Turning visions into results: unraveling the distinctive paths of leading with vision and autonomy to goal achievement

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Abstract

Purpose – Leading with vision while granting employees autonomy is one effective organizational response to the demands of a dynamic external environment. The former is thought to align followers' behavior by providing guidance, the latter to increase variance in their behavior by relinquishing control; both exert beneficial but distinct effects on organizational performance. What has remained uncharted heretofore is how these leader behaviors shape their followers' cognition and, subsequently, yield improvements in performance. The authors argue that a leader's vision communication transforms followers' cognitive representation of their work. This not only enables them to specify their goals in alignment with the vision (goal clarity) but also to locate the meaning of their work within the bigger picture of the vision (construal level). By contrast, perceived autonomy in terms of power-sharing might directly affect followers' work engagement more narrowly.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors tested the model on a sample of 408 employees from eleven enterprises of a holding company. In the survey, employees reported perceived vision communication and autonomy provided by their leader. Furthermore, the authors assessed the employees' goal attainment. To capture how employees represent their daily work activities, the authors measured their construal level and their goal clarity.

Findings – The results show that both perceived vision communication and granted autonomy improve employees' goal achievement. Moreover, two processes mediate the relationship between vision communication and goal achievement in followers: first, specifying goals in terms of clarity; second, composing a higher-level mental construal of their work. In contrast, no mediation of empowering leader behaviors was found.

Originality/value – Better goal achievement through visionary leadership is therefore achieved through cognitive alignment of followers, while leader-granted autonomy acts as a motivational tool directly on performance.

Keywords Autonomy, Goal achievement, Construal level, Empowering leadership, Visionary leadership

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction
Today's world is a VUCA world; it is characterized by high volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (Bennett and Lemoine, 2014). The ongoing augmentation of workplace demands and the accelerating cadence of technological innovations are mutually reinforcing. In a fast-changing knowledge economy that breeds disruptive technologies and business models (Li *et al.*, 2021), an agile workforce drives organizations' competitiveness. Organizations that aim to increase their agility can benefit from allowing their employees the flexibility to make decisions on their own, effectively granting them competencies that are typically reserved for leaders. At the same time, agile organizations need to ensure that their employees utilize the additional freedom in line with the company's goals. While allowing room for initiative increases the variance in employee behavior, making them adhere to the strategic vision reduces it. To address this seeming dilemma, leaders should respond to this challenge by providing both autonomy and direction, hence they should practice a leadership style that creates flexibility through empowering behaviors and alignment through visionary behaviors (Rosing *et al.*, 2011; Pearce, 2004). More pointedly stated that they should maintain control and let go of control (Kearney *et al.*, 2019).

Yet, although this leader-centric picture is supported by compelling evidence (Kearney *et al.*, 2019; Zacher *et al.*, 2016; Van Knippenberg and Stam, 2014; Berson *et al.*, 2015), it lacks the followers' perspective. Neither providing a vision (Berson and Halevy, 2014) nor granting autonomy (Wong and Giessner, 2018) by a leader necessarily results in better goal achievement by followers. The missing link that connects leader behavior to its desired outcomes are the followers and their way of making sense of how they perceive their leader's behavior (Brown, 2018; Hollander, 1958; Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978; Lord and Emrich, 2000). Leadership is a bidirectional process between leaders and followers, wherein followers are not merely passive recipients, but active agents who make sense of the abundant information they are exposed to (Bandura, 1986; Grant and Ashford, 2008; Lord *et al.*, 2020). Thus, leader behavior is an important input for followers in the workplace, but its outcomes depend on how followers perceive, interpret and act upon it (Brown, 2018; Lord *et al.*, 2020). While visionary and empowering leadership are effective organizational responses to the demands of a dynamic environment, followers' cognitions can be an important but hitherto neglected impediment or reinforcement to their effectiveness.

The present study aims to examine how followers' information processing translates perceived leader behaviors into improved performance. More specifically, we examine how perceived visionary and empowering leader behaviors shape the cognitive representations of work activity in their followers and thus facilitate performance benefits. We capture followers' cognitive representations of work activity through the way followers specify the goals of their daily activities (goal clarity) and generalize to the overarching purpose of their activities (construal level). We conducted a study among employees of eleven companies of a holding company to examine the degrees to which both activities influence the connection between leader behaviors and goal achievement.

Our research contributes to the current literature in three important ways. First, connecting with previous work (Kohles *et al.*, 2012; Wong and Giessner, 2018), we use a follower-centric approach to vision communication and granting autonomy (Brown, 2018). Rather than focusing on leader behavior or its perception, we take a look at the way followers' information processing (level of construal, goal clarity) is influenced by either empowering or visionary leader behaviors. By doing so we connect followers' perceptions of empowering and visionary leader behaviors by followers not only to goal setting theory (Locke, 1999; Locke and Latham, 2002) but also to construal level theory (Trope and Liberman, 2010; Wiesenfeld *et al.*, 2017).

Second, the study contributes to our understanding of how vision communication and granting autonomy affects follower effectiveness. We examine two distinct pathways,

namely the clarity of the followers' goals and the abstractness of the followers' representations of their work activities. Both might influence the relationship between followers' reception of a leaders' vision, granted autonomy and their goal achievement (Kohles *et al.*, 2012; Raub and Robert, 2010).

Third, we elucidate the distinct effects of empowering and visionary leader behaviors on followers' cognition. This is an important contribution because both leadership styles have been conceptualized in overlapping ways in the past, resulting in redundancy between both repertoires of behaviors (Banks *et al.*, 2016; Van Knippenberg and Sitkin, 2013). For example, behaviors such as communicating information about the overall organizational goals are conceptualized and assessed as empowering leader behaviors (Arnold, 2000; Amundsen and Martinsen, 2014; Li *et al.*, 2021; Kim and Beehr, 2020), which conflates visionary and empowering leadership and thus makes it difficult to examine their distinctive effects on followers.

2. Theory and hypothesis
2.1 Visionary leadership
"You've got to think about big things while you're doing small things so that all the small things go in the right direction" (Toffler, 1970). A vision is a tangible representation of the company's long-term goals, effectively describing its idealized future state (Van Knippenberg and Stam, 2014; Yukl and Gardner, 2020). By communicating a clear vision, the leader provides an umbrella under which followers set goals, which are thus aligned with the overall, strategic, long-term goals (Westley and Mintzberg, 1989). Therefore, a compelling vision fosters alignment of followers' activities with the organization's proposed end-state, rather than leaving the objective of an organization's activities open (Koryak *et al.*, 2018). A clear vision helps to coordinate the actions of the people within an organization (Carton *et al.*, 2014; Gordon and Martin, 2019; Stam *et al.*, 2014).

The reasons why a vision matters when leading an organization have been shown in many studies and across a plethora of outcomes, such as organizational change (Venus *et al.*, 2018; Westley and Mintzberg, 1989), company growth (Filion, 1991) and follower performance (Berson *et al.*, 2015; Kearney *et al.*, 2019). For example, Baum *et al.* (1998) show in a study on smaller, strongly growth-oriented organizations that the boards of the fastest-growing companies also led in the most visionary way (Baum *et al.*, 2001). Visionary leadership is most often operationalized in these studies as the specific behavior of communicating the vision. Therefore, it is not the mere existence of a vision that influences followers, but the effective communication of it (Kirkpatrick, 2009). Once the vision has been effectively communicated to and received by the followers, they internalize it. In other words, followers' self-image gets connected with the collective's future (Griffith *et al.*, 2018; Howell and Shamir, 2005; Shamir *et al.*, 1993). The appealing vision for the organization's future becomes the lens through which each follower sees their own possible future self (Stam *et al.*, 2014). This way, a leader's communication of a vision motivates followers to increase their efforts in order to realize the idealized future of their organization (Carton *et al.*, 2014; Kirkpatrick, 2016). These reasons lie at the heart of why envisioning has largely been considered as a hallmark of successful leadership (Baum *et al.*, 1998; Berson *et al.*, 2015, 2016; Greer *et al.*, 2012; Halevy *et al.*, 2011; Kohles *et al.*, 2012; Nanus, 1995). Moreover, the benefits of leading with vision have been demonstrated both in studies that include leader and follower perceptions of vision communication (Kopperud *et al.*, 2014) and in experimental intervention studies, where a higher degree of visionary behaviors consistently lead to better outcomes (Antonakis *et al.*, 2011; Meslec *et al.*, 2020; Ernst *et al.*, 2021).

H1. Visionary leadership is positively related to individual goal achievement, such that higher visionary leadership is associated with higher goal achievement.

2.2 Empowering leadership

Empowering leaders give autonomy to their followers and support their development (Conger and Kanungo, 1988; Lorinkova *et al.*, 2012; Zhang and Bartol, 2010). In short, it involves a shift of power from leaders to highly skilled followers, who can make decisions independently and autonomously in their daily work (Amundsen and Martinsen, 2015), while leaders remain available as coaches and provide the necessary resources (Cho *et al.*, 2020; Kirkman and Rosen, 1999). This granting of autonomy through delegation of responsibility and authority distinguishes empowering leadership from other leadership styles and represents the core of empowering leadership (Thomas and Velthouse, 1990; Vecchio *et al.*, 2010). The other behaviors such as giving direction and motivating might serve to channel followers' autonomous activities in the right direction (Gonzalez-Mulé *et al.*, 2016).

Empowered employees plan their own daily activities and set their own goals, making them feel an increased sense of ownership (Ryan and Deci, 2000) and strengthening their task involvement (Zhang and Bartol, 2010). Further, it positively affects engagement, intrinsic motivation (Tang *et al.*, 2020), self-efficacy and commitment (Jung *et al.*, 2020; Zhang and Zhou, 2014). Therefore, empowering leadership is associated with improved performance outcomes at both the individual (Kearney *et al.*, 2019; Raub and Robert, 2010; Vecchio *et al.*, 2010; Zhang and Bartol, 2010) and team level (Chen *et al.*, 2011; Lorinkova *et al.*, 2012; Martin *et al.*, 2013). Moreover, previous studies show that both leader-reported and follower-perceived empowering behaviors predict their beneficial effects on work outcomes (Tekleab *et al.*, 2008), the causality of which has been proven experimentally (Martin *et al.*, 2013; Lorinkova *et al.*, 2012). In summary, granting autonomy may motivate followers to dedicate themselves more strongly to the achievement of their work objectives, leading to improved performance.

H2. Leader-granted autonomy is positively related to individual goal achievement, such that higher degree of leader-granted autonomy is associated with higher goal achievement.

Potential downsides of empowering behaviors must be considered cautiously. Followers left leaderless may lack direction, engendering ungracious views of their leaders (Wong and Giessner, 2018). Empowering behaviors, above all the granting of too much autonomy, may easily be perceived by followers as a lack of leadership. If it is interpreted as leadership avoidance on the part of the manager, it will adversely affect follower outcomes (Cheong *et al.*, 2016; Humborstad and Kuvaas, 2013; Lorinkova *et al.*, 2012; Martin *et al.*, 2013; Yun *et al.*, 2006). Empowering leaders thus risk self-exacerbating coordination problems (Yukl and Gardner, 2020). It is therefore not surprising that some studies have found negative consequences of empowering leader behaviors, such as lower team performance (Cordery *et al.*, 2010) or lower employee satisfaction (Maynard *et al.*, 2007).

2.3 Visionary and empowering leader behaviors and followers' goal clarity

Both visionary and empowering behaviors do not necessarily deliver positive results for the organization: it is the followers who respond to the leader's behavior that create results. But it is unknown how these distinct leadership styles influence the cognition of followers in a way that allows beneficial effects to emerge. Follower-centric approaches to leadership emphasize the importance of how followers construct meaning from information in the workplace (Lord *et al.*, 2020; Brown, 2018). In other words, how they cognitively represent themselves, their activities and their workplace (Jennings *et al.*, 2021). Activities are mobilized by cognitively represented goals. Goal setting theory posits that goals exert a directional influence on behavior and regulate the effort exerted to achieve them (Locke and Latham, 2019). Therefore, clear goals focus both attention and efforts on activities relevant to the achievement of the

goal (Locke and Latham, 2002). Also, activities that are not necessary to achieve such goals tend to be curtailed, and performance is improved compared to more general "give your best" goals (Berson *et al.*, 2015; Jing *et al.*, 2020). This is because clarity about one's goals reduces the uncertainty associated with vague goals and provides a benchmark for followers' self-directed performance assessment. In this way, clear, specific goals can be used to achieve greater focus, with the commitment to achieving such goals increasing concomitantly (Berson *et al.*, 2015; Locke and Latham, 1984). Furthermore, actions are directed towards goals that have not yet been achieved, so that the work input is increased to reduce the tension between the current state and the desired end-state (Barsky, 2008).

Granting autonomy may instill a sense of self-determination (Ryan and Deci, 2000), hence leading to followers being more motivated to engage with preexisting goals, but it does not provide guidance. Although empowered followers have the freedom to set goals on their own, these individual goals are not necessarily aligned with the bigger picture, leading to a higher level of goal diversity and, in turn, to ambiguity rather than clarity (Nederveen Pieterse *et al.*, 2019). In a worst-case scenario, followers use their autonomy for activities that are not conducive to the overarching goals of the organization. Therefore, care must be taken to ensure that followers' interpretations are aligned with organizational goals and that there are no misinterpretations that could lead activities in the wrong direction (Yukl and Gardner, 2020). By contrast, a vision serves as a guiding star, making sure that leaders and followers move in the same direction. After a clear vision is communicated, followers are shown how they can contribute to achieving that vision. Although a vision describes an abstract goal on a time horizon far longer than typical operational goals, it can improve goal clarity. For example, if the vision is "to achieve excellent financial returns through absolutely reliable, fast, punctual and competitive transportation of high priority goods and documents" (FedEx), this is more reliable and stable than the specific, short-term goal of delivering a certain number of packages per day; the latter can be affected, limited or prevented by a variety of factors. As the vision remains the same it increases planning reliability and enables a more focused approach that helps followers to clarify their goals. In fact, a vision is an effective tool for aligning an organization's activities at every level (Koryak *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, we argue that communicating a vision promotes goal clarity.

Once followers comprehend the leaders' vision, they see which goals and activities are useful to the vision and which are not. Improved goal clarity directs the attention of followers towards the relevant activities that are necessary to achieve the vision. This also lets them refrain from activities that are not contributing to the achievement of the shared vision, thereby helping to avoid any waste. Followers who succeed in gaining more clarity about their goals through the vision may deliver better results. In contrast, those followers who fail to let the vision inform their action plans may perform worse. Correspondingly, improved goal clarity might support followers' goal achievement (Locke and Latham, 2019).

H3. Visionary leadership is positively related to goal clarity, such that higher visionary leadership is associated with higher goal clarity.

H4. Goal clarity indirectly influences the relationship between visionary leadership and goal achievement, such that higher visionary leadership leads to higher goal clarity and thus to higher goal achievement.

2.4 Visionary and empowering leader behaviors and followers' construal level
Being able to clearly represent the goals of one's activity does not prevent followers from short-term thinking. Metaphorically speaking, a person inside a forest will only recognize individual trees, while the entire forest only becomes visible from a distance. In a similar manner, followers need to shift the cognitive representation of their work activities away

from being myopic and concrete towards being more abstract, embedding their work in a bigger picture. The concept of different abstract and distal representations of an activity is formulated in construal level theory (Trope and Liberman, 2010; Wiesenfeld *et al.*, 2017). In this framework it is assumed that greater mental distance helps grasp the big picture (high-level construals), while a lesser distance is more intimately linked to details and to a shorter temporal horizon (low-level construals; Trope and Liberman, 2010). The construal level theory not only considers spatial distance but also other dimensions, such as abstractness, temporal distance or social distance (Gilead *et al.*, 2018).

The vision leaders provide is the idealized future end state of an organization; as such, it is abstract and distant in time (Carton *et al.*, 2014; Kirkpatrick, 2009). We argue that followers respond to a leader's vision communication by adapting their construal level from a lower, present-oriented construal of their work towards a higher, future-oriented construal level (Berson *et al.*, 2015; Vanderstukken *et al.*, 2019). The communication of a temporally distant desirable goal like a vision requires followers to focus on the big picture rather than on the details of working on one narrow goal followed by the next one (Berson *et al.*, 2015). Therefore, building a higher-level construal of their activities enables followers to connect their daily work with the leader's vision, causing them to experience meaning at work. This sense of meaning and purpose at work might build up followers' intrinsic motivation and thus inspire efforts to implement a leader's vision (Barrick *et al.*, 2012; Lepisto and Pratt, 2016; Carton *et al.*, 2014). Followers who are unable to redirect attention away from minute details, lower-level goals or proximal outcomes may get overstrained by visionary leader behaviors and perform worse. Those who are able to adapt their construal level, however, might plan their actions to be aligned with the overarching vision and experience meaning in their work, both of which lead to improved performance (Berson *et al.*, 2015).

H5. Visionary leadership is positively related to construal level, such that higher visionary leadership is associated with a higher construal level.

H6. Construal level will indirectly influence the relationship between visionary leadership and goal achievement, such that higher visionary leadership leads to higher construal level and thus to higher goal achievement.

3. Method and design
3.1 Design and procedure
To test the hypotheses, employees of eleven corporations of a holding company participated in an online survey that captured, first, their cognitive representations of their work activities and goals via their construal level and goal clarity; second, the degree to which they perceived their leader to grant autonomy and to communicate the vision to them; third, their self-reported level of goal achievement; and lastly, sociodemographic and organizational variables.

Since the companies were not uniformly German-speaking, the questionnaire survey platform offered the option of switching between different languages. The survey translation was provided by professional translators in German, English, Polish and Lithuanian. The link to the survey was sent out centrally by the University of — to show anonymity and independence. All items were measured on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*.

3.2 Sample
The final sample consisted of 408 participants (151 female; 257 male), whose age ranged from 16 to 75 years, $M = 45.95$, SD = 12.21. They were distributed between companies throughout

Europe and across different industries. Represented industries included insurance, retail, law, energy, manufacturing, engineering, chemical and various other types of services, with 52% of the respondents working in Germany and 33% in Switzerland or Austria. The remaining 15% were distributed among Poland and Lithuania. All participants gave informed consent to the use of their responses for research purposes.

3.3 Measures
To examine our research question in a cross-sectional design, it is important to emphasize the conceptual independence and distinctiveness of the constructs we consider. The constructs included in the model and their measurements are independent both in theory and in their operationalization in the questionnaires. For example, not only is it possible for leaders to grant autonomy without articulating a vision, but they can also provide a vision without either involving their followers in the decision-making or delegating the responsibility or leadership tasks to them (Kearney *et al.*, 2019). The same holds true for goal clarity and construal level: having a higher goal clarity does not necessarily engender having a lower construal level as well. Followers who adopt a lower construal level are overly focused on details and the present moment, whereas followers with a higher goal clarity have a clear understanding of what is expected from them, allowing them to navigate their behavior effectively (Berson *et al.*, 2015).

3.3.1 Leading through vision. We measured followers' perception of their leader's vision communication using six items that were established through prior research (De Luque *et al.*, 2008; Kearney *et al.*, 2019; Podsakoff *et al.*, 1990). All items capture only the leader's observable behavior of communicating a vision in order to avoid conflating visionary and empowering leader behaviors. We avoided adjectives that could influence the respondents positively, like "inspiring," "optimistic," or "compelling" (Kearney *et al.*, 2019). Respondents were asked about the extent to which their leader "talks about the future," "communicates a clear idea about what should be accomplished," "has a clear idea about what the future should look like," "communicates his/her vision of the future," and "states clearly where we are going." We calculated Cronbach's alpha values to assess the scales' reliability ($\alpha = 0.94$).

3.3.2 Leading through autonomy. To measure follower-perceived leader-granted autonomy, we used a selection of items from the empowering leadership scale (Amundsen and Martinsen, 2014). To extract only those items that are relevant to granting autonomy, we conducted an unrestricted maximum-likelihood factor analysis to reveal the instruments two-dimensionality and excluded the items that did display cross-loadings. As previously criticized, the measurement of empowering leadership includes generic, positively worded items that fit the stereotype of successful leadership but do not describe leadership behavior more concretely (Alvesson, 2020). The factor loadings obtained through the exploratory factor analysis revealed that these generically and positively phrased items were indeed not attributable to either factor. The final measure comprised four items. Further support for these four items is provided by an inductive analysis of the content. Respondents were asked to what extent their leader "conveys that I shall take responsibility" or "enables me to start tasks on my own initiative" ($\alpha = 0.91$).

3.3.3 Goal clarity. Goal clarity was measured using seven items based on the Goal Setting Questionnaire (Locke and Latham, 1984; Putz and Lehner, 2002; Kwan *et al.*, 2013). Specifically, the items asked how precisely the respondent knew "what I am supposed to do on my job," "by when I must have achieved my goals," or "how performance in the workplace is assessed" ($\alpha = 0.84$).

3.3.4 Construal level. Construal level was measured using four items that directly assess key elements like the level's abstractness and meaning (Trope and Liberman, 2010; Venus *et al.*, 2018). Respondents were asked to which extent they are "focused on the big picture

rather than on details" or "focused on the general meaning or overall effect of my work" ($\alpha = 0.78$).

3.3.5 Goal achievement. The measure for goal achievement was based on a self-assessment asking respondents about the extent to which their performance met their expectations (Walumbwa *et al.*, 2008). It was assessed on a five-point Likert scale ranging from $1 = way$ *below expectations* to $5 = way\ above\ expectations$. An exemplary item reads "How well did you achieve the work targets you agreed upon with your supervisor?" ($\alpha = 0.75$).

3.3.6 Control variables. Given the broad range of organizations represented in our sample, we included age and organizational tenure as control variables. Due to local data protection restrictions, the values could only be collected in groups and it was not possible to additionally collect the respondents' gender. Using hierarchical regression analyses, we found none of the control variables to be associated with visionary leadership or autonomy, but the effects of both leadership behaviors were significant (see also Amundsen and Martinsen, 2014).

3.3.7 Confirmatory factor analysis. To further ensure the discriminant validity of our scales and to control for common method bias, we performed confirmatory factor analysis. The expected five-factor model (visionary leadership, leader-granted autonomy, goal clarity, construal level and goal achievement) yielded an adequate fit to the data (χ^2 [200] = 576.89, $p < 0.001$; RMSEA = 0.07; CFI = 0.93), that was better than the fit of alternative models; for example, compared to a four-factor model combining visionary leadership and leader-granted autonomy as one factor, χ^2 [204] = 1068.85, $p < 0.001$; RMSEA = 0.10; CFI = 0.83. In summary, these CFA results confirm the discriminant validity. To test the potential effects of a common method bias, Harman's single factor test was performed (Podsakoff and Organ, 1986). The results show that the proportion of resolved variance is 38.88%, indicating that a single common factor did not account for the majority of the variance (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). To further substantiate this result, we calculated partial correlations following the recommendation of Lindell and Whitney (2001). As construal level showed the lowest significant correlations with the criterion goal achievement (see Table 1), we used this factor for controlling common method variance (CMV) via partial correlations. Controlling for CMV reduced the significant correlation of all variables. However, the correlations of visionary leadership, autonomy and goal clarity with the criterion remained statistically significant even when CMV is controlled, and they are in line with the correlations shown in Table 1.

4. Results

To test our hypotheses, we analyzed our data in three steps. First, the relationships between visionary leadership, granted autonomy, construal level, goal clarity and goal achievement were determined by calculating the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients. Next, we calculated ordinary least squares linear regression models to further test hypotheses 1 and 2 using SPSS 26. To test hypothesis 4 and hypothesis 6, which proposed an indirect effect on follower goal achievement by construal level and goal clarity, respectively, we

Table 1.
Means, standard deviations and Pearson product-moment correlations for visionary leadership, autonomy, goal clarity, construal level and goal achievement

Variable		M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1.	Vision communication	3.39	0.94	–				
2.	Autonomy	3.62	0.86	0.54[*]	–			
3.	Goal clarity	3.77	0.74	0.62[*]	36[*]	–		
4.	Construal level	3.36	0.72	0.29[*]	0.22[*]	0.23[*]	–	
5.	Goal achievement	3.26	0.66	0.22[*]	0.24[*]	0.23[*]	0.16[*]	–
Note(s): $N = 408$, [*]$p < 0.001$, reliabilities are presented along the diagonal parentheses								

performed regression analyses with the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2018). Our research model corresponded to model four in PROCESS. Correlations, reported as r, are considered a small effect if $r = \pm 0.10$, a medium effect if $r = \pm 0.30$ and a large effect if $r = \pm 0.50$. Rather than making a distinction between partial and full mediation (Preacher and Kelley, 2011) we focus on the indirect effects.

Finally, to test the hypotheses comprehensively, we conducted structured equation modeling using AMOS (version 26). To ensure model fit, we followed Kline's (2005) recommendation and calculated descriptive measures as (1) the Chi-square test statistics with the corresponding degrees of freedom and significance levels; (2) RMSEA with the corresponding 90% confidence interval, for which values lower than 0.05 indicate a close fit, values between 0.05 and 0.08 indicate a fair fit, values between 0.08 and 0.10 indicate a moderate fit, and values larger than 0.10 indicate a poor fit (Browne and Cudeck, 1993). We also calculated the ratio of chi-square value to degrees of freedom (Marsh *et al.*, 1988). Ratios in the range between 3 and 2 indicate an acceptable agreement between the model and the sample data (Arbuckle, 2007, p. 589). Furthermore, comparative measures of the increased model fit between the proposed and the independence model were computed (TLI, sufficient fit ≥0.95, good fit ≥0.97, Browne and Cudeck, 1993; Hu and Bentler, 1999).

First, correlational analyses revealed a link between visionary leadership and goal achievement ($r = 0.22$, $p < 0.001$; Table 1; Figure 1 for an overview). This finding supports hypothesis 1, which predicted visionary leadership to promote followers' goal achievement. Second, granted autonomy correlated with goal achievement ($r = 0.24$, $p \leq 0.001$), supporting our second hypothesis. The correlation between goal clarity and visionary leadership ($r = 0.62$, $p \leq 0.001$) provided evidence supporting hypothesis 3. Second, to further substantiate hypothesis 3, we performed ordinary squares linear regression analyses. The results showed that higher visionary leadership ($\beta = 0.67$, $p < 0.001$), but not more autonomy granted by the leader ($\beta = 0.01$, $p = 0.971$; see Figure 2), led to higher goal clarity. Therefore, hypothesis 3 was supported, which states that leaders' vision communication improves followers' goal clarity.

Further correlational analyses supported the relationship between visionary leadership and construal level ($r = 0.29$, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, visionary leadership could further direct the view and focus of followers more towards a higher construal level. Testing hypothesis 5 we found a significant effect of visionary leadership on construal level ($\beta = 0.27$, $p < 0.001$), but not for autonomy ($\beta = 0.10$, $p = 0.157$; see Figure 2). Therefore, we conclude that providing a vision leads to a higher construal of work activities among followers.

To test the indirect effects between vision communication and goal achievement, we performed analysis using PROCESS (Hayes, 2018; Table 2). Higher visionary leadership led to higher goal clarity ($\beta = 0.62$, $p < 0.001$), and higher goal clarity led to higher goal achievement ($\beta = 0.16$, $p = 0.014$). This evidence supported the indirect effect of goal clarity in the relationship between visionary leadership and goal achievement, thus supporting hypothesis 4.

Regarding hypothesis 6, the results revealed the indirect effect of construal level on goal achievement ($\beta = 0.10$; $p = 0.037$). Higher visionary leadership thus led to a broader, more general perspective ($\beta = 0.19$; $p = 0.002$), which in turn led to higher goal achievement, lending full support to hypothesis 6.

In the third step, we combined visionary leadership and granted autonomy in a structural equation model and tested whether performance was predicted by these leadership behaviors. The model is shown in Figure 3. We report standardized coefficients for the structural equation model. The observed data confirmed the structural equation model by sufficient fit ($\chi^2[200] = 577$, $p < 0.001$, χ^2/df = 2.88; RMSEA = 0.07; TLI = 0.93). The results thus confirmed the distinct positive effect of autonomy ($\beta = 0.13$, $p < 0.001$) and the indirect effect of visionary leadership ($\beta = -0.01$, $p = 0.879$) through goal clarity and construal level.
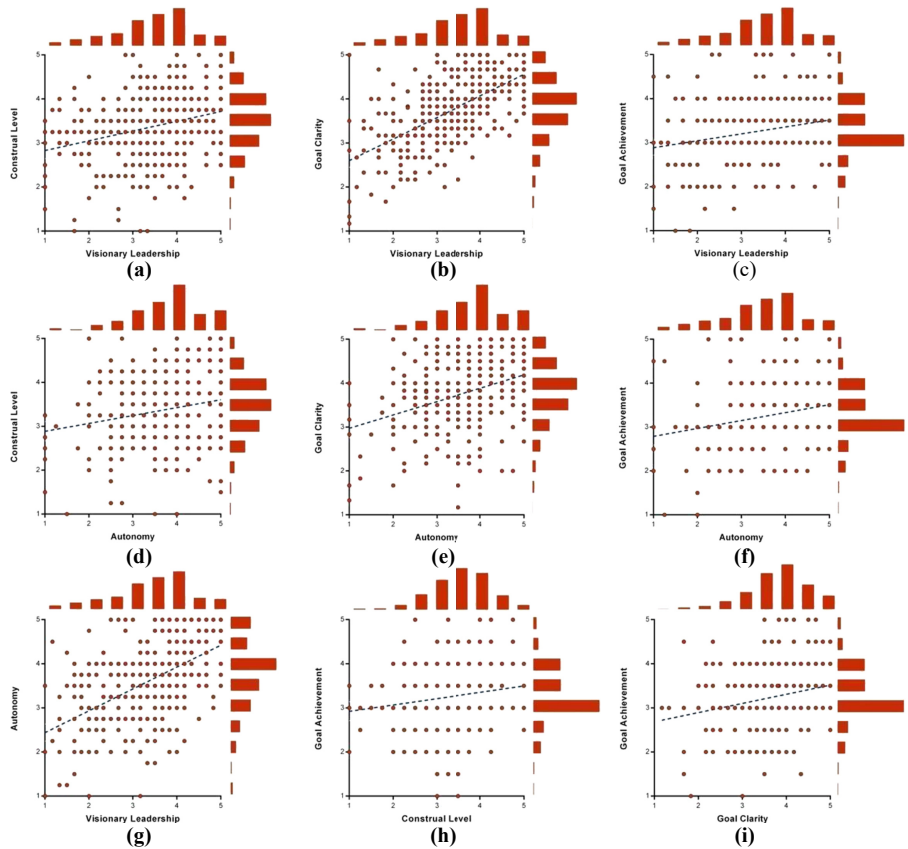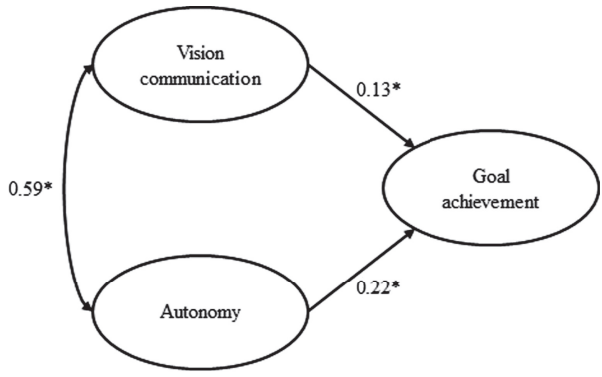
Figure 1.
Correlations are
displayed between
vision communication
(A, B, C, G), autonomy
(D, E, F, G), construal
level (A, D, H), goal
clarity (B, E, I) and goal
achievement (C, F, H, I)

Note(s): The unstandardized values ($N = 408$) are displayed with linear regressions and a 95% confidence interval. Histograms on either side of the graphs denote relative frequency distributions

This effect is particularly interesting, since visionary leadership increased goal clarity ($\beta = 0.52$, $p < 0.001$) and construal level ($\beta = 0.25$, $p < 0.001$). In summary, greater autonomy had a direct effect on performance without goal clarity or construal level, meaning that more autonomy led to greater goal achievement. In contrast, there was a positive indirect effect of visionary leadership through goal clarity and construal level, which is in support of hypothesis 6.

5. Discussion
Leadership behaviors can be found anywhere on the antipodal continuum between retaining control and relinquishing control (Waldman and Bowen, 2016); they either narrow the variance in employee behavior through alignment or increase the variance through more discretion (Cheong *et al.*, 2019; Hannah *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, the adaptive use of these two distinctive repertoires of leader behaviors is effective when followers need to make swift and independent decisions but their actions need to remain aligned with the strategic goals of the organization at the same time. The present results show that followers who perceive their

(a)
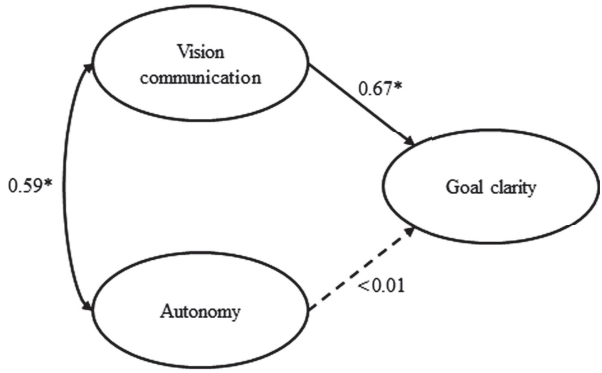
(b)
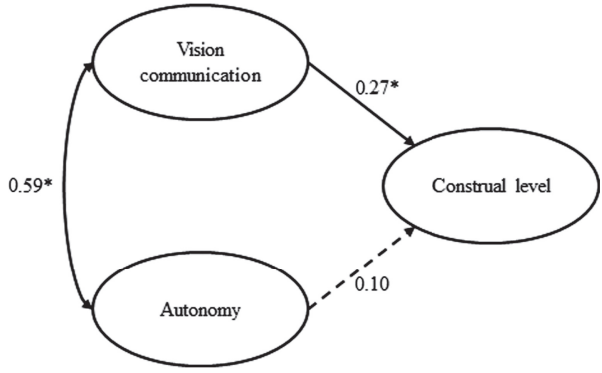
(c)

Note(s): Standardized coefficient estimates are displayed, $N = 408$,
$*p < 0.001$

leaders as both communicating a vision and granting autonomy have a greater confidence in their goal achievement (hypothesis 1, hypothesis 2). At the same time, the findings indicate that the performance gains attributable to perceived vision communication can be explained through the way this behavior changes followers' cognition. More specifically, results suggest that an increase in perceived vision communication led followers to build a clearer understanding of the goals of their work activity (hypothesis 3). This cognitive alignment in followers also improved their results (hypothesis 4). Beyond this, leaders' visionary aspirations led followers to build a higher construal of their work activities (hypothesis 5), which then can benefit their performance (hypothesis 6). Both changes in followers' information processing explain how vision communication translates into performance improvement. To conclude, results show visionary leadership to provide guidance to followers, which enables them to understand their daily work activities more thoroughly, both on an abstract and a specific level. In other words, perceiving a leaders' vision led followers first, to *abstract* a general meaning from their actions, and second, to specify clear individual goals to guide their actions (Berson *et al.*, 2015, 2016; Kearney *et al.*, 2019). In contrast, granting autonomy boosts performance but does not provide guidance, neither at an abstract nor at a specific level (Zhang and Bartol, 2010).

Effect	SE (HC3)	T	p	LLCI	ULCI	Effect	SE (HC3)	T	p	LLCI	ULCI
0.09	0.05	1.98	0.048	0.01	0.18	0.14	0.04	3.27	0.001	0.05	0.22
Mediator	Effect	SE		LLCI	ULCI	Mediator	Effect	SE		LLCI	ULCI
Goal clarity	0.10	0.04		0.02	0.17	Construal level	0.03	0.015		0.01	0.06

Table 2.
Direct and indirect effects of vision communication on goal achievement

Note(s): Number of bootstrap samples for calculating 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals 50,000, *N* = 408
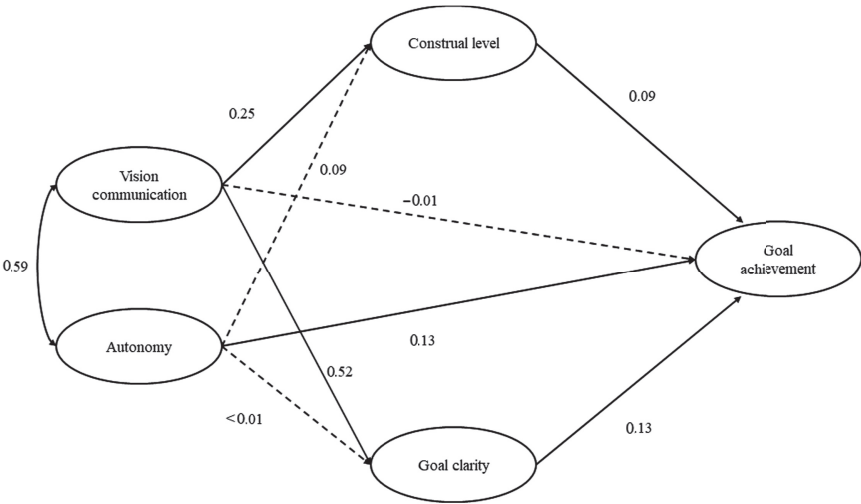
Figure 3.
Structural equation model of the effects of construal level and goal clarity on the relationship between perceived leader behaviors and goal achievement

Note(s): Standardized coefficient estimates are displayed, *N* = 408

Our findings offer an insight into a core process of visionary leadership: the route of followers' information processing, which ties the perception of the leader's behavior to its results (Brown, 2018; Lord *et al.*, 2020). More specifically, our results reveal two distinct mechanisms through which visionary leaders change their followers' cognition and thus facilitate performance gains: not only do followers represent their activity at a higher construal level, but they also represent their activity with improved clarity. First, leaders who provide a vision stimulate their followers to shift the perception of their daily operations from regarding them as a mere chain of unrelated chores towards apprising each of them as one of many required steps on the path to create a better future. As a consequence, followers understand how they help achieve the organization's long-term vision through their work (Stillman *et al.*, 2018), resulting in better goal achievement; a notion that is supported by our findings. The experience of contributing to the achievement of an appealing vision could then connect the leader's vision with the followers' self-concept, turning the image of the organization's future into the followers' image of their own desired future (Stam *et al.*, 2014). Perceiving their work activities as embedded in the overarching vision permits followers to experience a sense of meaning in their work (Strange and Mumford, 2005; Van Knippenberg, 2020). It is this connection that is supposed to underlie the beneficial effects of visionary leadership on individual and team performance and could therefore account for our findings (Howell and Shamir, 2005; Shamir *et al.*, 1993). If followers succeed in *generalizing*, i.e. in shifting their focus from the details of their actions to the greater whole, the vision grows from being an element of strategic management into being an effective tool for leading people.

Second, acting as a stable reference point, leaders' vision increases planning reliability and enables a more focused approach, which enables followers to clarify and align their goals (Kirkpatrick, 2009). Thereby a vision forms a common umbrella for the individual efforts of followers. In fact, our results show that vision communication by leaders increases the clarity of goals among followers (Kearney *et al.*, 2019). Followers might thus be enabled to evaluate autonomously whether an activity contributes to the shared vision or not, the latter case prompting them to change their current activities to be in line with the vision and to refrain from those which are not (Latham and Locke, 1991). Thereby, the vision can prevent excessive diversity of goals and increase focus among followers (Nederveen Pieterse *et al.*, 2019; Locke and Latham, 2019). Providing followers with a clear understanding of what to do and what not to do facilitates their goal achievement. Therefore, leaders who provide a vision enable their followers to *specify*.

The finding that leading with autonomy boosts followers' performance is consistent with prior evidence on the beneficial effects of empowering leadership on various individual and organizational outcomes (Chen *et al.*, 2011; Lorinkova *et al.*, 2012; Martin *et al.*, 2013; Raub and Robert, 2010; Vecchio *et al.*, 2010; Zhang and Bartol, 2010). This finding fits well with a long-established principle of occupational psychology regarding job characteristics necessary to imbue activities with an intrinsically motivating quality (Hackman and Oldham, 1976; Simonet *et al.*, 2019; Wang *et al.*, 2020; Spreitzer, 1995). Self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000) assumes that the more autonomy followers are granted, the more self-determination they experience and the higher their work engagement will be. In fact, Humphrey *et al.* (2007) found autonomy to be the single best motivational characteristic and predictor for objective performance. Interestingly, in contrast to previous findings, our results question earlier evidence on leaders' promotion of autonomy resulting in increased goal clarity among followers (Kearney *et al.*, 2019). More specifically, our results show no effect of granting autonomy on followers' understanding of their goals or their ability to embed their goals into a bigger whole. This lack of an effect of granting autonomy on followers' cognitive representations of their work activities is not surprising. Leading with autonomy does not provide followers with any information that could guide their work-related cognitions. Therefore, we conclude that being granted autonomy by empowering

leaders is a conducive but not sufficient criterion for organizational progress: Autonomy can increase followers' motivation, adaptability and sovereignty, but without knowing the direction they should be moving towards, their efforts may be exerted in vain (Nederveen Pieterse *et al.*, 2019; Yukl and Gardner, 2020).

6. Practical implications
Our findings highlight the importance of a follower-centric perspective (Lord *et al.*, 2020). Proven leader behaviors do not necessarily translate into beneficial outcomes; rather their influence on followers is critical for the achievement of desired results (Brown, 2018). Therefore, beyond the use of visionary leader behaviors, leaders should ensure that followers can grasp their vision and extract information from it. Our findings show that followers can use this information to specify their work activity and embed it in a larger purpose (Van Knippenberg, 2020). Vision communication, therefore, acts as a form of cognitive restructuring that causes observable behavioral changes (Boyatzis and Akrivou, 2006). Leaders should therefore formulate a vision and then communicate it to their followers repeatedly (Van Knippenberg and Stam, 2014). The frequency of the message, the channel of communication and the formulation of the vision should be designed to make it easy for followers to comprehend the leader's idea. For example, if a vision is formulated more vividly and includes a small number of values, it is more effective (Carton *et al.*, 2014; Levin, 2000). In other words, if a leader wants to influence the cognition of their followers, they should also ensure that the vision message is received by recipients. Last, our results reinforce existing evidence showing that granting autonomy can be used as a leadership vitamin (Spreitzer, 1995; Ryan and Deci, 2000). Leaders who give employees more autonomy in a way that is appropriate to the situation can motivate them to deliver better results.

7. Limitations and future research directions
Although we have carefully tried to mitigate biases, the interpretations and implications derived from the findings must be regarded in light of the study's limitations. Their careful consideration provides four promising directions for future research: First, using more objective measurement approaches for leader behaviors beyond questionnaires; second, observing the concrete communication behaviors of leaders when they communicate their vision; third, capturing the content and linguistic features of leaders' vision; and fourth, adopting research designs that are less susceptible to bias.

First, recent theoretical and empirical work highlights the importance of observing leader behaviors, rather than relying solely on questionnaire data (Sitkin *et al.*, 2011; Van Knippenberg and Stam, 2014; Yukl and Gardner, 2020). Two examples for relevant aspects of vision communication are the channel for vision communication and the frequency of its communication. Observation in these domains could help to identify the most effective modalities through which leaders can impact follower's information processing more effectively. Second, the way a vision is communicated represents a critical determinant of its ability to persuade the audience's minds. Visionary leaders are very often described as highly expressive (Tskhay *et al.*, 2017a, b). In fact, communicating a vision is described as a signal of charismatic leadership (Antonakis *et al.*, 2016). Future research could try to separate the effect of communicating a vision from other aspects, such as nonverbal signals (Maran *et al.*, 2021; Maran *et al.*, 2019; Tskhay *et al.*, 2017a, b) or other embodied signals (Reh *et al.*, 2017). This would enable a better understanding of the effects of leaders providing long-range guidance. Third, apart from the formal way leaders communicate their visions, the effectiveness of a vision depends on how it is formulated (Stam *et al.*, 2018). Future research should specifically investigate which linguistic and content-related aspects of a vision statement make it easier

for followers to clarify their goals or find purpose in their work activities and thereby improve their performance. Fourth, although we controlled for CMV and single-source bias using CFA and partial correlations, our cross-sectional design bears the risk of being biased. We encourage future studies to replicate our results in a multi-level design that assesses leadership behavior, performance and cognitive processes at multiple levels (Kearney *et al.*, 2019). Lastly, the most methodologically elegant solution to elucidate the effects of leading with vision and autonomy is an experimental design. Future research could examine the direct and interactive effects of these different repertoires of leadership behaviors in differentiated experimental designs (Sieweke and Santoni, 2020).

8. Conclusion

Recent research has focused on the distinct effects of more directive and open leader behaviors (Kearney *et al.*, 2019; Boulu-Reshef *et al.*, 2020). In our study, we focused on two specific behaviors of directive and less directive leadership, leading with vision and granting autonomy, to examine how these leader behaviors influence followers' cognition. Our results showed that, once a vision is set, followers develop a clearer understanding of their goals and integrate their activities into the larger picture of a leader's vision. For a vision to evoke performance gains, the leader's vision communication has to stimulate followers' cognition in two ways: to *specify* the goals directing their actions and to *generalize* towards the meaning of their actions. In contrast, granting autonomy does not change followers' representation of work activities, either on a specific or a more general level, but rather has an immediate beneficial effect on performance. Thus, granting autonomy acts as a vitamin for goal achievement, but without providing a common trajectory, it may be expendable.

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