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## Full Length Article

# Navigating change in the era of COVID-19: The role of top leaders' charismatic rhetoric and employees' organizational identification

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## ABSTRACT

The Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has had tremendous and swift effects on organizational change. This study examined how organizations can leverage leadership and employee resources to facilitate positive change outcomes. Drawing from the self-concept based motivational theory of charismatic leadership and substitutes for leadership theory, the current study proposed a theoretical model connecting top leaders' charismatic rhetoric, employees' affective commitment to change, and employees' turnover intention. Furthermore, the study investigated contingencies that may modify the relationship between leadership communication and followers' outcomes. Results from an online panel of 417 U.S. employees showed that top leaders' use of charismatic rhetoric during change led to followers' affective commitment to change, which decreased their turnover intention. Furthermore, employees' organizational identification moderated this relationship. When employees have low identification with their organizations, top leaders' charismatic rhetoric to address the immediate change is more needed.

## 1. Introduction

In a fast-evolving and uncertain business environment, change is an inescapable reality of the modern workplace. Organizational change refers to organizations' transition from one state to another (Lewin, 1951). Past research has either focused generically on organizational change or examined specific types of change, such as mergers and acquisitions, downsizing and layoffs, and changes in corporate culture, leadership, or technologies (Oreg & Berson, 2019). Managing change is challenging. In a crisis like Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19), organizations are suddenly confronted by the need to shift their operating norms and entrenched structures (Deloitte, 2020). Reported changes resulting from COVID-19 encompass mass layoffs, furloughs, pay cuts, reorganization, and digital transformation (Borden et al., 2020; McKinsey & Company, 2020). A recent study by McKinsey & Company (2020) found that COVID-19 has accelerated companies' digital initiatives by several years, and these changes are expected to be long-lasting.

One cannot talk about organizational change without leadership and management. In response to COVID-19, many organizations have quickly formed their contingency plans and relied on executive leaders to work through the transition (Men, 2020). The critical role of top leaders in initiating, communicating, and executing organizational change can be found in a sizeable amount of practitioner and academic

literature (Oreg & Berson, 2019). Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, executive leaders have found themselves at the forefront of internal communication, tasked with conveying work updates, safety measures, and providing comfort, support, and motivation to their followers.

Public relations scholars have long strived to theorize leadership and leadership communication (e.g., Jin, 2010; Men & Stacks, 2014; Meng et al., 2012; Thelen, 2019; Yue et al., 2021). Recent studies have shown an increasingly important role of CEOs in fulfilling communicative roles as corporate representatives (Huang & Yeo, 2018; Men et al., 2018; Park & Berger, 2004; Yue et al., 2021). However, there is a dearth of research that examines how executive leadership communicates during organizational change. This study examined top leaders' charismatic rhetoric during organizational change to address this gap in public relations and internal communication. The current study argues that leading successful changes amidst a global pandemic is only possible when top leaders utilize charismatic rhetoric to foster employees' self-esteem, self-expression, self-consistency, and self-efficacy. Although the literature on organizational change has documented leaders' critical function in cultivating employees' change acceptance and support, the field lacks a conceptual foundation to illustrate the process through which leaders impact followers' change reactions (Ling et al., 2018; Oreg & Berson, 2019). In addition, past research has almost exclusively focused on

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leadership styles and overlooked the communicative component of leadership (Jung et al., 2008; Men et al., 2020).

Drawing from a self-concept based motivational theory of charismatic leadership (Shamir et al., 1993), this study explored *whether* charismatic rhetoric from top leaders engendered employees' affective commitment to change and decreased employees' turnover intention during or after COVID-19 incurred organizational change. The focus on employee reactions is informed by a micro-level perspective on change, viewing employees' support as the leading force for successful change in the long run (Choi, 2011). Accordingly, this study examined both employees' attitude (i.e., affective commitment to change) and behavioral intention (i.e., turnover intention), which reflect different facets of employees' responses to change.

Another goal of this study is to investigate *when* charismatic rhetoric leadership increases employees' affective change commitment and inhibits turnover intention. Traditionally, research has focused on examining *how* leadership affects followers' behavior—much less explored *when*, or under what condition, leadership is more or less effective (Li et al., 2013). Based on substitutes for leadership theory (Kerr & Jermier, 1978), this study endeavored to fill this research gap by proposing employees' organizational identification as a moderator that modifies the relationship between leadership communication and changed-related employee outcomes. It should be noted that organizational identification is a stable, cross-situational factor that employees had developed over time (i.e., before COVID-19 incurred organizational changes). In summary, the current study presented a theoretical model in which follower behaviors during change are viewed as deriving from the joint influence of here-and-now leadership communication and followers' identification with organizations (see Fig. 1).

## 2. Literature review

Public relations and internal communication practitioners have played an increasingly important role in organizational change initiatives. For instance, they have taken on a broad set of functions, spanning managing emotions in organizations, consulting top leaders' communication styles, resolving conflicts between middle and top management, and educating communication skills and knowledge (Elving, 2005; Einwiller et al., 2021; Luo & Jiang, 2014; Men et al., 2020; Neill, 2018). While public relations and internal communication professionals have always been considered as vital forces in helping leaders formulate and implement communication plans for change and assisting employees in understanding the content and rationale of change, it was not until recent years public relations scholars have started to empirically explore different facets of internal communication in the context of change (Lee & Yue, 2020). A perusal of the most recent public relations scholarship related to organizational change reveals an emphasis on how internal communication at both corporate and leadership levels

facilitated employees' positive responses to change. For instance, Li et al. (2021) and Yue et al. (2019) surveyed employees in the U.S. to examine the role of transparent internal communication on employees' responses to organizational change. Einwiller et al. (2021) recruited 1,033 Austrian employees to study the impact of relational and informational communication on employee response to organizational crises caused by COVID-19. Moreover, Men et al. (2020) sampled 439 U.S. employees in various positions to explore how executive leadership communication affected employees' attitudinal and behavioral reactions toward change.

Further research on change communication—an essential function of public relations—will advance public relations theory overall and significantly increase the field's practical contribution (e.g., Elving, 2005; Johansson & Heide, 2008; Luo & Jiang, 2014; Men et al., 2020). By working closely with organizations' senior leaders on change—such as constructing collective visions for change and coaching leaders in delivering key messages to employees—public relations can realize its strategic management function in the context of organizational change (Men & Bowen, 2017; Men et al., 2020). Therefore, to extend this burgeoning line of research on the intersection between internal communication and change management, this study explores when and how executive leaders' charismatic rhetoric may induce employees' positive change reactions. Findings of this study ultimately provide practical insights to public relations professionals, given their role as expert prescribers, consultants, and enablers of communication in organizations (Zerfass & Franke, 2013).

### 2.1. Conceptualizing executive leaders' charismatic rhetoric: a self-concept based theory

Before introducing the core components of charismatic rhetoric, it is essential to review literature and theory on charismatic leadership. Dating back to Weber (1947), charismatic leadership has been one of the most researched and arguably most effective leadership theories (van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). Researchers have generally referred to charismatic leadership in light of its effects on followers. These leaders are said to possess spellbinding qualities (Willner, 1984) that inspire followers to forsake self-interest to pursue collective objectives. They also instill pride and trust in followers and increase followers' job satisfaction and performance (House & Shamir, 1993).

Realizing that there was no underlying mechanism that explains why and how charismatic leader behaviors inspire and motivate followers, Shamir et al. (1993) put forth a self-concept based motivational theory of charismatic leadership. This theory is proposed based on five assumptions: (1) Humans are self-expressive. (2) People are motivated to enhance self-esteem and self-worth. (3) People are motivated to retain a sense of self-consistency (i.e., continuity of self-concept between the past, the present, and the projected future). (4) Self-concepts consist of

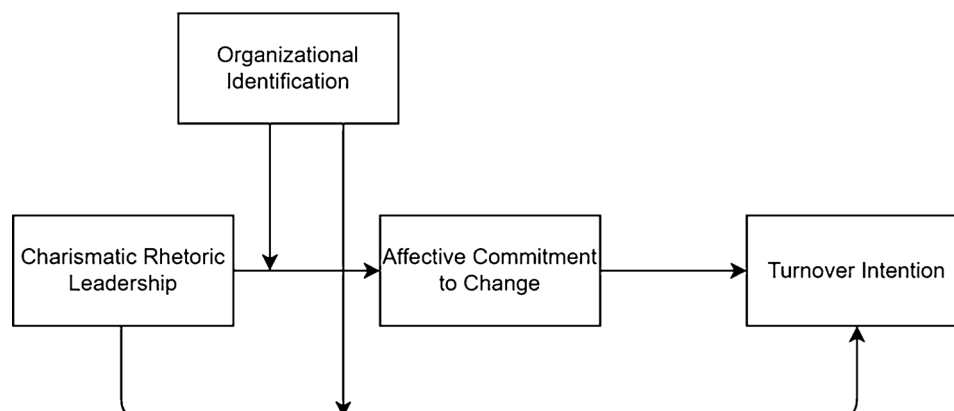


Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

personal and social identities marked by different salient levels. (5) People are motivated by believing in a better future (for a complete review, see Shamir et al., 1993, 1994). Based on these assumptions, Shamir et al. (1993) articulated that charismatic leaders motivate followers by implicating followers' self-concepts rather than imposing external rewards or punishment on followers. In the words of Shamir et al. (1998), charismatic leaders "raise the salience of certain values and collective identities in followers' self-concepts and articulate the goals and required efforts in terms of those values and identities" (p. 388). Furthermore, these leaders enhance followers' self-efficacy and collective efficacy through positive evaluations while elevating followers' self-worth by emphasizing the intrinsic value and moral correctness of their efforts in addition to de-emphasizing pragmatic extrinsic justifications (Shamir et al., 1993).

Notably, public relations literature has either incorporated charismatic leadership in defining excellent leadership in public relations (Aldoory & Toth, 2004; Meng et al., 2012) or centered on the formation and effects of charismatic leadership, with a focus on its communicative component (Holladay & Coombs, 1994; Men et al., 2020). The current study followed the second line of research to explore the communicative impact of charismatic leadership. Thus, it is crucial to point out the theoretical linkage between leadership and communication/language. Broadly speaking, leadership and communication/language are inextricably connected, and that leadership is best seen as influence-oriented language games (Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014; Johnson & Hackman, 2018). For instance, a communication-centered view of leadership conceives communication as a central, fundamental element that constitutes and constructs leadership (Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014). In fact, scholars believe that charismatic leadership is grounded in language (e.g., Gardner & Avolio, 1998; House & Shamir, 1993; Yukl, 2002) and that the skillful use of rhetoric is an essential means to realizing charismatic effect (Bligh et al., 2004; Emrich et al., 2001; Holladay & Coombs, 1994). More specifically, charismatic leaders use language and speech to achieve "frame alignment" between leaders and followers (Shamir et al., 1994). The "frame" is a "schemata of interpretation" that guides followers' actions by casting meanings on events and occurrences (Goffman, 1974, p. 464). In addition, Holladay and Coombs (1994) highlighted the crucial role of communication in charismatic leadership by examining the relationship of leaders' message content and delivery to perceived leader charisma. Previous work also noted that top leaders' ability to express their sentiments, articulate a vision, and unite followers through rhetoric is eminently important in crisis scenarios (Davis & Gardner, 2012).

To explore the motivational effects of leaders' charismatic rhetoric during organizational change, the current study adopted the seven propositions developed by Shamir et al. (1994) that encompass the core components of leaders' charismatic rhetoric. In essence, charismatic leaders appeal to their followers by including the following elements into their communication: (1) references to collective history and the connection between the past, the present, and the projected future; (2) an emphasis on the collective identity; (3) an emphasis on followers' self-worth and reinforcement of the collective efficacy; (4) references to leaders' similarity to followers; (5) a focus on values and moral justifications as opposed to tangible outcomes and pragmatic justifications; (6) references to distal goals and future; and (7) references to hope and faith (Shamir et al., 1994).

Many empirical studies have applied the seven propositions to examine the charismatic level of speeches delivered by political and business leaders. These endeavors focused on developing dictionary-based constructs to analyze speech content (e.g., Bligh et al., 2004; Bligh & Kohles, 2014; Davis & Gardner, 2012). However, rather than deciphering a single leader's one-time oral speech, the current study aimed to connect followers' reactions with the level of charismatic rhetoric adopted by executive leaders during organizational change. Charismatic rhetoric may be seen in both oral and written communication initiated by executive leaders. In the backdrop of stay-at-home

orders since mid-March of 2020, top leaders are reported to communicate and motivate followers via multiple channels, including digital (e.g., intranets, social networking sites, and videoconferencing systems), print publications (e.g., newsletters, memos), phone calls, and traditional face-to-face interactions (e.g., social-distanced one-on-one meetings, town halls, small group meetings, and after-work social-distanced informal meetings) (Mendy et al., 2020).

After reviewing the core elements of charismatic rhetoric and how it motivates followers, the next section defined employees' turnover intention and illuminated how and why top leaders' charismatic rhetoric can decrease employees' turnover intention during or after organizational change.

## 2.2. Linking leaders' charismatic rhetoric to employees' turnover intention

When change is mismanaged, employees tend to experience negative emotions, leading to a spike in withdrawal behaviors (Fugate et al., 2012). High voluntary turnover is prevalent during or after a significant organizational change (Kiefer, 2005). Voluntary turnover incurs considerable costs, which manifest in direct (e.g., replacement costs, reduced service quality) and indirect (e.g., low employee morale, costs of learning) costs (Hancock et al., 2013; Kiefer, 2005). This study focuses on examining employees' voluntary turnover intention, defined as "the subjective probability that an individual will leave his or her organization within a certain period of time" (Zhao et al., 2007, p. 651). Turnover intention is one of the best predictors of actual voluntary turnover (Griffeth et al., 2000). Thus, understanding the antecedents of turnover intention is essential for organizations to address this issue more effectively.

Organizational change scholars have linked turnover intention to organizational contextual factors and individuals' psychological activities. For instance, Wanberg and Banas (2000) showed that employees' positive attitudes toward change were related to lower intentions to quit and higher job satisfaction. In terms of contextual factors, change-related information that is useful, transparent, and timely reduces employees' turnover intention (van den Heuvel et al., 2017). Effective leadership practice is also instrumental in alleviating the adverse effect of frequent change on turnover intention (Babalola et al., 2016).

Although the role of leadership in organizational change/crisis has received substantive research attention (Oreg & Berson, 2019), few examined whether leaders' communication impacts followers' attitudes or behaviors in such context. However, an emerging line of public relations research sheds light on the critical functions of leadership communication. For instance, effective leadership communication is said to enhance organizations' reputation (Park & Berger, 2004), induce publics' digital engagement (Huang & Yeo, 2018), and build quality organization-public relationships (Tsai & Men, 2017). Internally, excellent leadership communication cultivated employees' organizational identification and employee advocacy (Yue, 2021). In the context of organizational change, Men et al. (2020) observed an increase in employees' cooperation and championing for organizational change when top leaders communicated vision, passion, and care.

Leaders' charisma, or charismatic rhetoric, is most effective under conditions of environmental uncertainty, such as a change or crisis (Davis & Gardner, 2012; Waldman et al., 2001). Indeed, Bligh et al.'s (2004) investigation on Present George W. Bush's public speeches before and after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 revealed his increased use of charismatic rhetoric during the crisis. Analyzing the same event, Davis and Gardner (2012) further noted that charismatic rhetoric co-varied with perceived leader effectiveness.

Drawing from self-concept based motivational theory of charismatic leadership, this study argues a theoretical connection between charismatic rhetoric used by top leaders and employees' turnover intention during or after organizational change. First, leaders who effectively

deploy charismatic rhetoric during organizational change can instill a sense of continuity of organizational identity by connecting the organization's past, present, and future. More specifically, they would assure followers that whatever is going to change, the defining attribute and character that constitute organizational identity will remain preserved (Venus et al., 2019). Given that employees often perceive changes in organizational culture, structure, or practices as a threat to their sense of self and continuity of self-identity (e.g., Giessner et al., 2011; Van Knippenberg et al., 2004), and that identity threats are important reasons for change resistance (e.g., Rousseau, 1998), leaders' depiction of change as non-threatening or even necessary for the preservation of the collective identity would likely decrease followers' tendency to quit organizations. Second, charismatic leadership communication can harness followers' self-worth, self-efficacy, self-esteem, as well as collective-efficacy perceptions during change. Followers who receive encouragement and high-performance expectations from leaders will perceive themselves in a collective movement that is powerful and effective (Shamir et al., 1994). As a result, followers are unlikely to leave their organizations because of the motivational forces from leaders' empowerment. Third, charismatic rhetoric increases the correspondence between followers' self-concepts and collective organizational goals, values, and efforts (Shamir et al., 1993, 1994). More specifically, the way leaders connect individual employees to the large organizational entities would make employees perceive organizational goals as meaningful to themselves and consistent with their self-concept. Therefore, change now carries intrinsic value and meaning to employees, and it would be unlikely for employees to forsake their value and leave organizations under this context. Thus, under the influence of leaders' charismatic rhetoric, followers will be less inclined to quit. The first hypothesis is put forth.

**Hypothesis 1.** Leaders' use of charismatic rhetoric is negatively related to employees' turnover intention.

### 2.3. Charismatic rhetoric-employee turnover intention: the moderating role of organizational identification

By explicating contingencies of leaders' charismatic rhetoric influence, we can attain a more nuanced view of when leaders can be more or less effective during organizational change. Extant literature suggests that the impact of leaders on followers' work attitudes and behaviors often vary depending on follower-related characteristics, such as followers' self-efficacy (Griffin et al., 2010) and organizational identification (e.g., Li et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2017).

Drawing on substitutes for leadership theory (Kerr & Jermier, 1978), the current study proposes organizational identification as an important boundary condition for the relationship between charismatic rhetoric leadership and employee turnover intention. Substitutes for leadership theory is "the most comprehensive attempt to identify the potential factors that may moderate leader effects on followers" (Whittington et al., 2004, p. 594). The theory posits that some variables can replace leaders' role to influence followers (Bottomley et al., 2016). These variables are broadly classified as subordinate-related variables, the nature of the task, and organizational characteristics (Kerr & Jermier, 1978). The present study focuses on followers' perception—i.e., organizational identification—as a substitute for leadership.

Organizational identification refers to the "perception of oneness with or belongingness to an organization" (Mael & Ashforth, 1992, p. 104). Identification occurs when an employee's self-concept includes the same attributes as those in the perceived organizational identity (Dutton et al., 1994). Simply put, the extent to which employees identify with their organizations depends on the overlaps between employees' individual identity and organizational identity. Organizational members are more likely to identify with their organizations when the organizational identity is salient and attractive and can enhance their positive self-image (He & Brown, 2013). Organizational identification has been

linked to a host of workplace outcomes, including turnover intention and turnover rate (Mael & Ashforth, 1995), in-role and extra-role performance (Levine et al., 2005), job satisfaction (Carmeli et al., 2007), organizational commitment (Riketta, 2005), and job engagement (He et al., 2014). Prior literature also identifies factors that drive the formation of organizational identification, such as internal communication quality (Neill et al., 2019), leadership behaviors (Demirtas et al., 2017), leaders' motivating communication (Yue, 2021), construed external prestige (Myers et al., 2016), and perceived organizational support (Edwards & Peccei, 2010).

From substitutes for leadership perspective, this study argues that when employees already identify with their organizations prior to the change, leaders' influence in mitigating turnover intention is likely to be attenuated. In other words, leaders' charismatic rhetoric may not be as influential when employees already have a strong sense of collective identity and motivation to contribute to organizations' survival and success. Literature has consistently shown that when employees perceive their organizations' success as their own, they are more willing to adjust their behaviors to fit in the organization (Wang et al., 2017) and engage in greater organizational citizenship behavior (Li et al., 2013). In contrast, employees with low identification do not feel a sense of oneness with the organization. They tend to be psychologically disengaged from the organization and thus lack the intrinsic motivation to undertake change-related tasks or make necessary adjustments. These employees need a booster to engage in positive work behaviors (Mostafa, 2018), which leadership can supply. For instance, Wang et al. (2017) found that organizational identification moderated the effectiveness of transformational leadership on subordinates' adaptability and job crafting (i.e., seeking resources and seeking challenges). Specifically, transformational leadership can help enhance the adaptability and job crafting of subordinates whose organizational identification is low.

Similarly, this study argues that top leaders of organizations can provide much-needed motivation (by using charismatic rhetoric) to followers who do not share a sense of togetherness with organizations. In other words, charismatic rhetoric should be in higher demand for employees who have not developed strong organizational identification. Consequently, the effectiveness of charismatic rhetoric in reducing employees' turnover intention should be more salient for those low in organizational identification. In contrast, in cases where employees have already formed a strong attachment to their organizations, they will be affected, to a lesser extent, by leaders' motivational efforts during change. Thus, organizational identification should act as a substitute for top leaders' charismatic rhetoric. Based on this argumentation, the following hypothesis is formulated:

**Hypothesis 2.** Employees' organizational identification moderates the negative relationship between leaders' charismatic rhetoric and employees' turnover intention such that the negative relationship is stronger when organizational identification is low.

### 2.4. Charismatic rhetoric-employee turnover intention: the mediating role of affective commitment to change

Researchers have examined employees' responses to organizational change at both attitudinal and behavioral levels (Oreg et al., 2011). *Commitment to change* is one of the most extensively studied constructs in change literature because of its critical role in explaining employees' proactive behaviors (Choi, 2011; Morin et al., 2016; Neill et al., 2019).

A widely accepted definition of *commitment to change* comes from Meyer and Herscovitch (2001), which they refer to as "a force (mind-set) that binds an individual to a course of action deemed necessary for the successful implementation of a change initiative" (p. 475). They further differentiated three types of commitment to change: affective, normative, and continuance. The current study focuses on employees' affective commitment to change in that it reflects employees' innate desire to

support a change initiative (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002) and is most likely to be affected by leadership behaviors (cf. Herold et al., 2008). Affective commitment to change also represents the highest level of commitment and has been shown to have the most consistent positive association with behavioral support for change (Morin et al., 2016). In comparison, normative commitment involves a sense of responsibility to support the change, and continuance commitment is driven by employees' recognition of the potential costs associated with not supporting the change (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002).

#### 2.4.1. Linking leaders' charismatic rhetoric to employees' affective commitment to change

In change literature, prototypical leader practices, such as transformational leadership (Michaelis et al., 2010) and ethical leadership (Rahaman et al., 2020), have been reported to induce employees' commitment to change. Although we could find no direct tests of how leaders' communication directly affects employees' change commitment, some preliminary support can be gleaned from prior research. For instance, Endrejat et al. (2020) found that employees displayed a readiness to change when change agents adopted an autonomy-supportive communication style. Examining executive leaders' communication during change, Men et al. (2020) reported a direct and positive path between leaders who communicated vision, passion, and care and employees' openness to change.

According to the self-concept based motivational theory of charismatic leadership, leaders with charismatic rhetoric skills can align employees' values with organizational values (Shamir et al., 1994). By connecting the intrinsic value of collective goals with the core component of followers' self-concepts, leaders strengthen the collective identity in followers' self-concepts, thus motivating followers to form an internalized commitment to these goals (Shamir et al., 1998). Recall that employees with a high affective commitment to change genuinely believe in the value of the change. Thus, it is logical to speculate that leaders' charismatic rhetoric can harness followers' affective commitment to change.

#### 2.4.2. Linking employees' affective commitment to change to turnover intention

Numerous studies have suggested the critical role of organizational commitment—particularly affective commitment—in reducing employees' turnover intention and actual turnover (Ausar et al., 2016; Meyer et al., 2002). This is because “affective commitment is based on the congruence between individuals' own values and goals and those of the organization” and thus entails employees' genuine wish to stay in organizations (Wombacher & Felfe, 2017, p. 4). Payne and Huffman (2005) found that affective commitment partially mediated the relationship between mentoring and turnover of U.S. Army officers. In other words, high affective commitment to the organization was why mentoring effectively decreased turnover. Similarly, Nazir et al. (2016) showed that employees who had greater autonomy and participation in organizational decision making were more likely to develop organizational commitment, which in turn, decreased turnover intention. Kang and Sung's (2019) findings revealed that employee-organization relationship quality, which consisted of trust, satisfaction, commitment, and control mutuality, was negatively related to employee turnover intention.

Herscovitch and Meyer (2002) extended the organizational commitment model to the organizational change context. They showed that commitment to change is a better predictor of behavioral support for change than is organizational commitment. Ever since, affective commitment to change has received growing attention as a key antecedent of employees' supportive behavior toward change (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002; Shin et al., 2012); for instance, it has been associated with greater organizational citizenship behavior, work performance, and cooperation and championing behaviors related to the change (Meyer et al., 2002; Shin et al., 2012). Several studies examined the

relationships between change commitment and employee turnover. For instance, Cunningham (2006) provided one of the first pieces of evidence showing that affective commitment to change facilitated employee's adoption of coping strategies during change, leading to lower turnover intention. Neves and Caetano (2009) brought further evidence on the role of affective commitment to change on employee turnover intentions, suggesting the importance of emphasizing the benefits of change instead of the outcomes of not supporting the change.

Following previous research, the current study proposes a negative association between affective commitment to change and turnover intention. Despite the uncertainty, anxiety, and pressure associated with change, it is expected that the more employees believe in the value and the outcome of the change, the less they will consider leaving the organization during or after the change. In a sense, affective commitment buffers against the negative effect of change-related stress on employees (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002).

In sum, this study proposes that charismatic rhetoric positively relates to employees' affective change commitment, which in turn leads to decreased turnover intention. In other words, affective commitment to change is a critical explanatory mechanism for understanding why leaders' charismatic rhetoric will reduce employees' intention to leave the organization. Previous studies further supported this mediating process by highlighting employee commitment as a crucial social exchange mechanism that links leadership behavior and employee behavioral outcomes (cf., Cropanzano et al., 2003). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**Hypothesis 3.** Employees' affective commitment to change mediates the relationship between leaders' charismatic rhetoric and employees' turnover intention such that charismatic rhetoric is positively associated with affective commitment to change and affective commitment to change is negatively associated with turnover intention.

Based on the preceding hypothesis postulating the mediating role of affective commitment to change, coupled with earlier discussion on the moderating effect of organizational identification, this study predicts that organizational identification will moderate the indirect effect of leaders' charismatic rhetoric on employees' turnover intention (via affective commitment to change). That is, for employees with low organizational identification, leaders' use of charismatic rhetoric is more likely to elicit their affective commitment to change and less likely to lead to turnover intention. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**Hypothesis 4.** Employees' organizational identification moderates the indirect relationship between leaders' charismatic rhetoric and employees' turnover intention via affective commitment to change such that the indirect effect is stronger when organizational identification is low than when it is high.

The conceptual model is shown in Fig. 1.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Procedure and participants

Full-time employees from the U.S. were recruited via a professional survey company in October 2020. Given the study's focus on COVID-19 incurred organizational changes, qualified participants must be working for organizations undergoing or had most recently gone through such changes.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, this study included employees working at organizations with more than 50 employees.

After data cleaning, 417 participants met the prescreening requirements. Participants had an average age of 49 years ( $SD = 14$ ) and

<sup>1</sup> The top four changes reported by respondents were layoff or furlough ( $N = 196$ ), pay or benefits cut ( $N = 126$ ), digital transformation ( $N = 90$ ), and reorganization ( $N = 87$ ).

worked for their current organizations for 3.78 years ( $SD = 1.61$ ). There were 198 (47.5 %) female and 217 (52.0 %) male respondents. Regarding their primary industry, most participants worked in health-care and social assistance ( $N = 60$ , 14.4 %), followed by educational services ( $N = 46$ , 11 %), manufacturing ( $N = 41$ , 9.8 %), retail trade ( $N = 36$ , 8.6 %), and information technology ( $N = 34$ , 8.2).

### 3.2. Measures

All primary constructs were measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*).

#### 3.2.1. Charismatic rhetoric

Drawing from Shamir et al.'s (1994) seven propositions regarding leaders' charismatic rhetoric, we developed a seven-item scale to quantitatively measure the construct. Employees rated the extent to which top leaders from their organizations use charismatic rhetoric during the change. An Exploratory Factor Analysis was conducted to determine the dimensionality of seven items. Principal axis factoring with a varimax rotation was employed. Analysis of the factor matrix revealed a single factor solution with eigenvalue greater than 1, which explained 75 % variance. All item loadings scored greater than .80. The seven items were also internally consistent as an index ( $\alpha = .94$ ). A Confirmatory Factor Analysis was conducted to further validate the reliability and validity of the construct. Several indicators demonstrated that this construct had good reliability and validity. First, model fit was satisfactory (CFI = .98, TLI = .97, RMSEA = .10, SRMR = .02) according to Hu and Bentler's (1999) joint criteria: either Comparative Fit Index (CFI)  $\geq .96$  and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR)  $\leq 1.0$ , or Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)  $\leq .06$  and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR)  $\leq .08$ . s, all factor loadings were significant at the  $p < .001$  level with standardized path coefficients above .80 (ranging from .80 to .86) and the AVE (Average Variance Extracted) above the minimum threshold of .50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Composite reliability is .94, above the minimum threshold of .70 (Hair et al., 2009).

#### 3.2.2. Affective commitment to change

To examine employees' affective commitment, this study borrowed six items from Herscovitch and Meyer (2002) (e.g., "This change is a good strategy for this organization,"  $\alpha = .83$ ).

#### 3.2.3. Turnover intention

The turnover intention was measured with three items from Carmeli and Freund (2009). A sample item is "Recently, I think a lot about leaving the organization." The construct demonstrated good reliability ( $\alpha = .92$ ).

#### 3.2.4. Organizational identification

Organizational identification comprised six items from Mael and Ashforth (1992) and showed good reliability ( $\alpha = .90$ ). A sample item was "When someone criticizes this organization, it feels like a personal insult."

#### 3.2.5. Control variables

This study controlled for participant age, gender, tenure, and position to minimize the possible spurious effects these control variables might have on the results. These variables were chosen based on recommendations from Bernerth and Aguinis (2016). Prior research has shown that these variables systematically affect employees' attitudinal and behavioral responses to change (e.g., Hill et al., 2012). For instance, employees who have been in an organization longer tended to respond to change less favorably because they are used to the organization's old ways of operating (van Dam et al., 2008). Similarly, senior managers have shown higher resistance to change compared to less senior employees (Oreg, 2006). Table 1 displays the means, standard deviations,

**Table 1**

Bivariate Correlations, Reliability Coefficients, Means, and Standard Deviations for the Main Variables.

	1	2	3	4
1. Charismatic rhetoric	(.94)			
2. Affective commitment to change	.45**	(.83)		
3. Turnover intention	-.30**	-.51**	(.92)	
4. Organizational identification	.52**	.37**	-.23**	(.90)
<i>M</i>	4.66	4.51	3.45	4.57
<i>SD</i>	1.40	1.24	1.95	1.35

The numbers on the diagonal are reliability coefficients.

\*\* Correlation is significant at  $p < .001$  (2-tailed).

reliabilities, and correlations between the main constructs.

## 4. Results

A moderated mediation model was assessed using Hayes's PROCESS macro (Model 8) on SPSS with bootstrapping procedure ( $N = 5,000$  samples) (Hayes, 2013). Table 2 shows the regression coefficients of the moderated mediation model.

Hypothesis 1 predicted a direct negative relationship between leaders' use of charismatic rhetoric and employees' turnover intention. However, a significant relationship was not found ( $\beta = -.12$ ,  $p = .09$ ). Thus, **H1 was not supported**.

Hypothesis 2 proposed that employees' organizational identification moderates the negative relationship between charismatic rhetoric and employees' turnover intention such that the negative relationship is stronger when employees' organizational identification is low. The results showed that the direct effect of charismatic rhetoric on employees' turnover intention was moderated by employees' organizational identification:  $\beta = .09$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $p < .05$ , 95 % CI = [.01, .16]. Subsequent probing revealed that the relationship between charismatic rhetoric and turnover intention was stronger when employees' organizational identification was low ( $\beta = -.24$ ,  $SE = .09$ , 95 % CI = [-.41, -.07]) compared to moderate ( $\beta = -.12$ ,  $SE = .07$ , 95 % CI = [-.27, .02]) or high organizational identification ( $\beta = -.01$ ,  $SE = .10$ , 95 % CI = [-.19, .18]) (see Fig. 2). In fact, the negative relationship between charismatic rhetoric and employees' turnover intention was significant only when organizational identification was low. Thus, **H2 was supported**.

Hypothesis 3 concerned the mediating effect of affective commitment to change. As predicted, charismatic rhetoric led to stronger affective commitment to change, which in turn, decreased employees' turnover intention ( $\beta = -.23$ ,  $SE = .04$ , 95 % CI = [-.32, -.15]). **H3 was supported**.

Hypothesis 4 proposed a conditional indirect effect of *charismatic*

**Table 2**

Moderated-Mediation Regression: Affective Commitment to Change and Turnover Intention.

Predictor	Affective Commitment to Change	Turnover Intention
Age	.02*** (.01)	-.01 (.01)
Gender	-.20 (.10)	.14 (.16)
Position	-.04 (.06)	.15 (.08)
Tenure	-.11** (.04)	-.18** (.06)
Charismatic rhetoric	.32*** (.04)	-.12 (.07)
Organizational identification	.19*** (.05)	-.07 (.07)
Charismatic rhetoric X Organizational identification	.01 (.03)	.09* (.04)
Affective commitment to change		-.68*** (.08)
$R^2$	.27***	.32***

Note:  $N = 417$ . Coefficients are standardized. Standard errors are shown in parentheses.

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

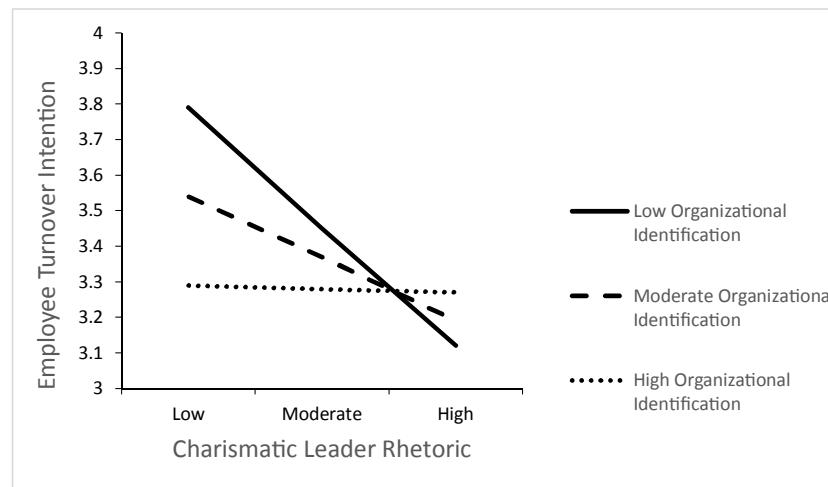


Fig. 2. The effects of charismatic leader rhetoric on employee turnover intention as a function of organizational identification.

rhetoric on turnover intention via affective commitment moderated by organizational identification. Examining the index of moderated mediation revealed that charismatic rhetoric on turnover intention through affective commitment was invariant at the mean and one standard deviation below/above the mean for organizational identification: Index =  $-.24$ , SE =  $.02$ , 95 % CI =  $[-.05, .04]$ . Therefore, **H4 was not supported**. Overall, this model explained 52.3 % of the variance for affective commitment to change and 56.9 % of the variance for turnover intention.

## 5. Discussions

The present study draws on the self-concept based motivational theory of charismatic leadership and substitutes for leadership theory to examine why and when top leaders' charismatic rhetoric can reduce employees' turnover intention during or after COVID-19 incurred organizational change. The study's findings indicated that top leaders' use of charismatic rhetoric during change led to followers' affective commitment to change, which in turn decreased their turnover intention. Furthermore, employees' organizational identification, a cross-situational psychological construct built up between employees and organizations over time, plays a critical role in moderating the relationship between the here-and-now charismatic rhetoric and employee turnover intention. When employees have low identification with organizations, top leaders' charismatic rhetoric to address the immediate change is more needed in that it decreased the likelihood for voluntary turnover. However, there was no direct association between charismatic rhetoric and employees' turnover intention as affective commitment to change fully mediated this relationship. Finally, the study did not find a conditional indirect effect as employees' organizational identification did not interact with leaders' charismatic rhetoric to affect turnover intention via affective commitment to change.

### 5.1. The impact of charismatic rhetoric during organizational change

As expected, the results showed that when leading the change, top leaders who skillfully leveraged charismatic rhetoric are more likely to foster followers' internalized commitment to the change initiative. This finding is in line with prior research, which associated change leadership with employees' openness to change (e.g., Groves, 2005) and commitment to change (e.g., Hill et al., 2012). Indeed, top leaders are viewed as organizational agents and key decision-makers during radical organizational change (Hill et al., 2012). By centering on the communicative function of charismatic leadership, this study reinforced the notion that change processes are rooted in and enacted through communication

(Lewis, 2019). From public relations' perspective, this finding supported our understanding that executive leaders not only empower public relations function (Grunig, 1993) but also serve as communication agents that directly influence employees' attitudes and behaviors (Jiang & Men, 2017; Men et al., 2020; Yue et al., 2019).

A large volume of research found that crisis or change is a prerequisite for charismatic leadership to emerge, and organizational members trust charismatic leaders in helping them navigate turbulent changes (e.g., Davis & Gardner, 2012). Drawing from the self-concept based motivation theory, this study revealed the mechanism through which charismatic rhetoric engenders employees' affective commitment to change. That is, by using charismatic rhetoric, leaders enabled followers' self-expression, self-consistency, self-esteem, and self-worth, and ultimately aroused employees' affective commitment. Given that existing literature in change management has largely confined the function of leadership communication as an informational source (cf. Hill et al., 2012), this study joins an emerging line of evidence in acknowledging the motivational effect of leadership communication during change (e.g., Endrejat et al., 2020; Men et al., 2020).

This research also supported Shin et al.'s (2015) claim that affective commitment to change is more malleable and likely to be influenced by employees' temporal states, such as emotions. Emotions, or affect, in turn, are contingent on situational factors such as change leadership (Luo et al., 2016; Shin et al., 2015). Echoing scholars such as Herold et al. (2008) and Ling et al. (2018), findings of this study highlighted the importance of studying situation-specific leadership communication behavior (compared to generic, cross-situational leadership behaviors). In other words, by examining the here-and-now influence of leadership communication during change episodes and by linking it to employees' commitment and loyalty, we reinforced the importance of studying change-specific leadership behavior.

### 5.2. The mediating role of affective commitment to change

Affective commitment to change encapsulates employees' innate belief that change is beneficial for organizations and employees (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002). Findings of this study revealed a negative relationship between employee turnover intention and affective commitment to change. In other words, employees who believed in the value of the change and viewed the change as an effective strategy are unlikely to leave the organization. This finding is consistent with previous work relating change commitment to decreased dysfunctional resistance behavior (Rahaman et al., 2020) and turnover intention (Shin et al., 2015).

Notably, this result reinforces the notion that employees need to



truly believe that the change will benefit them to stay with their organizations. If no psychological alignment exists, they will be more likely to leave (Shin et al., 2015). While the present study only measured affective commitment to change, previous literature noted that normative and continuance commitment to change has a limited impact on employees' withdrawal behavior. For instance, Shin et al. (2015) found that when employees are committed to change out of a sense of obligation (as opposed to an inherent belief), they may still decide to quit the organization. Thus, it seems unlikely that the role of affective change commitment in inhibiting employees' withdrawal behavior can be replaced by normative or continuance commitment.

Finally, the nonsignificant path from charismatic rhetoric to turnover intention pinpointed the critical mediating function of affective commitment to change. That is, effective leadership rhetoric indirectly prevented employees from quitting by first and foremost cultivating employees' affective commitment. Thus, this finding highlighted the importance of understanding employees' attitudes and emotions in the context of change.

### 5.3. The interaction between organizational identification and charismatic rhetoric

Increasingly, scholars have called for examining the boundary conditions that affect the influence of leadership on employees' attitudes and behaviors (Li et al., 2013). In light of this call, this study draws on substitutes for leadership theory to illustrate *when* charismatic rhetoric is more or less effective.

The present study's findings support the notion that follower self-concepts/perceptions serve as a moderator of leadership effectiveness (Kerr & Jermier, 1978). This finding corroborates studies by Li et al. (2013) and Wang et al. (2017) in which transformational leadership seems to be more effective in fostering employees' organizational citizenship behavior, adaptability, and job crafting when employees are less identified with their organizations. Similar to these findings and in line with the substitutes for leadership perspective, the current investigation revealed that employees' cross-situational organizational identification could replace change-specific leadership communication. To elaborate, the findings suggested that charismatic rhetoric was only effective in directly mitigating employees' turnover intention when employees have low organization identification. Nonetheless, when identification was moderate or high, the motivational effects of charismatic rhetoric disappeared. This finding adds to our understanding of organizational identification and its influence on employees' change outcomes. More specifically, high identifiers are more likely to take organizations' collective interest in heart to contribute to the success of the change, irrespective of change-related fear and uncertainty (van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003). The present result also implicates, from a different angle, that charismatic rhetoric is much-needed in conditions where employees do not feel a sense of belonging with their organizations.

### 5.4. Theoretical implications

This study has made several theoretical contributions. The first contribution is in integrating leadership communication into organizational change research. While communication has been recognized as one of the most crucial leadership competencies required to successfully handle crises and changes (Wooten & James, 2008), empirical work on the influence of leadership communication is sparse (Hill et al., 2012). The current study joins the most recent research endeavor (e.g., Men et al., 2020; Venus et al., 2019; Yue, 2021) to dive into the communication aspects of leadership rather than collapsing leadership communication into broader leadership style frameworks.

Second, while change communication and management has been widely acknowledged as an integral function of internal public relations (Li et al., 2021; Luo & Jiang, 2014; Neill, 2018), public relations scholars have only recently begun to explore the interconnections between

leadership, communication, and employee outcomes during change (e.g., Men et al., 2020; Neill et al., 2019). This study is among the first that identifies leaders' charismatic rhetoric as a pivotal force in driving employees' positive attitudinal and behavioral reactions, thereby reinforcing the growing expectation of executive leaders in fulfilling communication and public relations functions during organizational change (Men et al., 2020). While public relations scholars have long advocated the critical function of top leaders in delivering, enabling, and empowering quality internal communication (Grunig, 1993; Men & Bowen, 2017), the role of leaders' communication in the unique context of organizational change is insufficiently examined in the literature. The current study filled this gap and contributed to the notion that strategic leadership communication during organizational change should be an excellent characteristic of effective public relations (Men et al., 2020).

Third, drawing from the self-concept based motivational theory of charismatic leadership, we developed a model to explain why and how charismatic rhetoric from executive leaders impacted employees' affective commitment to change and turnover intention. While research on the function of leadership communication during change has increased, there is a lack of theoretical justification for why different communication styles may produce more or less desirable employee outcomes. Thus, the current study contributes to existing knowledge in attributing such influence to the rhetoric executive leaders adopt and highlights the importance of leveraging charismatic rhetoric to foster followers' self-concept related motivations during turbulent organizational changes.

Fourth, this study enriches internal communication literature by focusing on top organizational leaders. Although past research has analyzed how political and social movement leaders utilized charismatic rhetoric in communicating with the general publics (e.g., Davis & Gardner, 2012), few examined the benefits of using charismatic rhetoric to motivate employees. The current study thus sheds light on the utility of charismatic rhetoric in addressing internal organizational stakeholders. Specifically, we expanded the outcomes of charismatic rhetoric by associating it with higher employee commitment and lower turnover intention.

Finally, the current investigation adds to a growing body of research examining contingencies that may modify the relationship between leadership behaviors and followers' outcomes (Klein & House, 1995; Li et al., 2013). As Riggio et al. (2008) noted, the need to study follower characteristics is eclipsed by a focus on leaders' behavior. Although several studies on organizational change have begun to examine the role of (employee) individual differences in modifying leadership impact, these studies primarily focused on employees' personality or disposition (e.g., dispositional resistance to change, Fugate & Soenen, 2018). This study is among the first to investigate how employees' psychological attachment to the organization, which has been forged prior to the change, served as a contingency to affect employees' attitudes and behaviors during change. In this sense, this study provides a holistic picture of the interactive dynamics between the change-related, context-dependent leadership factor and the more stable, situationally irrelevant employee factor.

### 5.5. Practical implications

This study provides meaningful implications to organizational executive leaders and public relations professionals. Research has consistently shown that one of the most prominent challenges employees face during organizational change is receiving poor communication from the organization and its leadership (Barrett, 2002; Lewis, 2019). This study suggests that it is critical that executive leaders communicate organizational vision, values, and identities with employees during times of change. As trusted advisors to leadership, understanding which communication strategies executives should utilize elevates public relations' strategic function in organizational change management (Luo & Jiang, 2014). In other words, public relations professionals can

showcase their value in managing change by working closely with senior leaders to create a set of leadership communication strategies; doing so likely helps public relations managers gain access to decision making during or even after the change. Specifically, as communication counselors of organizational leaders, internal communication professionals need to instill the right public relations mindset into leaders' actions. Furthermore, they should develop programs and training to teach leaders how to frame change such that it will be aligned with followers' self-concepts in which their self-worth, self-expression, and self-consistency will be maintained and enhanced.

Second, organizations should pay attention to employees' affective commitment to change and leverage organizational resources to foster employees' enthusiasm toward change. Consistent with prior research (e.g., Shin et al., 2015), this study shows when employees think that the change serves a meaningful purpose and feel psychologically committed to the change, they are less likely to quit their organizations. Thus, employees' affective change commitment is pivotal to the implementation of successful change. In addition to encouraging and training executive leaders to adopt charismatic rhetoric, organizations can explore other practices (e.g., psychological empowerment, supervisor support, organizational listening, symmetrical internal communication) that may similarly foster employees' affective commitment to change.

Third, the power of organizational identification is particularly salient when top leaders lack systematic communication efforts during change. However, organizational identification is not established in one day but over many interactions between employees and organizations. Therefore, organizations should view cultivating employees' organizational identification as a long-term strategic goal that can prevent employees from quitting when top leaders' support is lacking. Moreover, leaders might leverage those already identified with the organization as change champions and direct their attention toward less identified followers. In summary, top leaders are encouraged to classify employees based on their personalities and preexisting relationships with organizations. To maximize positive employee reactions, organizational leaders need to tailor their actions instead of using a one-size-fits-all approach.

### 5.6. Limitations and future directions

The current study has several limitations that need to be addressed in future research. First, this study adopted a cross-sectional survey design, which limits its power for claiming causality. Although the impact of affective commitment to change on employees' subsequent behaviors has been empirically verified, it is still likely that employees who had planned to leave the organizations will show less commitment to change. Future research should utilize longitudinal or experimental designs to strengthen the causal relationship. Second, this study may suffer from single-source bias given all data were collected using employees' self-reports. It might have led to a less accurate depiction of leaders' charismatic rhetoric that deviated from reality. To solve this issue, future studies should collect data from multiple sources, including top leaders, followers, and change managers, to aggregate follower ratings. Third, while this study focused on COVID-19 incurred organizational changes, it did not distinguish specific types of changes. Therefore, this study could not conclude whether this model may work differently for a particular kind of change. Future research should use a case study approach to obtain a more nuanced, context-based understanding of leadership communication during change.

We illustrate three general directions for future research. First, scholars should consider other contextual factors that may modify the relationship between leadership communication and employee outcomes. For example, individuals' attributes, such as change-related self-efficacy and predisposed attitudes, may play a critical moderating role. Other cross-situational factors, such as employees' trust in their organizations and leaders and job satisfaction, may also moderate the proposed relationship. Overall, incorporating relevant contingencies at the

employee level will help organizations concentrate their efforts to address the most vulnerable group of employees in change communication. Second, future research can use discourse analysis to study the specific words, sentences, and speeches leaders send out to employees. Scholars can analyze leaders' verbal and written language and draw a more objective picture of change-related leadership communication. The third suggestion for future research is to explore other outcomes at the individual and organizational levels. Future scholars should investigate long-term impact changes exert on employees and measure employees' job satisfaction, work engagement, and relationships with organizations after the change.

### Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors report no declarations of interest.

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### Appendix A. Measures of Key Constructs

#### *Charismatic rhetoric leadership*

During these changes, top leaders (e.g., C-suite such as CEO, CFO, COO, president, or unit heads) in my organization:

- 1 reference our collective history and tradition as an organization
- 2 use inclusive language to reaffirm the commonalities that the employees and the leaders share
- 3 encourage employees to join together and foster solidarity
- 4 emphasize their similarities with employees
- 5 reference higher-level organizational values and beliefs
- 6 employ imagery or metaphors to provide employees with hope for the future
- 7 express confidence in employees to work towards common goals

#### *Affective commitment to change*

- 1 I believe in the value of the changes.
- 2 The changes are good strategies for my organization.
- 3 The changes serve important purposes.
- 4 I think that management is making a mistake by introducing the changes (R).
- 5 Things would be better without the changes (R).
- 6 The changes are not necessary (R).

#### *Organizational identification*

- 1 When someone criticizes my organization, it feels like a personal insult.
- 2 I am very interested in what others think about my organization.
- 3 When I talk about my organization, I usually say "we" rather than "they."
- 4 My organization's successes are my successes.
- 5 When someone praises my organization, it feels like a personal compliment.
- 6 If a story in the media criticized my organization, I would feel embarrassed.

#### *Turnover intention*

- 1 Recently, I think a lot about leaving the organization.
- 2 As soon as it is possible, I will leave the organization.

3 I intend to search for a position with another employer within the next year.

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