

Psychological Flexibility as a Moderator Between Micromanagement Leadership and Employee Performance in Contemporary Organizations

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ABSTRACT

Hybrid work arrangements and intensified monitoring technologies have renewed concerns about micromanagement leadership in contemporary organizations. Micromanagement is characterized by excessive control, frequent checking, and limited delegation, and it is commonly linked with reduced autonomy, lower motivation, and performance deterioration. In parallel, psychological flexibility, grounded in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), has been identified as a personal resource that supports adaptive functioning under stress through acceptance, present-moment awareness, values, and committed action. This conceptual paper discusses micromanagement leadership, psychological flexibility, and employee performance, and it proposes a conceptual framework in which psychological flexibility moderates the relationship between micromanagement leadership and employee performance. The paper concludes with suggestions for future empirical studies regarding research paradigms, units of analysis, sampling, and measurement.

Keywords: Psychological Flexibility, Micromanagement, Employee Performance, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), Workplace Well-Being, Decent Job, Leadership.

INTRODUCTION

The world of work has been fundamentally reshaped since the COVID-19 pandemic, producing a “new normal” characterized by remote and hybrid arrangements, persistent mental-health strain, and what Gallup terms the “Great Detachment,” in which employees feel increasingly disconnected from their organizations (Harter & Wigert, 2025). Recent indicators underline the severity of this context: in 2024, employee engagement in the United States declined to a ten-year low, and only 21% of employees strongly agreed that their organization cared about their overall well-being (Harter & Wigert, 2025; Hedrick et al., 2024). This environment is further intensified by a widespread burnout crisis, with 59% of U.S. employees reporting moderate to high burnout in 2024 (Aflac, 2024; NAMI, 2025). Taken together, these trends signal a workplace climate in which sustaining motivation, commitment, and performance is increasingly difficult, and the role of leadership has become more consequential.

Within this setting, micromanagement has re-emerged as a particularly salient leadership problem. Defined by excessive control, constant scrutiny, and limited delegation, micromanagement constrains autonomy, erodes trust, and suppresses initiative which are the conditions that are central to task effectiveness and adaptive performance

(Bwalya, 2024; Vu, 2025). Although some managers justify close oversight as a mechanism for quality assurance, evidence generally associates micromanagement with lower motivation, higher turnover intentions, and reduced productivity (Mba, 2024; Vu, 2025). Moreover, remote work has expanded the behavioral repertoire of micromanagement through digital monitoring and surveillance technologies, potentially amplifying employees' perceptions of distrust and intensifying strain (Dong et al., 2025; Hickman et al., 2020). These developments suggest that the micromanagement and performance relationship may be especially relevant in contemporary work designs where autonomy and discretion are both expected and contested.

At the same time, emerging research emphasizes that employees are not passive recipients of workplace stressors; rather, individual psychological resources can shape how adverse leadership climates translate into work outcomes. Psychological flexibility (PF), derived from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), has received growing attention as a protective capacity in demanding contexts. PF refers to the ability to contact the present moment more fully and to persist or change behavior in the service of valued ends (Hayes et al., 1999). Importantly, PF is not defined by the absence of distress; instead, it reflects the capability to pursue meaningful goals while experiencing difficult thoughts and emotions (Holmberg et al., 2020). Consistent with this framing, workplace interventions targeting PF have been linked to improved stress resilience, reduced burnout, and enhanced functioning and performance (Archer et al., 2024; Rad et al., 2025).

Conceptual work has begun to explore boundary conditions that may alter the impact of micromanagement on employee outcomes. For example, Mishra et al. (2022) proposed emotional intelligence as a moderating factor, suggesting that leaders with higher emotional intelligence may attenuate the negative consequences of micromanaging behavior. Extending this line of inquiry, the present conceptual paper shifts attention from leader characteristics to employee resources. Specifically, we argue that psychological flexibility may moderate the relationship between micromanagement leadership and employee performance. While the adverse association between micromanagement and performance is frequently reported (Vu, 2025) and the benefits of PF are increasingly documented (Archer et al., 2024), the interactive role of PF in the micromanagement and performance linkage remains under-theorized, representing a meaningful gap in current scholarship.

Accordingly, this paper develops a conceptual model positioning psychological flexibility as a buffering condition under which the negative effects of micromanagement on employee performance may be weaker. The paper proceeds by synthesizing recent literature on micromanagement, employee performance, and psychological flexibility, with emphasis on studies published since 2020, and then advances propositions to guide empirical testing. By foregrounding employee psychological flexibility as a resilience-enabling mechanism in controlling leadership climates, this work offers a contemporary perspective on sustaining performance and well-being in the post-pandemic workplace.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Micromanagement in the Contemporary Workplace

Micromanagement is commonly defined as a supervisory approach marked by excessive control, heightened scrutiny, and frequent intrusion into subordinates' tasks and decisions (Bwalya, 2024; Staff, 2025). Typical behavioral indicators include reluctance to delegate, overly prescriptive instructions, repeated requests for updates, and an emphasis on monitoring *how* work is done rather than evaluating *what* is achieved (Bwalya, 2024; Indeed, 2025). In the post-pandemic environment, the practice has taken on new forms as remote and hybrid work arrangements increase managers' reliance on technology-mediated coordination. Consequently, micromanagement may be enacted through constant digital check-ins, real-time tracking tools, and implicit expectations of continuous availability which are dynamics that can intensify work-life boundary erosion and perceived surveillance (Dong et al., 2025).

The prevailing literature portrays micromanagement as largely detrimental to employees and organizations. Empirical and practitioner-oriented evidence consistently associates micromanagement with reduced intrinsic motivation, lower job satisfaction, diminished creativity, and weakened engagement (Mba, 2024; Vu, 2025). Vu's (2025) systematic review, for example, indicates that when employees experience restricted autonomy and perceive their expertise as underutilized, their felt responsibility and willingness to invest discretionary effort decline which are the conditions that can contribute to disengagement and "quiet quitting" (Hamilton, 2025). These effects may be particularly pronounced among younger cohorts; Ryan and Cross (2024) suggest that millennial employees interpret micromanagement as a signal of distrust, which amplifies discouragement and dissatisfaction. In addition, constant oversight can cultivate an error-avoidant climate in which employees fear mistakes, thereby discouraging experimentation, learning, and prudent risk-taking which are the elements that are central to innovation and adaptability (Laker, 2024).

Recent scholarship, however, cautions against treating micromanagement as uniformly harmful across contexts. Galindez et al. (2025) report a positive association between perceived micromanagement and performance within a specific corporate setting, implying that close oversight may be interpreted as supportive structure under certain contingencies (e.g., inexperienced staff, time-sensitive tasks, or precision-critical work). This position is broadly compatible with contingency theory, which argues that leadership effectiveness depends on situational demands and follower readiness (Fiedler, 1967). Complementing this nuance, Milner (2024) introduces the notion of the “motivational micromanager,” who offers abundant guidance with positive intent. Yet intent does not necessarily negate impact: even well-meaning over-involvement can undermine autonomy, signal low confidence in employees’ competence, and contribute to exhaustion over time (Milner, 2024). Taken together, these perspectives suggest that micromanagement outcomes are shaped not only by controlling behaviors, but also by contextual demands and, critically, by how employees psychologically interpret and respond to those behaviors.

Psychological Flexibility: The Core of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)

Psychological flexibility (PF) is the central construct and primary intervention target of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), a “third wave” cognitive-behavioral approach that emphasizes adaptive functioning rather than symptom elimination (Rad et al., 2025; Thomson et al., 2025). PF is commonly defined as the capacity to remain in contact with the present moment despite unpleasant thoughts, emotions, or bodily sensations while choosing actions that are guided by situational demands and personal values (Fuchs et al., 2023; Holmberg et al., 2020). Rather than attempting to suppress or control internal distress, PF reflects a shift in one’s relationship to inner experiences so that behavior is less dominated by avoidance and more aligned with meaningful goals.

ACT conceptualizes PF through six interrelated processes, often summarized by the “Hexaflex” model: acceptance, cognitive diffusion, present-moment awareness, self-as-context, values, and committed action (Hayes et al., 2012). As a set, these processes enable individuals to acknowledge discomfort, loosen the grip of unhelpful cognitions, and persist with constructive behavior in line with chosen values. Within organizational settings, PF has increasingly been framed as a resilience-related resource because it supports effective functioning under chronic pressure, ambiguity, and interpersonal strain. Evidence from workplace studies indicates that ACT-informed interventions can enhance employees’ work-related PF and produce downstream benefits such as improved stress resilience and reduced exhaustion (Archer et al., 2024). Similarly, Rad et al. (2025) concludes that workplace ACT programs are generally effective in strengthening mechanisms closely tied to PF, including mindful awareness, acceptance, and diffusion. In high-demand contexts such as healthcare, higher PF has also been linked to stronger work engagement and reduced distress, underscoring its protective role when employees face sustained stressors. Collectively, this literature positions PF as a psychologically grounded capability that may help employees maintain performance and well-being even in challenging work climates (Archer et al., 2024; Holmberg et al., 2020).

Employee Performance in the Modern Context

Conceptualizations of employee performance have expanded beyond narrow indicators of output or task completion. In contemporary organizations particularly within knowledge-intensive and service economies, performance is increasingly treated as a multidimensional construct that includes task performance and contextual performance, such as organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), adaptability, collaboration, and innovation (Li & Rasiyah, 2025; Seong, 2025). Importantly, sustainable performance is now widely viewed as inseparable from employee well-being: prolonged burnout, high stress, and disengagement directly threaten long-term productivity, service quality, and retention (Harter & Wigert, 2025; SHRM, 2024). This broader framing is especially relevant in post-pandemic workplaces where employees are expected to remain agile under changing demands while also navigating elevated psychological strain.

Remote and hybrid work have further complicated how performance is enacted and evaluated. While flexibility can support productivity by reducing commuting strain and enabling better person–role fit (Aksoy et al., 2025; Harter & Wigert, 2025), distributed work can also create coordination challenges and reduce informal learning, mentorship, and social cohesion (Harter & Wigert, 2025). Bloom et al. (2024) report that hybrid work arrangements can maintain performance while reducing quit rates, suggesting that flexibility can enhance retention without sacrificing output. Yet, the effectiveness of hybrid work appears to depend heavily on leadership practices and organizational culture; supportive management, clear goals, and trust-based systems may be more influential for performance and satisfaction than work location alone (Harter & Wigert, 2025).

Leadership therefore remains a central determinant of the conditions under which modern performance emerges. Constructive styles such as transformational leadership have been associated with enhanced performance through mechanisms like psychological empowerment and engagement (Asif et al., 2025; Ibrahim et al., 2024). In contrast, destructive or overly controlling styles may erode the psychological foundations of performance particularly autonomy, trust, and psychological safety thereby constraining both task effectiveness and discretionary contributions such as innovation and OCB (Mba, 2024; Vu, 2025). This contrast reinforces the

importance of examining not only whether micromanagement affects performance, but also the boundary conditions under which employees can sustain performance despite controlling supervision.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Building on the boundary-condition logic advanced by Mishra et al. (2022) who position emotional intelligence as a moderator of the micromanagement–performance relationship and this paper develops a related but distinct conceptual model (Figure 1) in which **psychological flexibility** moderates the effects of micromanagement on employee performance. The model is anchored in **Trait Activation Theory**, which argues that situations provide cues that elicit or suppress individual differences and shape how personal capacities translate into behavior and outcomes (Zhang et al., 2025). In the present framework, **micromanagement leadership** is conceptualized as a negative situational cue (i.e., a chronic workplace stressor characterized by heightened control and low autonomy), whereas **psychological flexibility** represents an internal regulatory resource that influences how employees interpret, experience, and respond to that cue. In short, micromanagement is expected to undermine performance, but the extent of harm should vary depending on employees' capacity to remain present, disengage from unhelpful cognitions, and persist with value-consistent action under pressure.

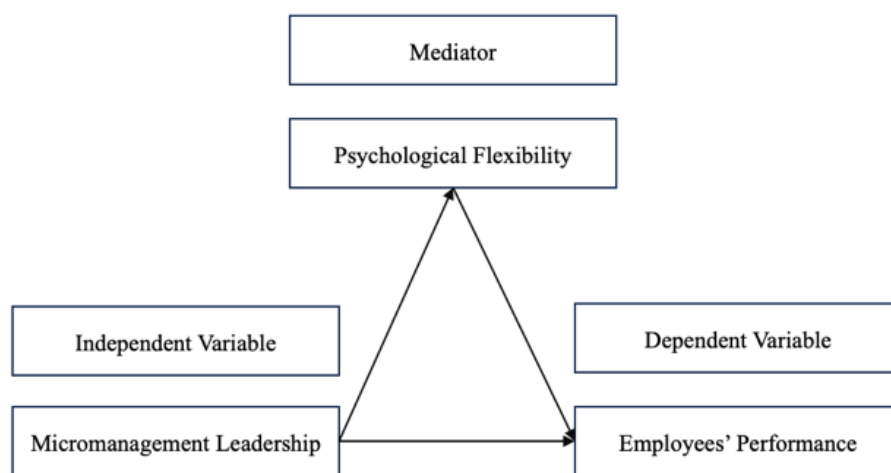


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the study

Based on the proposed framework and the reviewed literature, the following propositions are offered for future empirical examination.

Proposition 1: Micromanagement is negatively associated with employee performance.

This proposition forms the baseline relationship in the model. Micromanagement is defined by excessive oversight, frequent correction, and constrained delegation typically weakens the conditions that support sustained performance (Bwalya, 2024; Vu, 2025). By limiting autonomy and signaling distrust, micromanagement can diminish intrinsic motivation, reduce learning and initiative, and foster risk avoidance, thereby constraining proactive problem-solving, creativity, and adaptive performance (Mba, 2024). Employees operating under persistent scrutiny may become dependent on approval, disengage from discretionary effort, and narrow their contributions to “safe” task execution, which can reduce task performance as well as contextual performance (e.g., OCB, collaboration) and increase withdrawal outcomes (Mishra et al., 2022; Vu, 2025). Although close oversight may yield short-term benefits in specific contingencies (e.g., novice employees or precision-critical tasks) (Galindez et al., 2025), the dominant literature indicates that micromanagement is more likely to impair performance particularly when work requires judgment, creativity, and sustained engagement.

Proposition 2: Psychological flexibility is positively associated with employee performance.

Psychological flexibility is theorized as a functional capacity that supports effective action under strain by enabling individuals to experience difficult thoughts and emotions without becoming behaviorally constrained by them (Holmberg et al., 2020). Employees high in PF are more likely to maintain attentional control and persist with task demands despite stress, uncertainty, or self-doubt (Archer et al., 2024). The ACT processes underlying PF provide a clear theoretical pathway to performance outcomes: cognitive diffusion reduces the influence of self-

critical or threat-based thinking; acceptance limits avoidance responses such as procrastination or disengagement; values clarify priorities and strengthen motivation; and committed action channels those priorities into consistent goal-directed behavior (Hayes et al., 2012). Consistent with this logic, PF has been associated with stronger work engagement, lower burnout, and improved functioning and performance indicators, supporting a direct positive relationship between PF and employee performance (Archer et al., 2024; Holmberg et al., 2020).

Proposition 3: Psychological flexibility moderates the negative relationship between micromanagement and employee performance, such that the relationship is weaker when psychological flexibility is high.

This is the central boundary-condition claim of the paper. Micromanagement frequently elicits adverse internal responses, including frustration, anxiety, perceived incompetence, and a sense of being distrusted. Under low psychological flexibility, employees may become fused with these experiences (e.g., “I’m not trusted,” “I can’t do anything right”), increasing the likelihood of experiential avoidance (e.g., psychological withdrawal, reduced initiative) and, consequently, performance decrements. In contrast, employees high in psychological flexibility are theorized to respond differently: they may acknowledge discomfort without avoidance (acceptance), treat distrust-related cognitions as transient mental events rather than literal truths (diffusion), and continue acting in accordance with work-related values (committed action). As a result, even if micromanagement remains unpleasant, its translation into reduced performance should be attenuated. This buffering argument aligns with evidence that psychological flexibility can reduce the impact of workplace stressors on adverse outcomes such as burnout and turnover intentions (Baquero et al., 2025; Yildirim et al., 2024).

Together, these propositions clarify a testable conceptual model in which micromanagement exerts a generally negative influence on performance, while psychological flexibility operates both as a direct performance-supporting resource and as a moderator that shapes employee vulnerability to controlling leadership climates.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The conceptual framework proposed in this paper offers a novel lens for understanding the elaborate dynamics of leadership and performance in the modern workplace. By positing psychological flexibility as a key moderating variable at the employee level, this paper moves beyond a simplistic condemnation of micromanagement to explore the conditions under which its deleterious effects might be attenuated. This is particularly salient in the post-pandemic era, where employee well-being and psychological resources have become central to organizational resilience and success.

The core argument is that the damage caused by micromanagement is not solely a function of the manager's behavior, but also of the employee's capacity to respond to the resulting psychological distress. Micromanagement creates a stressful environment by threatening fundamental psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. For employees with low psychological flexibility, this stress can easily translate into a downward spiral of negative thoughts, emotional reactivity, and behavioral disengagement, leading to the well-documented decline in performance. However, for those with high psychological flexibility, the same external stressor does not necessarily lead to the same internal collapse. These individuals can unhook from unhelpful thoughts, make room for uncomfortable feelings, and stay focused on what matters to them, thereby creating psychological distance from the stressful leadership style in their work output.

This model has significant theoretical implications. It integrates leadership theory with concepts from clinical and health psychology (ACT), providing a more holistic view of workplace behavior. It extends the work of Mishra et al. (2022) by shifting the moderating variable from the leader (emotional intelligence) to the follower (psychological flexibility), emphasizing the active role employees play in shaping their own work experiences and outcomes. This aligns with a broader shift in organizational psychology toward understanding and cultivating individual psychological resources, such as psychological capital (PsyCap) and resilience (Gojny-Zbierowska et al., 2024; Kuhlmann & Klingenberg, 2025), as drivers of positive organizational outcomes.

If empirically validated, our propositions would have substantial practical implications for organizations. First, while the primary goal should remain reducing micromanagement through better leadership training, this model suggests a complementary strategy: bolstering employees' psychological flexibility. Organizations can invest in training programs based on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). Numerous studies have shown that even brief ACT interventions can effectively increase psychological flexibility and yield tangible benefits, including reduced stress, lower burnout, and improved well-being (Archer et al., 2024; Rad et al., 2025; Thomson et al., 2025). Such programs could be offered as part of standard employee development, wellness initiatives, or onboarding processes.

Second, this framework can inform talent management and employee support. During recruitment, assessing for traits related to psychological flexibility could help identify candidates who are more resilient to various

workplace stressors, including difficult management styles. For existing employees, coaching and development could focus on building PF skills, empowering them to cope more effectively with challenging work environments rather than feeling like passive victims. This approach fosters a culture of personal agency and resilience, which is critical in today's volatile work landscape.

Finally, understanding this dynamic can help managers themselves. A leader who recognizes that their close supervision is causing distress can be trained not only to change their own behavior but also to support their team in developing the psychological skills to handle pressure more effectively. This creates a dual pathway to a healthier, more productive team environment.

This paper is conceptual and, as such, its primary limitation is the lack of empirical data to support its propositions. The proposed relationships require rigorous testing through quantitative studies. Future research should employ a moderated-mediation design to test the whole model. This would involve measuring perceived micromanagement, psychological flexibility, and various dimensions of employee performance (task, contextual, innovative) over time. A longitudinal study would be particularly valuable for establishing causality and observing how these dynamics unfold.

Another limitation is the focus on a single moderating variable. Many factors influence employee performance. Future studies could incorporate other individual differences (e.g., the Big Five personality traits, self-efficacy) and contextual factors (e.g., organizational culture, job demands, remote work intensity) to build a more comprehensive model. For example, how does psychological flexibility interact with a trait like conscientiousness in the face of micromanagement? Research shows conscientiousness is linked to leadership effectiveness and performance (Zhu & Jia, 2025), and its interplay with PF would be a fruitful area of inquiry.

Furthermore, measuring micromanagement can be challenging. As Milner (2024) points out, the manager's intent can color the behavior. Future research should use validated scales and, if feasible, supplement self-report data with multi-rater feedback (e.g., from peers and managers) to provide a more objective picture of leadership behaviors. Finally, this model should be tested across different industries, cultures, and job roles to assess its generalizability.

In today's rapidly changing work environment, it is more important than ever to understand what helps employees stay resilient and perform well. This paper has proposed a conceptual framework suggesting that psychological flexibility which is a key mental resource and acts as a moderator between micromanagement and employee performance. Although micromanagement is generally a harmful leadership style, its adverse effects may not be the same for everyone. Employees who can manage their internal discomfort, detach from negative thoughts, and stay focused on their values may be able to maintain their performance even when working under a controlling manager.

The propositions in this paper suggest a need for new empirical research to investigate this relationship. If this model is validated, it could offer organizations a two-part strategy to improve performance: first, by training leaders to be more empowering, and second, by investing in the psychological flexibility of all employees. By developing these internal skills, organizations can help their employee's not just cope but succeed, creating a more resilient, high-performing workforce ready for the challenges of the modern workplace.

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