust, forgiveness, and competition, significantly moderates knowledge-hiding behavior. In high-trust environments, employees are more inclined to share knowledge and feel secure even under diverse leadership styles, reducing knowledge hiding (Guo Yuanyuan, 2021).^[13] Organizations with strong forgiveness cultures tolerate mistakes, and employees in these environments are less likely to engage in knowledge hiding even under exploitative leadership. Conversely, in low forgiveness cultures, employees may resort to knowledge hiding as a self-protective measure against high-pressure or exploitative leadership behaviors (Gou Linyi, 2020).^[19] In highly competitive organizational cultures, employees are more likely to hide knowledge to maintain a competitive edge (Zhang Jing & Huang Ya, 2020).^[8] In contrast, cooperative cultures foster greater knowledge sharing. Moreover, motivational climate plays a moderating role: a performance-oriented climate positively moderates the relationship between psychological safety and knowledge hiding, while a control-oriented climate negatively moderates this relationship (Wu Yangzi, 2022).^[21]

6 Conclusions

Prior research on knowledge hiding has primarily focused on the impact of various leadership styles on employee knowledge-hiding behavior, examining both positive leadership styles (e.g., participative, servant, transformational) and negative leadership styles (e.g., self-serving, exploitative, abusive) and their underlying mechanisms, with particular emphasis on the mediating roles of psychological safety, moral norms, and employee emotional exhaustion. Additionally, research has explored the moderating influence of employee characteristics and organizational culture on the relationship between leadership styles and knowledge hiding. Despite these advancements, several gaps remain. The potential competitive interplay between coexisting leadership styles warrants further investigation. Certain leadership styles, such as differential leadership, require further empirical validation across multiple samples and contexts to establish their robustness. Cross-cultural variations in the impact of leadership styles on knowledge hiding remain largely unexplored. Moreover, existing research often provides a general overview of the influence of leadership styles on knowledge hiding without delving into their specific effects on different dimensions of knowledge hiding (e.g., knowledge withholding, evasion, playing dumb). Future research should examine the interplay between different leadership styles, conduct cross-cultural comparisons, and test these complex mechanisms in real-world settings. Furthermore, future studies should investigate the differential impact of leadership styles on specific dimensions of

knowledge hiding and incorporate additional moderating variables, such as differences in knowledge hiding across different managerial levels.

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