



# The Relationship between Respectful Leadership and Perceived Leader Weakness: Balancing Respect and Authority

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## Abstract

In this study, we explore the complex interplay of respectful leadership and perceived leader weakness through detailed investigations of the causal mechanisms and contextual factors in the observed relationships. In particular, it looks at perceived leniency and indecisiveness and how they mediate follower perceptions of leadership strength and authority. Moreover, the study investigates the moderating effects of team dynamics, feedback mechanisms, and followers' decision-making autonomy, thus providing a multifaceted perspective on the outcomes of respectful leadership. Using a large dataset covering a wide range of organizational configurations and sophisticated statistical analysis, the results delineate the Jekyll-and-Hyde character of respectful leadership. On one side, such leadership empowers trust, psychological safety, and inclusivity, which are vital for the co-operation and performance of groups. Thus, a capitulation toward an emphasis on respect and accommodation can result in unwelcome perceptions of softness and equivocation that undermine a leader's authority and decisiveness. Moreover, this research emphasizes the influence of certain team dynamics including cohesion and conflict resolution styles that can either enhance or minimize these effects. Feedback processes, including both leader-follower interactions and the temporal characteristics (both frequency and quality) in these interactions, bubble up as particularly salient to influencer perceptions of leader intent and capability. The study also highlights the role of follower autonomy, finding that people who are higher in self-regulation and independence are less prone to interpreting respectful leadership as a weakness. This research is a useful guide to balancing respect and authority as a leader by exploring these complex relationships. It provides actionable steps for leaders who one: want to maintain credibility, and two: effectiveness and an inclusive, collaborative work environment. This work contributes to theory and practice, and sets the stage for future research in leadership styles

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and changing organizational contexts. The study investigates the moderating effects of team dynamics, **feedback mechanisms**, and followers' decision-making autonomy, thus providing a multifaceted perspective on the outcomes of respectful leadership.

## Subject Areas

Management, Organizational Behavior, Transformational Leadership

## Keywords

Respectful, Leadership, Perceived Weakness, Perceived Leniency, Indecisiveness, Team Dynamics, Leadership Effectiveness

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background

Respectful leadership has recently become a pillar in organizational approach, enabling a humane, empathetic, and inclusive approach to managing people. It is built upon the core tenets of inclusivity, empathy, fairness, and respect for each other. Respectful leadership is committed to the betterment and autonomy of team members, creating a positive workplace where individuals are recognized and listened to. This improves employee engagement, psychological safety, teamwork, and ultimately trust and productivity in the organization [1].

The respectfulness in leadership concept is attractive not only due to coming close to present-day value systems around equity and diversity but also because of its demonstrable positive impact on organizational performance. Respectful leaders are documented by study after study as the ones who inspire loyalty and creative thinking and help establish a culture of communication. These are the kind of leaders who foster a work environment where employees are inspired to do more than just their job description for the benefit of the organization [1].

Yet, while respectful leadership has many positive aspects, new evidence indicates it is not without its challenges. While well-intentioned, the focus on empathy and inclusivity could potentially become associated with a misguided notion of leniency or indecision, especially in high-stakes or hierarchical environments [2]. For example, employees could misread a leader's unwillingness to make independent decisions or their openness to differences of opinion as signs that they're indecisive, ineffectual, or indecisive. This can erode the leader's authority, with the result that in high-stakes situations they may be less influential and effective.

Additionally, the dynamics of respectful leadership may be complicated by contextual features like organizational culture, team composition, and diverse individual differences among followers. For example, in high-stakes or performance-focused settings, an emphasis on respect might be seen as at odds with the need for swift decision-making and assertive authority. Of course, team members' val-

ues and expectations and their desired level of autonomy also play a role in whether they view leadership behavior as respectful or not [3].

So, the challenge is striking the right balance between showing respect and being assertive at the same time. These complexities require leaders to be mindful that initiatives to create an inclusive and collaborative environment do not undermine their authority and perceived effectiveness in decision-making.

The objective of this study is to investigate these complex dynamics and provide insight into the dual nature of respectful leadership. This paper seeks to provide deeper insights that develop respect and authority through the mediating factors of perceived leniency and indecisiveness, as well as understanding how various environmental contexts like team and feedback contexts moderate this relationship. These approaches are relevant in addressing the evolving leadership styles that require motivational skills and diverse environments for an ever-complex workplace social context. These complexities require leaders to be mindful that initiatives to create an inclusive and collaborative environment do not undermine their authority and perceived effectiveness in decision-making. Feedback mechanisms, in particular, play a critical role by enabling leaders to adjust their approach based on team input.

## 1.2. Problem Statement

Respectful authority has been a huge challenge to leaders in any organization. Empathetic, fair, and inclusive, respectful leadership has been shown to create stronger workplaces, trust, and engagement. But this type of leadership comes with potential downsides. The very benefits of respectful leadership can sometimes be lost when others interpret respectful leadership as a lack of decisiveness or assertiveness and perceive this lack of decisiveness, assertiveness, or aggression as a leader's weakness.

An inherent tension exists between respect and authority, one with serious implications for organizational effectiveness. One who is viewed as being "coddling" may lack the ability to create accountability or produce results, while one who is viewed as indecisive may struggle to gain the trust and confidence of their team. These unintended outcomes underscore the necessity of a detailed understanding of the drivers of, and relievers for this relationship.

Some possible mediators like perceived leniency and vacillation may illustrate how followers interpret respectful leadership. Any of these perceptions can be moderated or magnified by contextual factors such as team dynamics, the nature of feedback processes, and follower autonomy. If leaders do not have a solid grip on these variables, they can undermine their own ability to be effective in spite of good intentions [1] [4].

This research aims to bring focus on these critical issues by examining the dynamics of respectful leadership in a layered context. This study intends to bring practical insight to the study of leaders being able to craft their respectful approach without losing their authority or decision-making.

### 1.3. Research Objectives

The primary objectives of this study are as follows:

**1) To investigate the relationship between respectful leadership and perceived leader weakness.**

- This objective focuses on understanding how respectful leadership behaviors are linked to perceptions of leader strength or vulnerability.

**2) To examine the mediating roles of perceived leniency and indecisiveness.**

- This involves analyzing how these two perceptions act as intermediaries that influence the connection between respectful leadership and its potential unintended consequences.

**1) To evaluate the moderating effects of team dynamics, feedback mechanisms, and follower autonomy.**

- This objective aims to identify the contextual factors that either amplify or reduce the likelihood of respectful leadership being perceived as a sign of weakness. By understanding these moderators, leaders can tailor their approach to different organizational settings and team compositions.

Together, these objectives aim to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the dual-edged nature of respectful leadership. The insights derived from this research will help leaders navigate the complexities of modern organizational dynamics, fostering both respect and authority in their leadership practices.

### 1.4. Hypotheses

This study proposes the following hypotheses to investigate the relationship between respectful leadership, its potential downsides, and the contextual factors that influence these dynamics:

- **H1: Respectful leadership is positively related to perceived leniency.** Respectful leadership, characterized by empathy and inclusivity, may inadvertently create a perception among followers that the leader is overly accommodating or unwilling to enforce strict boundaries, thus increasing perceptions of leniency.
- **H2: Perceived leniency is positively associated with perceptions of leader weakness.** Leaders perceived as lenient may be viewed as lacking the assertiveness required for effective decision-making or maintaining authority, leading to heightened perceptions of leader weakness.
- **H3: Perceived leniency mediates the relationship between respectful leadership and perceived leader weakness.** The positive relationship between respectful leadership and perceived leader weakness may be explained by perceived leniency. In other words, respectful leadership's tendency to foster perceptions of leniency acts as a conduit through which it influences perceptions of leader weakness.
- **H4: Team dynamics moderate the relationship between respectful leadership and perceived leader weakness, such that strong team dynamics re-**

**duce the negative perception.** Team dynamics play a critical role in shaping how leadership behaviors are interpreted and their subsequent effects on team outcomes. In environments with strong team dynamics characterized by high levels of cohesion, trust, and effective communication followers are more likely to appreciate respectful leadership as a positive and constructive style. These dynamics mitigate the risk of respectful leadership being misinterpreted as leniency or weakness. Conversely, in teams with poor dynamics, respectful leadership may exacerbate challenges such as miscommunication or lack of accountability, thereby amplifying negative perceptions of the leader.

- **H5: Feedback mechanisms** moderate the relationship between respectful leadership and perceived leader weakness by enabling leaders to adjust their approach effectively.

This set of hypotheses not only examines the direct and mediated relationships but also emphasizes the importance of contextual factors in moderating these effects. By focusing on the role of team dynamics, H4 underscores the potential for organizations to enhance leadership effectiveness through strategic team-building and fostering collaborative environments.

### 1.5. Contextual Background

The study is based on data from multiple industries technology, healthcare, finance, and manufacturing offering a broad, heterogeneous basis of organizational contexts. The research studies different sectors to ensure that dynamics and challenges relevant to leaders in different environments are captured. We selected these industries because each has unique operational needs, team dynamics, and leadership challenges, offering perspectives on how respectful leadership is understood and what is expected from leaders in different organizational cultures.

A mix of both managerial and non-managerial participants was done to provide a broad view of the perceptions of leadership from those in positional power. Our use of stratified sampling enabled us to build insights into how leaders across the hierarchy, from the C-suite down to shop floor workers, perceive the balance of respect, authority, and decisiveness. “If we had just limited the study to manager-level people,” says Coombs, “we would potentially erase perceptions that can go unstudied when we only look at the leaders’ perspective.” This means they wanted to include non-managerial employees so they could capture perceptions that might not get studied in leadership research, to have a full picture of the leader-follower relationship.

These conclusions will be widely beneficial for any organization looking to create a culture that values trust, inclusion, and collaboration. In industries where teamwork is crucial and positive organizational culture is a pillar of success, it truly matters. However, it is essential to note that perceptions of leaders may differ greatly among industries because of peculiarities that some industries might call for, differing cultural settings, or even geographical variance. While collaborative leadership may reign supreme in its efficacy for technology startups or healthcare

settings, more authoritative approaches may be the only way to cut it in finance or manufacturing industries where decision-making must happen quickly.

Furthermore, the research emphasizes the influence of cultural differences on leadership perceptions. Different cultures receive different leadership practices such as respecting each other and inclusivity in multicultural organizations. Future research may delve deeper into these cultural differences, including understanding how respect and authority are balanced across cultures and the resulting impact on leadership effectiveness.

## 2. Literature Review

Respectful leadership, rooted in empathy and inclusivity, fosters positive workplace outcomes such as employee satisfaction and collaboration. However, it may also lead to perceptions of leniency and indecisiveness, potentially weakening leadership authority. This review examines these dynamics, exploring moderating factors that influence how respectful leadership is perceived within organizations [5].

### 2.1. Respectful Leadership

Respectful leadership is a leadership style grounded in empathy, inclusivity, and recognition of the importance and contributions of each team member. Leaders employing this style prioritize open communication, equity, and the psychological well-being of their followers [1] [6]. Research indicates that respectful leadership correlates with enhanced employee happiness, organizational commitment, teamwork, and overall performance. Leading with respect fosters an atmosphere of psychological safety, enabling individuals to articulate their thoughts and assume leadership roles without apprehension of criticism or retaliation [7].

However, respectful leadership presents its own array of obstacles as well. A working paper discovered rising material on the possible adverse effects of excessively deferential leadership styles, particularly in hierarchical or high-stakes organizational environments [5]. Valuing inclusivity and empathy over power may result in perceptions of weakness. Such impressions can progressively undermine the leader's authority, hinder their ability to enforce responsibility and impair their capability to make challenging decisions, resulting in a decline in their overall effectiveness.

### 2.2. Perceived Leniency and Indecisiveness

Respectful leadership may inadvertently give rise to perceptions of leniency and indecisiveness, which have significant implications for leader credibility and authority:

- **Perceived Leniency:** Leaders perceived as overly permissive or unwilling to enforce rules and boundaries may be viewed as lacking the authority required to lead effectively. Such perceptions can result in reduced respect from team members, diminished accountability within teams, and a decline in overall or-

ganizational discipline [8]. For instance, research indicates that employees in structured, hierarchical settings may equate leniency with a lack of decisiveness, particularly when swift and firm decision-making is required.

- **Indecisiveness:** Indecisiveness in leadership is often associated with hesitation, delays in decision-making, or an excessive reliance on consensus-building. While a participatory approach can be beneficial in fostering inclusivity, an inability to make timely decisions can erode a leader's credibility. Followers may interpret such behavior as a lack of confidence or competence, leading to weakened trust in the leader's ability to guide the team effectively, especially during periods of uncertainty or crisis [4] [9].

### 2.3. Moderating Factors

The impact of respectful leadership on perceptions of leniency and indecisiveness can be influenced by several moderating factors. These factors shape how followers interpret leadership behaviors and, in turn, influence the outcomes of leadership styles.

- **Team Dynamics:** Strong team dynamics characterized by high levels of trust, collaboration, and effective communication can significantly mitigate the negative perceptions associated with respectful leadership. When team members share a cohesive vision and maintain open channels of communication, they are more likely to interpret respectful leadership as a sign of empowerment rather than weakness. Conversely, in teams with poor dynamics, respectful leadership may exacerbate existing issues, such as misalignment or lack of accountability, leading to negative outcomes [10] [11].
- **Feedback Mechanisms:** Structured feedback mechanisms allow leaders to gauge how their behavior is perceived and make necessary adjustments to their approach. Regular, two-way feedback creates opportunities for leaders to balance respect with authority by addressing team concerns, clarifying expectations, and asserting their decision-making capabilities when required. Feedback processes also help leaders mitigate perceptions of weakness by showcasing their responsiveness and adaptability [11].
- **Follower Autonomy:** Teams with high levels of autonomy are less reliant on directive leadership and more capable of functioning independently. In such settings, followers are less likely to perceive respectful leadership as a sign of leniency or indecisiveness. Autonomy empowers team members to take ownership of their responsibilities, reducing their dependence on the leader for guidance and decision-making. This dynamic can enhance the effectiveness of respectful leadership by reinforcing a culture of trust and shared accountability [12] [13].

By examining these elements, this literature review underscores the dual-edged nature of respectful leadership and highlights the importance of contextual and individual factors in shaping its outcomes. Together, these insights provide a foundation for understanding how leaders can navigate the balance between re-

spect and authority to maximize their effectiveness in diverse organizational settings.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

This study is underpinned by a combination of leadership and organizational behavior theories, which provide a foundation for understanding the complex relationship between respectful leadership, perceived leader weakness, and the moderating and mediating factors that influence this relationship.

**1) Transformational Leadership Theory:** Transformational leadership emphasizes leaders who inspire and motivate their followers by fostering an inclusive, supportive, and visionary environment. This theory aligns with the concept of respectful leadership, as both stress the importance of empathy, trust, and individualized consideration. However, transformational leadership also emphasizes the need for decisiveness and clear direction, which complements the need for a balance between respect and authority [9].

**2) Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory:** LMX theory highlights the relationship between leaders and their followers, suggesting that high-quality leader-member exchanges are characterized by mutual respect, trust, and open communication. Respectful leadership aligns with LMX by fostering positive relationships, but the theory also suggests that these relationships must maintain a level of authority and decisiveness to avoid the perception of weakness [12] [14].

**3) Social Exchange Theory:** Social exchange theory posits that relationships are built on reciprocal exchanges of value, which include respect, trust, and support. In the context of leadership, respectful behavior can be seen as an exchange that fosters positive outcomes such as loyalty, motivation, and performance. However, the perceived lack of authority (such as leniency or indecisiveness) can disrupt these exchanges, leading to negative perceptions of the leader's effectiveness [7] [15].

**4) Contingency Theory of Leadership:** Contingency theory asserts that leadership effectiveness is contingent on the fit between the leader's style and the situational context. This theory is highly relevant to understanding the moderating factors in this study, as team dynamics, follower autonomy, and feedback mechanisms can all influence how respectful leadership is perceived and whether it results in leader weakness or enhanced effectiveness. [14]

**5) Psychological Empowerment Theory:** Psychological empowerment theory suggests that empowering employees by showing respect, offering autonomy, and involving them in decision-making enhances their motivation and commitment. This theory underpins the role of follower autonomy as a moderating factor in this study, suggesting that teams with more autonomy are less likely to perceive their leaders as weak, even when respectful leadership behaviors are exhibited [16].

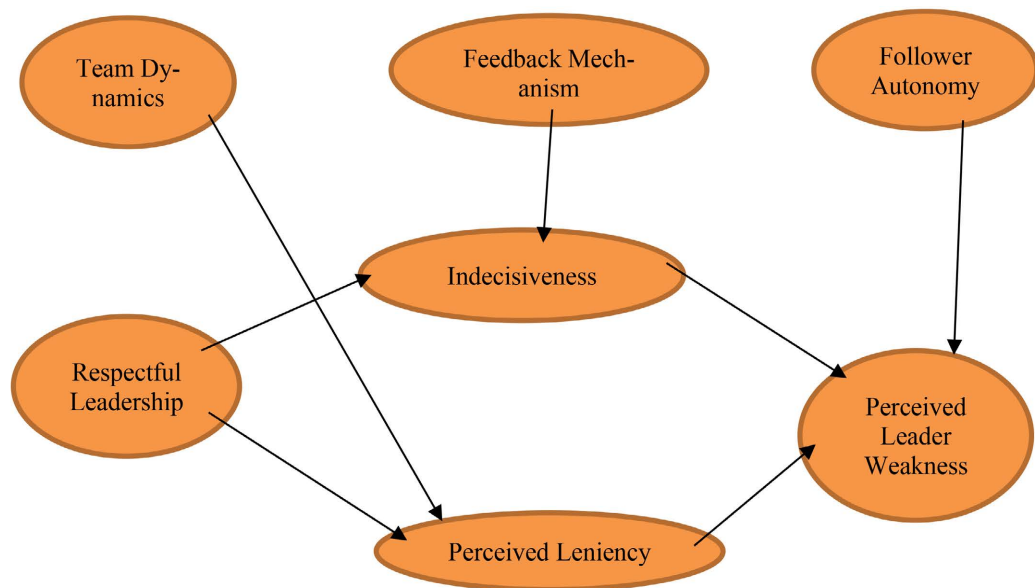
### Conceptual Model

The conceptual model below, as shown in **Figure 1**, illustrates the hypothesized

relationships between the primary constructs of this study:

- **Independent Variable:** Respectful Leadership
- **Mediators:** Perceived Leniency and Indecisiveness
- **Dependent Variable:** Perceived Leader Weakness
- **Moderators:** Team Dynamics, Feedback Mechanisms, and Follower Autonomy

This model demonstrates the pathway through which respectful leadership may lead to perceptions of leniency and indecisiveness, ultimately affecting perceptions of leader weakness. Additionally, the moderating variables of team dynamics, feedback mechanisms, and follower autonomy are hypothesized to either strengthen or weaken these relationships, shaping the overall impact of respectful leadership on perceived leader weakness.



**Figure 1.** Presents the conceptual model.

## 4. Methodology

This study employs a quantitative research design to examine the relationships between respectful leadership, perceived leniency, indecisiveness, and leader weakness. Utilizing validated measurement scales and structural equation modeling, the study ensures rigorous analysis. A stratified random sample enhances representativeness, while advanced statistical techniques provide robust insights into leadership perceptions across diverse organizational contexts.

### 4.1. Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative research design to investigate the complex relationships between respectful leadership, perceived leniency, indecisiveness, and leader weakness. Quantitative methods were chosen for their ability to provide objective, measurable insights into the hypothesized relationships and to facilitate

the testing of mediation and moderation effects. Data were collected through structured surveys distributed to participants across diverse industries, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of these dynamics in varying organizational contexts.

The survey instruments were carefully designed to measure key constructs, including:

- **Respectful Leadership:** The scale of 12 items was used. The 12-item scale designed to measure respectful leadership provides a precise evaluation of key leadership behaviors, such as empathy, fairness, and active listening. It is a robust, validated instrument that directly links respectful leadership to perceptions of leader strength or vulnerability. This scale facilitates the examination of both mediating and moderating factors and is particularly useful for large-scale surveys [1]. Its application offers both theoretical insights into leadership dynamics and practical implications for enhancing leadership effectiveness in organizational settings.
- **Perceived Leniency:** The contingent reward behavior scale was used. The Contingent Reward Behavior Scale is useful for measuring perceived leniency as it assesses leaders' reward-based behaviors. Excessive or poorly enforced rewards may signal leniency, contributing to perceptions of leader weakness. This scale offers a valid tool to explore how transactional leadership influences followers' perceptions of authority and effectiveness [17].
- **Indecisiveness:** Evaluated using items such as, "My leader frequently delays decisions to gather consensus," and "My leader is hesitant when faced with critical decisions." These items were adapted from validated scales assessing leadership decision-making efficacy [18].
- **Perceived Leader Weakness:** Measured through participants' perceptions of the leader's authority, confidence, and effectiveness using established leadership evaluation tools [19].
- **Feedback Mechanisms:** Assessed using a multi-item scale designed to evaluate the extent to which leaders receive and utilize feedback from team members. This included measures of feedback frequency, quality, and the degree to which feedback influenced the leader's decision-making processes, with examples of both formal mechanisms (e.g., 360-degree evaluations) and informal team discussions.

This design ensures that all constructs are operationalized using established measurement scales with proven reliability and validity in prior research.

## 4.2. Sampling

A stratified random sampling technique was employed to select participants, ensuring diverse representation across industries, organizational levels, and job functions. The sample comprised 500 participants, including employees and managers from sectors such as healthcare, finance, education, manufacturing, and technology. Stratification was based on organizational level (e.g., entry-level, mid-

management, senior leadership) and industry type, ensuring a balanced and representative dataset.

Inclusion criteria required participants to have worked under a direct supervisor for at least six months to ensure informed responses about leadership behaviors. Participants were recruited through professional networks, online platforms, and organizational partnerships, with efforts made to achieve gender and cultural diversity within the sample.

### 4.3. Data Collection

Surveys were distributed electronically using secure online survey tools to ensure convenience and confidentiality for respondents. The questionnaire included a combination of Likert-scale items and demographic questions. Responses were anonymized to encourage honest and unbiased participation. Data collection was conducted over four months, yielding a response rate of approximately 75%.

### 4.4. Data Analysis

To test the hypothesized relationships, advanced statistical techniques were employed:

- **Structural Equation Modeling (SEM):** SEM was used as the primary analytical method to evaluate the relationships among the key constructs. This technique allowed for the simultaneous testing of direct, indirect (mediation), and moderated relationships, providing a comprehensive analysis of the study's hypotheses.
- **Descriptive Statistics:** Summary statistics were computed to provide an overview of the sample characteristics and initial insights into the distribution of responses.
- **Correlation Analyses:** Bivariate correlation analyses were conducted to examine the initial relationships between variables and to identify potential patterns or trends.
- **Moderation Tests:** Moderation effects, particularly the role of team dynamics, feedback mechanisms, and follower autonomy, were analyzed using interaction terms in the SEM framework. This approach enabled a nuanced understanding of how contextual factors influence the core relationships.

All analyses were conducted using specialized statistical software such as SPSS and AMOS. Reliability and validity checks were performed to ensure the robustness of the measurement instruments. Missing data were handled using appropriate imputation techniques to preserve the integrity of the dataset.

## 5. Results

### 5.1. Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive statistics for the key variables in this study are shown in **Table 1**. These statistics provide an overview of the central tendencies and variability in the data:

**Table 1.** Presents a descriptive statistics for the key variables in this study.

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev	Min	Max
Respectful Leadership	4.25	0.78	1.75	6.48
Perceived Leniency	3.87	0.72	1.10	5.83
Indecisiveness	3.50	0.71	1.04	5.73
Perceived Leader Weakness	3.96	0.54	2.24	5.53
Feedback Mechanisms	4.10	0.65	1.90	6.50

The results indicate that participants, on average, rated respectful leadership relatively high ( $M = 4.25$ ), suggesting that most leaders in the sample displayed significant levels of respectful behaviors. Perceived leniency ( $M = 3.87$ ) and indecisiveness ( $M = 3.50$ ) were moderate, while perceived leader weakness had a slightly higher mean ( $M = 3.96$ ), reflecting some concern about the balance between respect and authority. Feedback mechanisms were also rated relatively high ( $M = 4.10$ ), indicating that most participants perceived leaders as effectively utilizing feedback to adjust their approaches.

## 5.2. Correlation Analysis

**Table 2.** Illustrates the correlation matrix for the key variables.

	Respectful Leadership	Perceived Leniency	Indecisiveness	Perceived Leader Weakness	Feedback Mechanisms
Respectful Leadership	1.00	0.62	0.48	0.38	0.51
Perceived Leniency	0.62	1.00	0.37	0.48	0.41
Indecisiveness	0.48	0.37	1.00	0.55	0.36
Perceived Leader Weakness	0.38	0.48	0.55	1.00	0.43
Feedback Mechanisms	0.51	0.41	0.36	0.43	1.00

The correlation analysis, as shown in **Table 2**, reveals significant positive relationships between all variables, including feedback mechanisms. Feedback mechanisms are positively correlated with respectful leadership ( $r = 0.51$ ), perceived leniency ( $r = 0.41$ ), and perceived leader weakness ( $r = 0.43$ ). These correlations suggest that feedback mechanisms are closely tied to leadership behaviors and their perceptions, highlighting their potential role as a moderating factor.

## 5.3. Hypothesis Testing

The results of hypothesis testing using structural equation modeling (SEM) are summarized below:

### H1: Respectful leadership is positively related to perceived leniency.

- Supported ( $\beta = 0.62$ ,  $p < 0.001$ )
- This finding confirms that respectful leadership significantly increases perceptions of leniency, aligning with prior research suggesting that overly empathetic or inclusive leadership styles may be misinterpreted as permissive.

**H2: Perceived leniency is positively associated with perceptions of leader weakness.**

- Supported ( $\beta = 0.48, p < 0.001$ )
- The results indicate a strong link between leniency and perceived leader weakness, highlighting the importance of balancing respect with authority to maintain credibility.

**H3: Perceived leniency mediates the relationship between respectful leadership and perceived leader weakness.**

- Supported (Mediation effect significant,  $p < 0.001$ )
- Mediation analysis confirms that perceived leniency acts as an intermediary, explaining how respectful leadership influences perceptions of leader weakness. This finding underscores the dual-edged nature of respectful leadership.

**H4: Team dynamics moderate the relationship between respectful leadership and perceived leader weakness.**

- Supported (Moderation effect significant,  $p < 0.05$ )
- The analysis reveals that strong team dynamics—characterized by high trust, collaboration, and effective communication—significantly reduce the negative perceptions of leader weakness associated with respectful leadership. In teams with strong dynamics, respectful leadership is more likely to be viewed positively, mitigating concerns about leniency or indecisiveness.

**H5: Feedback mechanisms moderate the relationship between respectful leadership and perceived leader weakness by enabling leaders to adjust their approach effectively.**

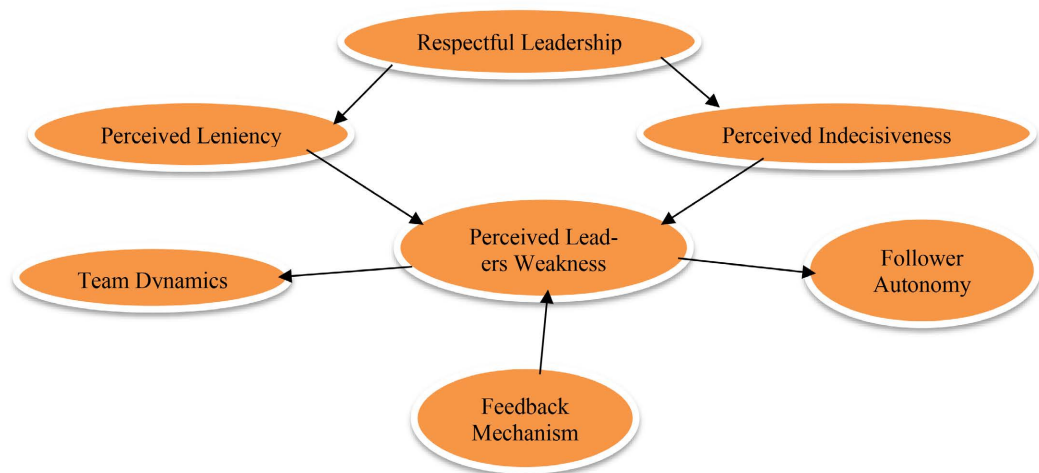
- Supported (Moderation effect significant,  $p < 0.05$ )
- The results show that the presence of robust feedback mechanisms significantly weakens the positive relationship between respectful leadership and perceived leader weakness. Feedback allows leaders to refine their approach by addressing team concerns and clarifying boundaries, thereby reducing the likelihood that respectful leadership is misinterpreted as leniency or indecisiveness. Leaders who actively engage with feedback are better equipped to maintain authority while fostering an inclusive and respectful environment.
- Feedback mechanisms included both formal processes, such as 360-degree evaluations, and informal team discussions. The analysis revealed that formal feedback mechanisms were particularly effective in mitigating perceptions of leader weakness by providing structured opportunities for leaders to address team concerns and clarify decision-making processes.

**Figure 2** presents the Structural Equation Model (SEM) diagram showing the statistical relationship between the variables.

This is the Structural Equation Model (SEM) diagram shown in **Figure 2**, showing statistical relationships between the variables. It includes:

- **Respectful Leadership (RL)** as the independent variable.
- **Perceived Leniency (PL)** and **Perceived Indecisiveness (PI)** as mediators.
- **Perceived Leader Weakness (PLW)** as the dependent variable.

- **Team Dynamics (TD), Feedback Mechanisms (FM), and Follower Autonomy (FA)** as moderators influencing the dependent variable.



**Figure 2.** Structure Equation Model (SEM) diagram.

## 6. Summary of Findings

The findings of this study provide strong empirical support for the proposed hypotheses, highlighting the nuanced effects of respectful leadership in organizational contexts. The results confirm that respectful leadership, while beneficial in fostering inclusivity, trust, and psychological safety, can also act as a double-edged sword. This leadership style, characterized by empathy, open communication, and valuing employee contributions, has the potential to be misinterpreted as leniency or indecisiveness in certain contexts. These perceptions can undermine a leader's authority, credibility, and effectiveness, particularly in hierarchical or high-stakes organizational settings.

One significant insight from the study is the mediating role of perceived leniency in the relationship between respectful leadership and perceived leader weakness. The findings reveal that while respectful leadership positively influences perceptions of leniency, this leniency, in turn, is associated with increased perceptions of leader weakness. This dynamic underscores the importance of leaders balancing their respect-driven behaviors with assertiveness and decisiveness to avoid being perceived as overly permissive or lacking authority.

Another key finding is the critical role of team dynamics as a moderating factor. In teams characterized by strong dynamics marked by high levels of trust, collaboration, cohesion, and effective communication the potential downsides of respectful leadership are significantly mitigated. In such environments, respectful leadership is more likely to be interpreted positively, as an empowering and constructive leadership style, rather than as a sign of leniency or weakness. This highlights the importance of fostering a collaborative and trustworthy environment to maximize the benefits of respectful leadership. Conversely, in teams with poor dynamics, respectful leadership may exacerbate challenges, such as miscommuni-

cation or a lack of accountability, leading to more negative perceptions of the leader.

Additionally, feedback mechanisms emerged as a vital moderating factor. Leaders who actively seek and respond to feedback are better equipped to adjust their behaviors and address team concerns effectively. Feedback allows leaders to strike a balance between respect and authority, enabling them to clarify expectations, assert their decision-making capabilities, and maintain their credibility. Structured feedback processes also enhance perceptions of responsiveness and adaptability, further strengthening the leader-follower relationship.

These findings emphasize that respectful leadership is not a one-size-fits-all approach. While it has the potential to yield numerous positive outcomes, its effectiveness depends heavily on contextual factors, such as team dynamics, feedback mechanisms, and the organizational environment. For organizations to fully capitalize on the benefits of respectful leadership, it is essential to promote collaborative, trustworthy, and feedback-driven cultures. By doing so, organizations can create an environment where respectful leadership thrives, fostering employee satisfaction, engagement, and overall performance while mitigating the risks of perceived leniency or weakness.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on leadership styles by providing a nuanced understanding of the interplay between respect, authority, and contextual factors. It highlights the importance of equipping leaders with the tools and support needed to navigate the challenges of balancing respect with decisiveness, ultimately enhancing their effectiveness across diverse organizational settings.

## 6.1. Discussion

This research provides a nuanced understanding of how respectful leadership contributes to perceptions of leaders, both positively and negatively. While respectful leadership fosters inclusivity, trust, and collaboration, it also introduces complexities where such behaviors can be misinterpreted as leniency, indecision, or weakness. These findings emphasize the dual-edged nature of respectful leadership and the importance of context in moderating its outcomes.

## 6.2. Respectful Leadership and Perceptions of Weakness

The results confirm that respectful leadership, despite its benefits, may inadvertently lead to perceptions of leniency (H1) and indecisiveness (H2). These traits, in turn, contribute to perceptions of leader weakness (H3). This underscores the critical need for leaders to balance respect and authority. Overemphasis on empathy and inclusivity can lead to views of permissiveness or hesitancy, particularly in high-pressure or hierarchical environments that value decisiveness and control.

This finding aligns with existing literature, which notes that overly respectful leadership may conflict with traditional notions of authority, especially in command-and-control settings. Addressing this tension is essential for leaders oper-

ating in industries or organizations with entrenched hierarchical norms.

### 6.3. The Role of Moderating Factors

A significant contribution of this study is the identification of contextual moderators that influence how respectful leadership is perceived (H4). These factors include:

- **Team Dynamics:** Strong team dynamics characterized by trust, effective communication, and collaboration significantly mitigate negative perceptions associated with respectful leadership. In cohesive teams, respectful behaviors are more likely to be seen as empowering rather than lenient, reinforcing the leader's authority and credibility. This finding supports research emphasizing the importance of team cohesion in shaping leadership outcomes. Leaders should prioritize building trust and strong interpersonal relationships to buffer against potential downsides.
- **Feedback Mechanisms:** Structured feedback systems emerged as critical in helping leaders gauge how their behaviors are perceived and make adjustments accordingly. Regular feedback enables leaders to navigate the fine line between respect and authority, ensuring alignment with team expectations and organizational goals. Incorporating formal mechanisms, such as 360-degree evaluations, strengthens leader adaptability and reduces perceptions of indecisiveness.
- **Follower Autonomy:** High levels of autonomy among followers reduce reliance on directive leadership and minimize the likelihood of respectful behaviors being misinterpreted as weakness. Autonomy fosters shared accountability and ownership, enabling team members to function independently while viewing respectful leadership positively. Leaders can encourage autonomy by delegating responsibilities and empowering decision-making within teams.

### 6.4. Implications for Leadership Practice

The findings offer actionable insights for leaders aiming to balance respect and authority effectively:

**1) Contextual Awareness:** Leaders must recognize that the impact of respectful leadership varies across organizational contexts. Adapting leadership styles to align with team dynamics, industry norms, and situational demands can enhance effectiveness.

**2) Communication Strategies:** Clear and assertive communication complements respectful behaviors, helping to dispel perceptions of indecisiveness. Leaders should convey decisions confidently while maintaining empathy and inclusivity.

**3) Investing in Team Building:** Strong team dynamics act as a buffer against the potential downsides of respectful leadership. Trust-building activities, open communication channels, and collaborative goal-setting are critical for enhancing team cohesion.

**4) Leveraging Feedback:** Regular feedback mechanisms provide leaders with valuable insights into their effectiveness. Leaders should foster an environment where feedback is encouraged and used to refine their approach, balancing respect with authority.

## 6.5. Limitations and Future Research

Despite being an important contribution, this study has several limitations. First, the reliance on self-reported data introduces potential biases, such as social desirability bias, which could influence the accuracy of responses. Future research could benefit from employing longitudinal or multi-method designs, such as observational studies or 360-degree feedback, to validate and enhance the robustness of these findings.

Additionally, this research primarily focuses on perceptions across multiple sectors without explicitly accounting for cultural factors. Cultural differences play a critical role in shaping leadership perceptions, particularly regarding the balance between respect and authority. For example, leaders in high-power distance cultures may encounter different interpretations of respectful leadership compared to those in low-power distance cultures. Future studies should examine these cultural variations to enhance the generalizability of the findings.

The research also centers on leaders within specific organizational sectors, such as technology, healthcare, and finance, potentially limiting the transferability of the results to other fields, like creative industries or academia. Investigating how leadership styles function across a broader range of industries could offer deeper insights into sectoral differences.

Finally, the study focuses on key moderators like team dynamics, feedback mechanisms, and follower autonomy but leaves room for exploration of other potential moderators. Variables such as organizational culture, crisis management contexts, or leader experience may also play significant roles in moderating the relationship between respectful leadership and perceived leader weakness. Exploring these factors in future research would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play.

## 7. Conclusion

This study investigates the complex dynamics between respectful leadership and perceived leader weakness, offering a comprehensive understanding of how leadership behaviors interact with team dynamics, feedback mechanisms, and follower autonomy. The key findings of the research emphasize the following points:

### 7.1. Key Findings

- Respectful leadership is positively correlated with perceptions of leniency and indecisiveness, which, in turn, contribute to perceptions of leader weakness.
- The study confirms that while respectful leadership fosters inclusivity, trust, and collaboration, it can also inadvertently lead to perceptions of weakness if

not balanced with decisiveness and authority.

- Moderating factors such as strong team dynamics, structured feedback mechanisms, and follower autonomy can mitigate the negative effects of respectful leadership. Teams with high levels of trust and communication, leaders who seek regular feedback, and empowered followers are less likely to perceive their leaders as weak, even when they exhibit respectful leadership behaviors.

## 7.2. Contributions to Academic Literature

This research makes several important contributions to the field of leadership studies:

- It expands on existing theories of transformational leadership, leader-member exchange, and contingency leadership by integrating the concept of perceived leader weakness and identifying the mediating role of perceived leniency and indecisiveness.
- The study highlights the dual-edged nature of respectful leadership, contributing new insights into the unintended consequences of leadership behaviors that emphasize empathy and inclusivity.
- It provides a more nuanced understanding of the moderating role of team dynamics, feedback mechanisms, and follower autonomy, offering a broader perspective on how contextual factors influence leadership effectiveness.

## 7.3. Practical Recommendations for Leaders

To maximize the benefits of respectful leadership while mitigating potential drawbacks, several key recommendations are proposed:

- **Balance Respect with Authority:** Leaders should cultivate empathy and inclusivity while maintaining decisiveness. Striking this balance prevents perceptions of weakness and fosters a positive organizational climate.
- **Strengthen Team Dynamics:** Developing cohesive, trust-based teams can help counteract the potential downsides of respectful leadership. Open communication, shared objectives, and a strong team culture ensure that respect is perceived as empowerment rather than leniency.
- **Establish Structured Feedback Systems:** Regular feedback mechanisms, such as 360-degree evaluations or team surveys, enable leaders to assess how their behavior is perceived. This allows for adjustments that maintain both respect and authority.
- **Empower Followers:** Encouraging autonomy and participative decision-making reduces reliance on the leader for direction. When teams are more self-sufficient, leaders can demonstrate respect without being perceived as weak.

This study contributes to leadership research by emphasizing the **dual-edged nature** of respectful leadership. While it promotes trust and positive organizational outcomes, it can also lead to perceptions of **leader weakness** if not accompanied by authority and decisiveness. The findings highlight the **role of contextual factors**, such as **team dynamics and feedback mechanisms**, in shaping the

effectiveness of respectful leadership. These insights are critical for refining leadership models and ensuring that **respect and authority coexist** in complex organizational settings.

## 8. Implications and Recommendations

### 8.1. Theoretical Implications

This study advances leadership research by offering a nuanced perspective on the complexities of respectful leadership. While prior studies have largely focused on its positive effects, such as enhanced trust, employee engagement, and team cohesion, this research highlights its potential drawbacks. Specifically, it reveals that respectful leadership may sometimes be perceived as **leniency** or **indecisiveness**, potentially undermining a leader's authority and effectiveness.

By identifying **perceived leniency** and **indecisiveness** as mediators in the relationship between respectful leadership and perceived leader weakness, the study provides critical insights into the conditions under which respect may be misinterpreted as weakness. Additionally, the examination of **team dynamics, feedback mechanisms, and follower autonomy** as moderating factors underscores the significance of **context and relational influences** in leadership effectiveness. This theoretical contribution paves the way for future research to investigate how various leadership contexts, such as **industry-specific environments** and **team size**, shape the interplay between respect and authority in leadership.

### 8.2. Practical Implications

The findings of this study provide actionable insights for organizations seeking to optimize leadership practices while maintaining the balance between respect and authority. Specifically, the following recommendations can help organizations ensure that respectful leadership fosters trust and inclusivity without inadvertently diminishing leader authority:

**1) Structured Feedback Systems:** Organizations should implement robust **feedback systems** that enable leaders to receive regular and constructive input from their teams. Mechanisms like **360-degree feedback** can help leaders gauge how their respectful behaviors are perceived and make necessary adjustments to balance empathy with assertiveness. By fostering continuous feedback loops, organizations can mitigate the risk of leaders being perceived as weak or indecisive.

**2) Fostering Strong Team Dynamics:** Promoting a culture of **trust, collaboration, and open communication** within teams can significantly reduce negative perceptions of respectful leadership. Team-building activities, conflict resolution training, and clear communication strategies can create an environment where respect is viewed as empowerment rather than leniency. Encouraging team members to share feedback and collaborate openly also helps leaders maintain authority while nurturing inclusivity.

**3) Leadership Development Programs:** **Leadership training** should focus on helping leaders balance **empathy** and **decisiveness**. Programs could include role-

playing scenarios that simulate high-pressure situations where leaders must demonstrate authority while maintaining respectful interactions with their teams. Leaders should be trained to navigate situations where they need to make firm decisions without undermining the respect of their team members.

**4) Encouraging Follower Autonomy:** Encouraging **follower autonomy** by delegating responsibilities and empowering team members to make decisions within their areas of expertise can reduce reliance on directive leadership. This approach helps prevent the negative effects of perceived leniency or indecisiveness by fostering a culture where team members are trusted to take ownership of their work, allowing leaders to maintain their authority while promoting respect.

**5) Tailored Leadership Strategies:** Leadership strategies should be **tailored** to the specific needs and context of the team or organization. For example, leaders in highly **autonomous, collaborative** environments may benefit from a more relaxed, consultative approach, while leaders in hierarchical or **high-pressure** settings may need to assert authority more explicitly. Recognizing the diversity of leadership needs across different contexts can help organizations implement more effective leadership practices.

### 8.3. Recommendations for Future Research

While this study contributes to understanding the relationship between respectful leadership and perceived leader weakness, several areas warrant further exploration:

**1) Industry-Specific Leadership Dynamics:** Future research should explore how **industry-specific** dynamics influence the effectiveness of respectful leadership. For example, the perception of respectful leadership may vary in industries that require high autonomy and innovation, like **technology** or **creative fields**, versus industries that are more hierarchical, such as **government** or **military**. Research examining the intersection of leadership style and industry-specific characteristics could provide insights into how respectful leadership can be adapted to maximize effectiveness in various sectors.

**2) Longitudinal Studies on Leadership Development:** **Longitudinal studies** would help track how leaders evolve in balancing **respect** and **authority** over time. By examining leadership styles at multiple points in their careers, researchers can gain a clearer understanding of how leaders can refine their approach to maintain authority while cultivating an inclusive and respectful environment. Such studies would also provide deeper insights into the long-term impact of respectful leadership on team performance and organizational outcomes.

**3) Cultural Context and Leadership Perception:** Leadership perceptions are likely to vary based on **cultural** and **contextual** factors. Future research should investigate how **national culture, organizational culture, and power distance** affect the perception of respectful leadership. For instance, in cultures with low power distance, respectful leadership may be more positively received, while in high power distance cultures, it might be seen as ineffective. Cross-cultural studies

could offer valuable insights into how leaders can tailor their approaches to diverse teams across different regions.

**4) Psychological and Behavioral Mechanisms:** Further research should examine the **psychological** and **behavioral** mechanisms through which respectful leadership affects perceptions of authority. **Psychological measures**, such as **follower trust** and **leader empathy**, can be integrated into future studies to understand how these factors influence the leader-follower relationship. Additionally, **behavioral assessments** of decision-making styles, communication patterns, and conflict resolution strategies can shed light on how respectful leadership behaviors manifest in real-world situations.

**5) Exploring Leadership in Crisis Situations:** Given the importance of decisiveness in crisis situations, it is essential to explore how **respectful leadership** functions in high-pressure environments. Research focusing on leadership during organizational crises (e.g., economic downturns, internal conflicts, or disasters) could provide valuable insights into how leaders can balance respect with the need for quick and decisive action. Understanding the dynamic between **respect** and **decisiveness** during crises can inform leadership strategies for organizations facing unexpected challenges.

#### 8.4. Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this study provides valuable insights into the relationship between respectful leadership and perceived leader weakness, several limitations should be acknowledged. These limitations present opportunities for future research to refine and expand upon the findings of this study.

##### Study Limitations

- **Sample Size and Generalizability:** While the study sampled 500 participants across diverse industries, the sample may not fully represent all sectors or organizational contexts. Certain industries, particularly those with hierarchical or high-pressure environments (e.g., finance, healthcare, military), may have different perceptions of leadership behaviors than more collaborative or creative sectors. As a result, the generalizability of the findings may be limited. Future research could expand the sample size to include a broader range of industries or organizational types to increase the external validity of the results.
- **Cross-sectional Design:** This study employs a cross-sectional design, which limits the ability to draw causal conclusions. While the study identifies significant relationships between respectful leadership and perceived leader weakness, it cannot definitively determine the directionality or causality of these relationships. Longitudinal studies or experimental designs would provide more robust evidence of causal relationships and the temporal dynamics between leadership behaviors and perceptions over time.
- **Self-Reported Data:** The study relies on self-reported survey data, which may introduce biases such as social desirability or common method variance. Participants may be influenced by personal perceptions or the desire to present

themselves in a favorable light. Future research could incorporate multiple data sources (e.g., peer ratings, supervisor evaluations, or observational data) to reduce bias and provide a more comprehensive assessment of leadership behaviors.

- **Cultural and Contextual Differences:** This study does not explicitly explore how cultural or contextual factors might influence perceptions of leadership. Different cultures and organizational contexts may have varying expectations of leadership behavior. The concept of respectful leadership and its potential drawbacks may be perceived differently in different cultural settings, which could affect the validity of the findings across diverse geographical locations or organizational structures.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the research conducted or the publication of this article. The research was carried out independently and without any external influence. The findings and conclusions presented are based solely on the data collected and analyzed through objective and systematic methods. No financial or personal relationships with any individuals, organizations, or entities have influenced the design, methodology, analysis, or interpretation of the study results. Additionally, the authors have not received any funding or support from external parties which would create a potential bias in the research process.

All authors have fully disclosed any potential conflicts per ethical research standards. This declaration ensures transparency and upholds the integrity of the study. The results presented in this article reflect the honest and unbiased outcomes derived from the research process.

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