

Cultivating Positive Work Experiences: Leader-Member Exchange as a Pathway from Ebullient Supervision to Psychological Safety and Learning Motivation

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Abstract

This study intends to investigate the impact of ebullient supervision (ES) on psychological safety (PS) and learning motivation (LM) through the mediating role of leader-member exchange (LMX). Data were collected through a questionnaire from 423 supervisor-subordinate dyads employed in software houses in Pakistan. The findings show that ES, through the implementation of result-oriented workplace fun practices, positively influences the perception of psychological safety and boosts LM. The finding suggests that managers can adopt practices of an ebullient supervisor, such as playful designs, well-planned fun activities, and celebration of achievements, to motivate employees and develop deeper bonds with them.

Keywords: Ebullient supervision, learning motivation, psychological safety, leader-member exchange

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Introduction

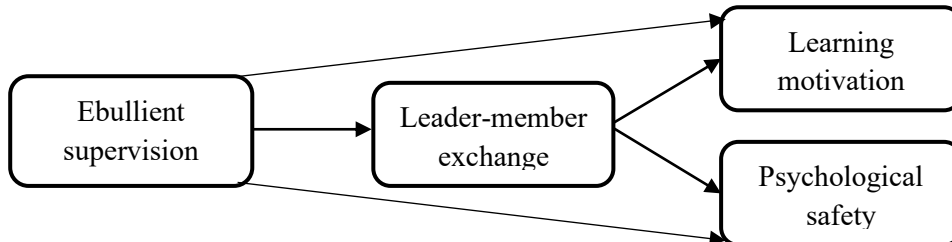
The contemporary work environment is increasingly defined by work complexities, rapid transformations, emotional demands, and elevated performance standards, conditions that deeply impact employees' psychological and motivational experiences (Blasco-Giner et al., 2025). In an era of continuous adaptation, the efficacy of leadership is not merely evaluated on a leader's competence to direct daily tasks or implement compliance but by the capacity to foster a work atmosphere that supports employees' psychological experiences and intrinsic motivation (Alshahrani et al., 2025; Imran et al., 2025). Leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping psychological perceptions and inner motivational conditions because they determine an employee's ability to execute different tasks and adapt to change, which is intended for effective functioning (Song et al., 2025). Specifically, within this leadership landscape, ebullient supervision (an emerging leadership style) has gained recognition as a modern and compassionate leadership approach that utilizes planned workplace fun interventions to drive engaging and impactful work experiences (Ahmed et al., 2025). The optimistic, energetic, playful leadership tactics help to shape a positive psychological interpretation of the work and motivate employees to engage in work authentically (Shetu et al., 2026). An ebullient supervisor is "one who, through words and deeds, helps create a work environment that is considered by a subordinate a fun place to work" (Ford et al., 2019, p. 2).

Although the initial studies on ebullient supervision (ES) have observed its positive impact on frequently studied employee work outcomes (Alajhar et al., 2025; Islam et al., 2024; Shetu et al., 2026), its influence on deeper psychological and motivational processes remains limited and requires closer attention. In this context, psychological safety (PS) and learning motivation (LM) have emerged as important psychological and motivational outcomes. PS reflects an employee's belief in voicing opinions and concerns without any threat or fear of negative repercussions (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023), whereas LM represents an individual's inherent motivation to engage in learning activities (Colquitt et al., 2000). Therefore, to advance the scant literature on ES, this study intends to explore the impact of ES on PS and LM. ES focuses on meaningful fun activities to ease workplace tensions, signal approachability, and encourage open communication of ideas and opinions (Alajhar et al., 2025), which enable employees to feel psychologically safe. An ebullient supervisor particularly promotes result-oriented playful work designs to nurture revitalizing experiences that internally motivate employees to enjoy work and exploit available learning opportunities with passion (Bakker et al., 2025), which may boost employees' LM. However, the strength of the leader-follower connection can play a crucial role in understanding the impact of ES on employee outcomes (Alajhar et al., 2025).

The impact of leadership on employee outcomes is deeply rooted in the quality of the leader-follower relationship (Vu et al., 2025). Furthermore, Forbes (2022) recommended that LMX is an important relational pathway that has the potential to facilitate an ebullient supervisor's ability to produce beneficial outcomes and invited further empirical scrutiny. Therefore, this study proposes LMX as a relational mediating mechanism. Modern workplaces are facing resource scarcity, and a stronger bond with the immediate leader based on trust and mutual respect leads to better access to resources (Gu et al., 2024). Therefore, employees who enjoy high-quality LMX with an ebullient supervisor are in a more comfortable and psychologically safe position to undertake risky assignments and engage in learning behaviors (Alajhar et al., 2025). The model can be supported with Blau's (1964) social exchange theory (SET). According to SET, when one party receives something valuable, it tries to reciprocate to the giver. On similar grounds, ebullient supervisors use fun practices, celebrations of achievement, and humor in daily conversations to improve leader-follower bonding (LMX), which employees feel is valuable, and in turn, reciprocate with constructive psychological responses, including a stronger perception of PS and higher levels of LM (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Conceptual model



Theorization and Hypotheses Development

In contemporary challenging work environments, leaders and managers are increasingly seeking impactful ways to constructively influence employees' psychological perceptions and inner motivational states to achieve superior performance (Alshahrani et al., 2025; Imran et al., 2025; Shetu et al., 2026). Accordingly, in recent years, ES has gained attention as an optimistic leadership approach that endorses happiness at work through structured fun activities to cultivate profound positive psychological perceptions (Aboramadan & Kundi, 2023; Alajhar et al., 2025). An ebullient supervisor improves employees' perception of PS by encouraging them to confidently express their concerns, take risks, and admit mistakes, which ultimately translates to better performance at work (Shetu et al.,

2026). The PS, ensured by an ebullient supervisor, facilitates employees sharing different concepts, even half-baked ideas, without any reluctance or hesitation (Alajhar et al., 2025). The carefully premeditated fun activities designed by an ebullient supervisor offer a psychologically safe space to employees and allow them to discover novel patterns, which lead to innovative breakthroughs (Shetu et al., 2026; Zahoor et al., 2025).

Likewise, an ebullient supervisor also tries to boost LM by especially promoting those playful work designs that motivate employees to refine their skills through engaging learning experiences (Ahmad et al., 2025). The fun work environment is extremely conducive to social bonding, and co-worker socialization promotes informal learning (Gnankob et al., 2024; Taheri et al., 2022). In a pleasurable environment, employees feel motivated to learn from colleagues and brainstorm new ways to solve problems (Tews et al., 2025). Learning is a lengthy process that occurs in phases, and it is extremely important to stay motivated so that each developmental opportunity is exploited to its full potential (Lundqvist et al., 2023). The unconditional support and encouraging playful culture can enhance LM, which can further expedite the learning process (Islam et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2022). According to SET (Blau, 1964), it is proposed that the fun leadership approach of ES creates a trustworthy and approachable work culture, which improves employees' sense of PS and intrinsically motivates them to enjoy work and pursue learning opportunities with self-endorsed motivation (LM). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₁: Ebullient supervision positively affects employees' perception of psychological safety (H1a) and learning motivation (H1b).

Mediating role of leader-member exchange (LMX)

The impact of ES on psychological and motivational experiences does not appear in isolation; rather, these conditions are socially constructed through workplace interactions (Alajhar et al., 2025). Among the many influences shaping these interactions, the quality of the leader-follower connection (LMX) is an important mechanism. An ebullient supervisor in daily interactions practices warm greetings, compliments, and light-hearted humor, which establishes trust and mutual respect and improves the supervisor-subordinate relationship (Ahmed et al., 2025). The bonding with an ebullient supervisor empowers employees to express themselves confidently, ultimately promoting PS (Shetu et al., 2026). Generally, higher levels of risk are associated with higher returns, and as LMX quality increases, employees' evaluation of undertaking interpersonal risks changes, and they are more likely to engage in risk-taking behaviors in a psychologically safe work environment (Wang et al., 2024). So, LMX can function as an impactful relational conduct through which high-quality exchanges under an ebullient supervisor are converted into feelings of PS at work, which leads to improved results (Alajhar et al., 2025).

In addition to PS, LMX can function as a facilitating mechanism for LM. An ebullient supervisor relies on a playful and empathetic approach to communicate with employees rather than relying only on formal authority (Ahmed et al., 2025). This enables a better relationship between the leader and follower and intrinsically motivates employees to approach formal and informal learning opportunities with more enthusiasm (Shetu et al., 2026). Within high-quality relationships, employees perceive learning as a safe activity, and they feel inherently motivated to acquire knowledge and upgrade their skill set (Hillberg Jarl, 2024). In line with SET (Blau, 1964), it is suggested that an ebullient supervisor, through playful work designs and fun activities, promotes positive leader-member exchanges; employees feel indebted and reciprocate with positive responses that include an elevated perception of PS and a heightened sense of LM. Therefore, the following is proposed:

H₂: Leader-member exchange mediates the relationships of ebullient supervision with psychological safety (H2a) and learning motivation (H2b).

Research Methodology

Participants and Procedure

This study collected data from the employees working in the IT sector located in Lahore, Rawalpindi, Islamabad, and Karachi. IT is one of the fastest-growing sectors in Pakistan with a high level of stress, which makes this sector an ideal setting to study fun (ebullient supervision).

The study estimated a sample of 580 using an item-to-response ratio (Harvey & Hammer, 1999) with the criteria of twenty responses for each question in the questionnaire (29*20). Thus, 580 IT employees/professionals were approached through a referral-based sampling technique (Gierczyk et al., 2024). The study, after getting permission, promised employees that their responses would not be shared with anyone except for the results of this study, because they were hesitant to provide information. Nevertheless, the researcher was lucky to collect 423 responses, which were used in the final analysis.

From a total of 423 participants, 208 (49.2%) were female, and 215 (50.8%) were male. The authors deliberately considered an equal number of responses from each gender to understand ebullient supervision without bias. Further, 96 (22.7%) of the respondents were less than 25 years of age, whereas most of the respondents, 129 (30.5%), were aged between 31 and 35 years. Interestingly, 141 (33.3%) of the respondents had 5-8 years of work experience, with an eighteen-year degree, i.e., 179 (42.3%).

Measures

The measures used in this study were adapted from past studies, and responses were collected on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree).

The study used a thirteen-item scale from the study of Ford et al. (2019) to understand employees' perception of their supervisors' ebullient style. The reliability value of the ebullient supervision scale was 0.89, and a sample item was "My supervisor uses a cheerful tone when speaking with subordinates."

The study used seven items of Graen and Uhl-Bien's (1995) scale for leader-member exchange, with a sample item of "How well does your supervisor/manager recognize your potential?" The reliability of this scale was 0.76.

Further, four items were used to measure learning motivation (Noe & Schmitt, 1986; VandeWalle, 1997) with a reliability of 0.90, and a sample item of this scale includes "I am motivated to learn the skills emphasized in the job."

Finally, another five items of Carmeli et al. (2010) were used to understand employees' perceptions about their psychological safety; a sample item of this scale was "It is safe to take a risk in this organization." The reliability value of this scale was 0.91.

Results

First, the 423 responses were examined for missing values, which is a common practice in social sciences. The data was free from missing values, perhaps because it was personally collected by the authors, and respondents were asked to reconsider their responses for missing values at the time of return. The study further noted that the values of skewness were less than ± 1 and the values of kurtosis were less than ± 3 , which confirmed normal distribution (Byrne, 2016). Finally, using the stem-and-leaf method, there were no outliers in the study; thus, the data were ready for further analysis.

Common method bias (CMB)

While collecting data on all variables at a single point in time, CMB can be a potential threat to the data. The questionnaires were shuffled, and respondents' identities were anonymous at the time of data collection. Later, through Harman's single-factor test, the first factor was noted to contribute 45.43% of the variance, which is within the limit of 50.0% (Podsakoff et al., 2012), confirming the absence of CMB.

Correlational and descriptive statistics

The results revealed a consistency in the mean values of all the variables (i.e., 2.97, 3.00, 2.98, and 2.96, respectively) for ebullient supervision, leader-member exchange,

psychological safety, and learning motivation (Table 1). The results also revealed that employees' perception of their supervisor's ebullient style positively correlates with their leader-member exchange ($r = 0.60$, $p = 0.000$), psychological safety perceptions ($r = 0.74$, $p = 0.000$) and learning motivation ($r = 0.73$, $p = 0.000$). Similarly, leader-member exchange also positively correlates with psychological safety perceptions ($r = 0.54$, $p = 0.000$) and learning motivation ($r = 0.51$, $p = 0.000$). It also confirmed the absence of multicollinearity in the data; hence, it was ready for hypothesis testing.

Table 1
Correlational and descriptive statistics

Variables	1	2	3	4
1- Ebullient supervision	1			
2- Leader-member exchange	0.60**	1		
3- Psychological safety	0.74**	0.54**	1	
4- Learning motivation	0.73**	0.51**	0.56**	1

Note. DG=Dispositional greed, KS=Knowledge sabotage, and SH=Shame.

Hypotheses testing

The results of linear regression are presented in Table 2. The results revealed that the ebullient supervision positively influences employees' perception of leader-member exchange ($\beta = 0.60$, $p = 0.000$, $SE = 0.33$), psychological safety ($\beta = 0.74$, $p = 0.000$, $SE = 0.38$), and learning motivation ($\beta = 0.73$, $p = 0.000$, $SE = 0.40$). These results confirmed the first hypothesis of the study.

Table 2
Results of linear regression

Hypothesis	β	SE	p	R ²
Ebullient supervision → Leader-member exchange	0.60	0.033	0.000	0.36
Ebullient supervision → Learning motivation	0.73	0.040	0.000	0.54

Mediation analysis

The mediation analyses were examined by identifying direct and indirect effects (Table 3). The study examined a structural model with observed variables (mean scores) using AMOS V.24. Further, for robust analysis, the study used bootstrapping with 3000 resamples to understand lower and upper intervals (Byrne, 2016). The indirect effect of ES on PS through LMX was significant ($\beta = 0.04$, $p = 0.031$), and there were no zero values involved between its lower and upper boundaries ($LL = 0.031$, $UL = 0.105$), which indicates

mediation. It was also observed that after the addition of a mediator (LMX), the effect of ES on PS still remained significant, which indicates partial mediation. This result supports H2a of the study. Similarly, the indirect effect of ES on LM through LMX was significant ($\beta = 0.11$, $p = 0.013$), and there were no zero values involved between its lower and upper boundaries (LL = 0.028, UL = 0.202), which indicates mediation. It was also observed that after the addition of a mediator (LMX), the effect of ES on LM still remained significant, which indicates partial mediation. This result supports H2b of the study.

Table 3

Results of mediation analysis

Variables	β	SE	P	bootstraps @ 3000	
				LLCI	ULCI
<i>The mediation of LMX between ES and LM</i>					
Direct effect	0.73	0.040	0.000	0.684	0.773
Indirect effect	0.11	0.045	0.013	0.025	0.202
<i>The mediation of LMX between ES and PS</i>					
Direct effect	0.74	0.038	0.000	0.692	0.787
Indirect effect	0.04	0.034	0.031	0.031	0.105

Discussion and Implications

The finding of H1(a) confirmed that an ebullient supervisor, through purposeful fun interventions, improves perception of PS, and the positive relationship between ES and PS offers foremost empirical evidence to the latest conclusions drawn by Alajhar et al. (2025), Mashkoor and Muhammad (2024), and Ahmed et al. (2025) that an ES is a non-controlling leadership approach that provides psychological safe space to employees by strategic use of fun activities, which help to reduce communication barriers and facilitate interpersonal risk and experimentation. In alignment with SET, H1 (b) was also confirmed, and the crucial finding further augments the scarce ES literature. This study is the first to provide evidence that ES positively impacts LM. The outcome lends empirical support to documented observations of Islam et al. (2024) that ES, as an extrinsic motivational mechanism, acts as a powerful force to drive internal motivation to learn, which further contributes to knowledge acquisition and the ability to experiment and innovate. In addition, the study also supports the argument of Tews et al. (2025) that a playful work atmosphere contributes to the development of learning motivation through informal learning sources like co-worker bonding. Such socialization encourages divergent thinking, helps to look at errors from a developmental perspective, and contributes to skill enhancement and knowledge acquisition (Islam et al., 2024; Shetu et al., 2026). Moreover,

the findings show that playful work designs promoted by an ebullient supervisor promote intrinsic motivation, which further leads to positive work performance (Bakker et al., 2025).

The findings of H₂(a) and H₂(b) confirm the role of LMX as an underlying mediating mechanism for ES with PS and LM. The outcome aligns with the argument of Alajhar et al. (2025) that an ebullient supervisor replenishes resources, such as prudently planned fun activities that signal support and reciprocation of positive exchanges. The finding is consistent with the prior evidence reported by Forbes (2022) that LMX can operate as a constructive intervening pathway in translating ES into positive workplace outcomes, in this study, PS and LM.

Theoretical implications

The study has made an early contribution by extending the ES literature by moving beyond widely examined employee outcomes and examining deeper psychological (PS) and motivational (LM) experiences. With the support of SET, the study responded to the call of Forbes (2022) to examine LMX with ES and confirmed the potential of LMX as a relational mediating mechanism. By doing so, the study contributed to the latest calls by Alajhar et al. (2025) and Mashkoor and Muhammad (2024) to expand and clarify the mediating mechanisms associated with ES. The study, by extending SET, suggests that social exchange can also happen because of playful and joyful supervisors' activities.

Further, the findings also offer insights into Deci and Ryan's (2000) self-determination theory (SDT). This theory suggests that at the fulfillment of fundamental psychological needs (i.e., autonomy, competence, and relatedness), individuals become intrinsically motivated. This study suggests that individuals working under ES with high-quality LMX feel psychologically comfortable because such supervisors, through enjoyable social exchange, playful work design, and supportive interactions, create such an environment. Working in such an environment evokes individuals' internal desire not only to engage in developmental activities but also to learn. Therefore, the study also contributes to SDT by showing that fun-based supervisory interactions can function as contextual conditions that stimulate individuals' PS and LM.

Practical implications

The findings offer practical guidance to leaders and managers. Firstly, a manager can promote a psychologically safe work culture by designing meaningful, fun interventions that are designed in a way that they don't give an impression of being inauthentic and forced. Moreover, fun activities such as brainstorming sessions, hackathons, game-oriented research tasks, and idea jams can provide employees with a psychologically safe space to

take risks and express opinions confidently. Managers can use AI to install playful work designs that hold the power to spark learning motivation through mental resets, and fun activities can support IT professionals to bypass routine logic and generate architectural breakthroughs (Bakker et al., 2025). For IT professionals, constant upgrading of knowledge on programming languages and frameworks is extremely important to stay relevant and successfully engage in innovative problem-solving (Islam et al., 2024). So, for software engineers, a manager can plan activities that offer great learning through trial and error, such as constraint-based prototyping, which is an activity that trains employees to develop coding solutions with limited resources.

Beyond the IT context, the study has essential implications for educational management. Educational leaders (i.e., academic administrators, program coordinators, departmental heads, and school principals) can support a better working and learning environment for the staff and teachers by adopting ebullient supervision. Purposefully designed fun interventions (e.g., team-building exercises, informal knowledge-sharing sessions, and collaborative problem-solving activities) may cultivate PS. This would enable educators to freely express concerns, openly discuss mistakes without fear of criticism, and experiment with novel teaching approaches. Such fun-related interventions can further stimulate LM by encouraging academic staff and teachers to engage in continuous learning, participate in professional development programs, and embrace pedagogical innovations. Consequently, educational institutions may benefit from enhanced collaboration, continuous improvement in teaching, knowledge sharing, and administrative practices.

The study also suggests that educational institutions should incorporate positive and relational leadership into their development programs for academic administration. The departmental heads and principals should be given training for enjoyable social interactions, interpersonal warmth, and supportive communication. The departmental heads, by fostering LMX, can create trusting, psychologically safe, and learning environments. Such environments ultimately contribute to organizational learning and successful implementation of educational reforms.

Limitations and Future Directions

There are some limitations associated with the study. The generalizability of the study is restricted as it is only conducted in the IT sector, so future studies can investigate the conceptual model in other sectors such as hospitality, banking, etc. In the future, ES can be explored with other important psychological and motivational outcomes that may include psychological empowerment, autonomous motivation, etc. Further, future studies can also explore the impact of ES on positive workplace outcomes facilitated by PS and LM to

advance the literature on mechanisms associated with understudied ES. In the future, to expand the understanding of relational processes within the context of ES and work outcomes, it is suggested to examine the LMX as a boundary condition with different conceptual models. The study's conceptual model can be replicated with other positive leadership styles. By examining the spillover and crossover effects of ES, future studies can offer valuable insights about the impact of ES beyond the workplace.

Conclusion

Ebullient supervision is a modern and evolving leadership style that possesses the potential to positively impact on the psychological and motivational experiences of employees. An ebullient supervisor relies on thoughtful, fun interventions rather than strict authority or control to connect with employees and enable them to adopt learning behaviors within a psychologically safe work environment.

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