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Antecedents of Amoral Leadership and Its Double-Edged Sword Effect

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Abstract

Why do many leaders in reality neither guide nor respond to ethical issues in business activities? How do subordinates react to such behavior? This study explores the antecedents and formation mechanisms of amoral leadership based on situational strength theory, investigates the double-edged sword effect of amoral leadership on multi-level job performance and its underlying process mechanisms using social information processing theory and the instrumentality-morality cognitive framework, and identifies from an observer's perspective the situational conditions that moderate the effects of amoral leadership, such as leaders' high performance demands and team-perceived leader bottom-line mentality. Through a systematic investigation of the antecedents and consequences of amoral leadership, this research provides insights for organizational management practices aimed at addressing amoral leadership.

Full Text

Antecedents and Double-Edged Sword Effect of Amoral Management

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Abstract

Why do many leaders in practice fail to guide or respond to ethical issues in business activities? How do subordinates react to such leadership? Drawing on situational strength theory, this study investigates the antecedents and formation

mechanisms of amoral management. Using social information processing theory and the instrumental-ethical cognition framework, we examine the double-edged sword effects of amoral management on multi-level work performance and their underlying processes. Additionally, from an observer's perspective, we identify contextual conditions that moderate these effects, such as leaders' high-performance demands and team-perceived leader bottom-line mentality. Through a systematic investigation of the generation mechanisms and consequences of amoral management, this study provides insights for organizational management practices aimed at addressing this leadership style.

Keywords: amoral management, bottom-line mentality, moral decoupling, work performance, instrumental-ethical cognition framework

Introduction

In January 2022, Walmart was fined 300,000 RMB by market supervision authorities for deceptive practices in its Sam's Club app, which automatically posted five-star reviews. This case illustrates potential leadership responsibilities: In Scenario One, the leader explicitly instructs programmers to design a system that displays authentic customer reviews without "traps" or "tricks" to mislead consumers (clearly absent in this case). In Scenario Two, the leader encourages, guides, or implicitly suggests designing an automatic five-star review system that inflates positive ratings to mislead consumers while avoiding personal accountability (pessimistically, this unethical leadership process likely existed behind the case). In Scenario Three, the leader emphasizes business requirements such as attractive interface design, user-friendliness, and prominent display of important information, while showing little concern for or guidance on the ethical implications and consequences of the system design. This third scenario—moral "inaction" in leadership—appears to be the most common phenomenon in everyday management.

Just as matters in life are not simply good or bad, morality-based leadership is not black and white. The first two scenarios represent clearly correct moral leadership and clearly wrong unethical leadership, respectively, while the third scenario represents the focus of this study: amoral management. Positioned between moral and immoral leadership, amoral management constitutes the "majority" of management practices (Carroll, 1987). Synthesizing existing research on the concept (e.g., Carroll, 1987; Greenbaum et al., 2015; Quade et al., 2022), Ren et al. (2022) define amoral management as leaders' persistent failure to respond to subordinates' ethical concerns and to demonstrate ethical requirements through communication, modeling, and rewards/punishments. Amoral managers are not necessarily lacking ethical awareness or moral cognition; they may simply believe that business rules differ from those in other life domains, requiring only compliance with minimum legal standards rather than consideration of moral factors in decisions and actions (Carroll, 1987). This implies that the personal characteristics of amoral managers are morally ambiguous—even morally sound individuals may choose to practice amoral management. High lev-

els of amoral management manifest as persistent moral “inaction,” characterized by consistent absence of moral consideration and guidance in leadership work, along with avoidance of subordinates’ ethical questions. For instance, leaders do not intervene or guide when subordinates’ work involves ethical issues, and remain neutral or avoid responsibility when moral decisions are required (Quade et al., 2022).

In practice, perhaps because amoral management is so pervasive, ethical scandals frequently reported in the media are rarely attributed to it. Scholars have primarily focused on ethical leadership (e.g., ethical leadership) and unethical leadership (e.g., abusive supervision) (e.g., Zhao et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2016; Shen & Yang, 2020; Treviño et al., 2003), while seriously neglecting research on amoral management. Only a handful of scholars have explored the concept theoretically (e.g., Carroll, 1987; Treviño et al., 2003; Greenbaum et al., 2015). Until recently, Quade et al. (2022) developed a scale for amoral management and validated its positive effect on subordinates’ unethical behavior, while Ren et al. (2022) found this effect is particularly significant in highly competitive contexts. Beyond these studies, empirical research on amoral management remains virtually nonexistent, leaving us with limited understanding of why this widely endorsed leadership style emerges and what its consequences are. Why do managers choose to practice amoral management? Does it have constructive or destructive effects on subordinates’ work performance? What are the underlying mechanisms and boundary conditions? These questions urgently demand attention from both practitioners and researchers. Accordingly, this study proposes a multi-level theoretical framework to examine the antecedents and consequences of amoral management, drawing on situational strength theory and social information processing theory.

2.1 Conceptual Development, Definition, and Measurement of Amoral Management

Carroll (1987) first proposed the concept of amoral management, positioning it alongside moral leadership and immoral leadership as three distinct ethical leadership types. Carroll (1987) clarified that amoral management is not simply the midpoint on a continuum between moral and immoral leadership; it possesses unique characteristics. If moral leadership is white (clearly correct) and immoral leadership is black (clearly wrong), amoral management is gray (an intermediate state). Unlike immoral leadership, which actively opposes ethical norms and violates accepted ethical standards for corporate or personal gain (Brown & Mitchell, 2010), and unlike moral leadership, which adheres to both legal and ethical standards (Brown et al., 2005), amoral management operates within legal boundaries (Carroll, 1987; Entwistle & Doering, 2023). Based on extensive statistical reports of managerial behavior, ethics research reports, and discussions with corporate managers, Carroll (1987) found that the distribution of amoral, moral, and immoral leaders in business follows a normal curve, with amoral managers constituting the majority. Carroll (1987) distinguished

between unintentional and intentional amoral managers: unintentional amoral managers lack moral awareness and cognition, displaying ignorance and carelessness regarding moral issues (not the focus of this study), while intentional amoral managers may possess moral awareness and cognition but deliberately ignore moral issues in pursuit of bottom-line performance. If amoral managers have a moral guide at all, it is constrained by legal statutes rather than legal spirit, viewing legal 底线 as the boundary for business activities (Carroll, 1987; Entwistle & Doering, 2023).

More than a decade after Carroll's conceptualization, Treviño et al. (2003) interviewed senior executives and corporate ethics officers, categorizing leaders' ethical performance as ethical leadership, unethical leadership, or ethically neutral leadership. Ethically neutral leadership—characterized by self-centered leaders concerned only with personal and organizational bottom-line interests rather than others or ethics (Treviño et al., 2003)—aligns closely with Carroll's (1987) description of amoral management. However, some scholars argue that ethical neutrality is merely managers' intention or fantasy, as indifference and avoidance of ethics constitute a choice that creates gray space for moral issues (Laasch et al., 2019). Nevertheless, both ethically neutral and amoral leadership describe characteristics from the actor's perspective; observers cannot discern the purposes and motivations behind amoral management. Moreover, because subordinates' perceptions may deviate from leaders' actual traits—especially since amoral management may be an active choice not reflecting true amorality—the concept lacked clear definition.

Consequently, Greenbaum et al. (2015) refined and defined amoral management. Managers may personally support ethics but fail to use ethical communication and explicitly demonstrate ethical practices to support socially salient ethical issues, making it difficult for subordinates to perceive leaders' clear stance on ethical matters. Combining Carroll's (1987) amoral management and Treviño et al.'s (2003) ethically neutral leadership, Greenbaum et al. (2015) defined amoral management as managers' failure to use ethical communication and explicitly demonstrate ethical practices to support socially salient ethical issues. This definition conveys two key implications: first, amoral managers' failure to use ethical communication to explicitly demonstrate moral management practices may be perceived by subordinates as amoral; second, amoral managers' personal moral characteristics lack clarity. Managers may possess moral traits but choose not to consider ethics in their leadership process—meaning even “good people” may practice amoral management. In contrast, Treviño et al.'s (2000) “two-pillar model” of ethical leadership includes both moral person and moral manager, reflecting consistency between person and management, whereas amoral management's definition does not reflect such consistency. High amoral management manifests as leaders' persistent abandonment of ethical considerations in the workplace, making avoidance of ethical questions the norm in management practice (Quade et al., 2022). Low amoral management is not simply the opposite of high amoral management; it may also indicate ethical or non-ethical leadership.

Building on Greenbaum et al.'s (2015) definition, Quade et al. developed a measurement tool for amoral management from an observer's perspective using rigorous scientific methods. The scale comprises four items assessing employees' evaluation of their supervisors: (1) My supervisor is uninvolved when moral questions arise in my work; (2) My supervisor is absent when moral questions arise in my work; (3) My supervisor remains neutral when moral decisions need to be made; (4) My supervisor avoids responsibilities involving moral considerations. Quade et al. validated the scale, demonstrating good reliability and discriminant validity from ethical leadership, laissez-faire leadership, and abusive supervision.

2.2 Distinctions Among Amoral, Ethical, and Unethical Leadership

Carroll (1987) compared the characteristics of ethical, amoral, and unethical leadership across dimensions including ethical norm compliance, motivation, goals, legal orientation, and strategy, as shown in Table 1. Unlike ethical and unethical leadership, which take clear stances on ethical issues, amoral management maintains an ambiguous ethical position.

Table 1 Characteristics of Unethical Leadership, Amoral Management, and Ethical Leadership

Dimension	Unethical Leadership	Amoral Management	Ethical Leadership
Ethical Norms	Management decisions, actions, and behaviors demonstrate opposition to morality (ethics); decisions violate accepted ethical standards, implicitly representing active denial of morality	Management is neither moral nor immoral, simply amoral; decisions fall outside the scope of moral judgment; management activities exceed specific moral order; unintentional amorality means lack of ethical perception	Management activities conform to moral or rights standards; behavior meets accepted professional conduct standards; motivation is benevolent
Motivation	Management wants success but only within sound moral frameworks (fairness, justice, due process)	Selfish. Management cares only about personal or company gains	Benevolent but appears selfish, disregarding impact on others

Dimension	Unethical Leadership	Amoral Management	Ethical Leadership
Goals	Profitability at any cost, regardless of other goals	Profitability within legal and ethical standards	Profitability while ignoring other goals
Legal Orientation	Legal standards are obstacles to overcome in achieving goals	Law is the moral guide, constrained by legal statutes. Core question: What can we legally do?	Compliance with both legal letter and spirit. Legal requirements are minimum ethical standards; actual actions exceed legal 底线
Strategy	Exploiting opportunities for corporate profit, taking shortcuts	Manager has freedom; personal morality applies only when management chooses. Responds to legal requirements	Acts according to good ethical standards. When ethical dilemmas arise, assumes leadership responsibility. This is enlightened self-interest

Source: Carroll (1987)

Ethical leadership and amoral management represent opposite practices. In terms of management style, ethical leaders are moral managers who emphasize ethical issues to subordinates through ethical communication while being receptive to subordinates' opinions (Sun & Lu, 2017). They also demonstrate ethical practices by using rewards and punishments to enforce moral standards (Zhang & Xi, 2014). In contrast, amoral managers lack both ethical communication and visible demonstration of ethical practices (Greenbaum et al., 2015). Additionally, while ethical leaders possess moral traits, amoral managers' moral traits are ambiguous. Amoral managers may not be selfish or completely ignore moral issues while focusing solely on bottom-line interests, but their failure to prominently support ethical issues through words and actions makes them easily perceived as amoral by subordinates (Greenbaum et al., 2015). Amoral management also differs substantially from unethical leadership. Representative unethical leadership styles include abusive supervision (Tepper, 2000), destructive superiors (Duffy et al., 2002), and autocratic leadership (Ashforth, 1994). Unethical leaders lack positive moral traits, whereas amoral managers' moral characteristics are ambiguous. Unethical leaders employ immoral management methods that violate organizational rules and ethics (Liu, 2014), while amoral managers persistently fail to respond to morally charged issues without actively violating or undermining organizational rules and ethics.

2.3 Research on Antecedents and Consequences of Amoral Management

Research on the antecedents and consequences of amoral management remains largely theoretical, with only Quade et al. (2022) and Ren et al. (2022) empirically testing its negative effects. Greenbaum et al. (2015) proposed that when leaders anticipate threats from practicing ethical leadership, they adopt amoral management. These anticipated threats include: (1) achievement of career goals, such as demonstrating competence, integrity, maintaining team harmony, and management efficiency and effectiveness; and (2) achievement of social goals, such as reducing popularity and social capital. Additionally, less tenured leaders may face greater resistance when adhering to ethics, and in strong instrumental ethical climates, leaders focus more on personal and organizational bottom-line success while neglecting ethics, thus choosing amoral management. Greenbaum et al. (2015) also theoretically examined the consequences of amoral management. From an actor's perspective, they argued that amoral management may enhance moral motivation and subsequently exhibit ethical leadership behavior under external conditions, specifically the moral intensity of ethical events and the presence of a coalition for ethics. Quade et al. (2022), from an observer's perspective, empirically found that when subordinates perceive amoral management, it reduces their moral courage, thereby increasing unethical behavior. Ethical climate strengthens the relationship between amoral management and moral courage, thus strengthening the mediating effect of moral courage. This occurs because a high ethical climate conveys clear moral norms, making the moral ambiguity of amoral management more salient and leading subordinates to believe leaders deliberately disregard morality, further eroding moral courage and ultimately promoting unethical behavior. Ren et al. (2022), drawing on goal shielding theory, empirically found that amoral management promotes subordinates' unethical behavior by strengthening their bottom-line mentality, particularly in highly competitive contexts. Research exploring the formation mechanisms and multi-level, double-edged effects of amoral management remains virtually nonexistent.

2.4 Literature Review

1. Recent business ethics scandals have attracted scholarly attention, advancing research on (un)ethical leadership and generating rich findings. However, despite being more common than (un)ethical leadership, amoral management has been long neglected in ethics-based leadership research. Only a few studies have conceptually and theoretically explored amoral management, with empirical research domestically and internationally just beginning. The reasons for and consequences of this widespread leadership style remain unknown.
2. Existing research has examined the causes of amoral management, such as the need for competition and performance achievement, requirements

of business game rules, and concerns about threats to social and career goals (e.g., Carroll, 1987; Treviño et al., 2003; Greenbaum et al., 2015). However, these studies are not only thin and one-sided but also remain at the theoretical level without empirical testing. How leader individual characteristics and situational factors influence amoral management requires theoretical explanation and practical guidance from academia.

3. Quade et al. (2022) have clearly defined the operational definition of amoral management, laying a foundation for empirical research. However, given that amoral management's characteristic moral "inaction" differs from other leadership styles with clear features, subordinates' interpretation of amoral management's ambiguous moral signals involves multiple possibilities. An inclusive theoretical framework is needed to systematically examine this leadership style's effects, processes, and contextual conditions.

3.1 Research Overview

This study employs survey, experimental, and case analysis methods to investigate the generation mechanisms and double-edged sword effects of amoral management. Regarding influencing factors and formation mechanisms, we examine how leaders' personal and situational characteristics interactively influence amoral management. Carroll (1987) noted that amoral managers are not necessarily immoral individuals; they simply believe business game rules differ from other life domains, emphasizing that winning competition legally and legitimately does not require highlighting moral elements in decisions and actions. Inspired by this, we propose that leader bottom-line mentality (instrumental characteristic, reflecting the importance attached to performance) and moral decoupling (ethical characteristic, reflecting judgments about the relationship between performance and morality) are important individual variables reflecting these cognitions. Market competition (external characteristic) and organizational competitive climate (internal competition) are important situational variables in business practice. Based on the individual-situation interactionist model and situational strength theory, this study proposes that these individual and situational characteristics are all important factors influencing amoral management, with strong market competition and organizational competitive climate moderating the effects of bottom-line mentality and moral decoupling on amoral management.

Regarding consequences, existing theoretical research suggests amoral management is widely endorsed because it facilitates achievement of performance goals (Greenbaum et al., 2015; Brown et al., 2005), while empirical studies emphasize it may lead to unethical behavior (e.g., Greenbaum et al., 2015; Laasch et al., 2019; Quade et al., 2022). This suggests amoral management has both constructive and destructive effects in specific leadership contexts. On one hand, based on theoretical inferences about its positive functions, we hypothesize and test how amoral management positively influences subordinate work performance

under specific contextual conditions. It should be noted that unethical leadership may share similar performance goal orientations, but its illegal and immoral methods undermine employees' motivation to work hard, lacking theoretical and practical basis for promoting work performance. On the other hand, because amoral management's moral "ambiguity" leaves cognitive space for subordinates to interpret leaders' intentions, it may reduce subordinate work performance through different psychological mechanisms, even leading to unethical behavior for performance achievement. Drawing on social information processing theory and the instrumental-ethical cognition framework, we establish multiple double-edged sword models of amoral management's effects on individual and team performance, including employees' task performance and unethical expedient behaviors for achieving task performance, as well as customer-oriented service performance and customer-directed unethical behaviors, thereby echoing the organizational and market competition emphasized in the antecedent research.

Additionally, because amoral management signals leaders' disinterest in and lack of requirements for ethics, this signal may directly influence employees' (un)ethical behavior but has an indirect relationship with work performance. We therefore examine amoral management's influence processes under specific contextual conditions. At the individual level, we examine the moderating effect of leaders' high-performance demands; at the team level, we examine the moderating effect of team members' shared perception of leader bottom-line mentality. Examining the moderating roles of high-performance demands and leader bottom-line mentality is necessary and theoretically meaningful because they help employees clarify the reasons for leaders' amoral management, thereby shaping their psychological reactions and behavioral decisions.

The theoretical model of this study is shown in Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper]. We briefly discuss our theoretical framework below.

Figure 1 Theoretical Model of Antecedents and Double-Edged Sword Effects of Amoral Management

3.2 Study 1: Generation Mechanism of Amoral Management— An Individual-Situation Interactionist Perspective

Behavior results from the joint influence of individual differences and situational factors. Theoretical research indicates that managers often believe business game rules should follow "winner takes all," and that only by focusing on performance without being distracted by moral requirements can they demonstrate excellent management effectiveness and achieve results (Greenbaum et al., 2015). This cognition leads most managers to practice amoral management in reality (Carroll, 1987). These findings suggest that how leaders view performance and the relationship between performance and morality are two important individual characteristics influencing amoral management, while internal and external competitive characteristics constitute important contexts for its emergence. We therefore select leader bottom-line mentality (instrumental characteristic,

reflecting individual emphasis on performance) and moral decoupling (ethical characteristic, reflecting individual judgments about the performance-morality relationship) as two individual antecedents of amoral management, and examine these characteristics within the contexts of market competition (external competition) and organizational competitive climate (internal competition). Based on situational strength theory, the individual-situation interactionist theoretical model is shown in Figure 2 [Figure 2: see original paper].

Figure 2 Theoretical Model of Amoral Management's Generation Mechanism

Note: Solid lines represent positive effects; dashed lines represent negative effects.

3.2.1 Bottom-Line Mentality, Moral Decoupling, and Amoral Management

Bottom-line mentality is a one-dimensional mindset that ensures bottom-line results while ignoring alternatives, driving individuals to act in a fixed behavioral pattern focused solely on certain bottom-line outcomes (Greenbaum et al., 2012). Leaders with high bottom-line mentality concentrate only on profit acquisition, neglecting the importance of upholding multiple values to ensure long-term organizational success (Wolfe, 1988). Ensuring bottom-line results is also the top priority for personal success (Bonner et al., 2017). Consequently, high bottom-line mentality leaders emphasize bottom-line goals in management and push subordinates to vigorously pursue them (Mesdaghinia et al., 2019). This intense, singular focus on the bottom line creates a competitive, amoral management style (Wolfe, 1988), thus promoting amoral management.

Moral decoupling refers to people's selective separation of their performance judgments from their moral judgments (Bhattacharjee et al., 2013). Individuals high in moral decoupling can acknowledge that a person's behavior is immoral yet still consider them a good performer (Haberstroh et al., 2017). Leaders high in moral decoupling believe judgments about work performance should be separated from moral judgments; even if a subordinate's behavior is not professionally ethical, he/she can still be an excellent employee (Fehr et al., 2019). Therefore, high moral decoupling leaders believe management effectiveness is reflected in departmental or team performance; without economic performance, they would be evaluated as ineffective managers. Moral decoupling thus promotes amoral management.

3.2.2 Organizational Competitive Climate, Market Competition, and Amoral Management

According to social information processing theory, people attend to environmental cues because they provide necessary guidance for effective decision-making in social environments (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). We propose that internal and external competitive conditions are important environmental cues that promote amoral management.

Organizational competitive climate refers to the extent to which employees believe organizational rewards depend on their performance relative to peers (Brown et al., 1998). When organizational competitive climate is strong, it indicates that the organization provides salient cues and behavioral norms encouraging members to pursue high performance. A high competitive climate makes leaders perceive that to gain recognition and rewards, they must perform better than peer leaders, which depends on their team's work performance. In high competitive climate contexts, leaders' attention to ethics does not directly promote economic performance and may even face subordinate opposition, as subordinates often need to use borderline means to achieve high performance demands (Greenbaum et al., 2015). These social cues lead managers to 倾向于 replace ethical leadership with amoral management.

Leaders are responsible for helping subordinates achieve departmental and organizational goals (Horton et al., 2014). When external market competition is intense, organizations face high survival uncertainty and threats to goal achievement, both of which are cues that attract leaders' attention (Nadkarni & Barr, 2008). In highly competitive markets, organizations are more likely to design performance-based reward mechanisms to motivate leaders to strive for organizational goals, further strengthening leaders' focus on economic objectives. Leaders believe efficiency and profit maximization should be prioritized in decision-making, and emphasis on profit goals often dilutes attention to means, causing leaders to downplay and ignore moral requirements in management, thus leading to amoral management.

3.2.3 Moderating Effects of Organizational Competitive Climate and Market Competition

Situational strength theory posits that the translation of traits into behavior depends on situational strength; higher situational strength increases situational constraint on traits, weakening trait effects on behavior (Weiss & Adler, 1984). We predict that strong competitive situations (i.e., high organizational competitive climate and market competition) weaken the promoting effects of managers' individual characteristics (bottom-line mentality and moral decoupling) on amoral management. When organizational competitive climate increases, the signals sent require leaders to focus not only on departmental performance but also link performance closely to personal economic benefits and career development (Spurk et al., 2019), representing a strong situation. Even leaders without high bottom-line mentality and moral decoupling will believe that only by focusing all attention on performance achievement, motivating subordinates to find ways to create performance without being distracted by moral management, can they generate competitively high performance.

When market competition is intense, the signals conveyed concern organizational survival and development, as well as income and job security for leaders and subordinates, constituting a strong work situation. Under strong market competition, even managers without high bottom-line mentality and moral de-

coupling will prioritize performance achievement based on their understanding of market competition and downplay moral management's contribution to competitive advantage. Conversely, under weak organizational competitive climate and market competition, leaders do not face internal and external survival and development pressures, allowing bottom-line mentality and moral decoupling as leaders' own traits to be activated and exert stronger effects on amoral management.

3.3 Study 2: Double-Edged Sword Effects of Amoral Management on Subordinate Work Performance and Unethical Behavior

From an intra-organizational competition perspective, we examine employees in enterprises, exploring the relationship between amoral management and subordinate task performance within the context of leaders' high-performance demands. Leaders' high-performance demands clarify the reasons and intentions behind amoral management behavior and exert both positive and negative effects on subordinate work engagement and performance through different pathways. Combining theoretical inferences about positive functions and empirical findings about negative effects, this study predicts that amoral management may produce both positive and negative double-edged sword effects on subordinate work engagement and task performance through instrumental cognition and moral cognition pathways. We also predict that amoral management simultaneously promotes task performance and expedient behavior through these psychological mechanisms, forming another double-edged sword effect. The integrated double-edged sword model is shown in Figure 3 [Figure 3: see original paper] (researchers may focus on corresponding theoretical models based on future research needs).

Figure 3 Double-Edged Sword Effects of Amoral Management on Task Performance and Expedient Behavior

Note: Solid lines represent positive effects; dashed lines represent negative effects. (This figure contains two double-edged sword models: one showing positive and negative effects of amoral management on task performance; the other showing amoral management's simultaneous promotion of task performance and unethical expedient behavior.)

3.3.1 Positive Effects of Amoral Management with High-Performance Demands on Subordinate Task Performance

In increasingly competitive markets, corporate leaders often set performance requirements above market averages and translate these into work tasks for each team and employee (Locke & Latham, 2002). When leaders communicate high-performance demands while practicing amoral management, they signal not only that task performance is the priority but also that moral performance

is not a concern. When high-performance demands are strong, amoral management prompts subordinates to develop mental focus on performance to meet supervisors' performance targets. When high-performance demands are weak, subordinates infer from an observer's perspective that leaders' moral "inaction" does not reflect a performance-over-morality principle, reducing their cognitive focus on performance and decreasing performance emphasis.

When subordinates develop mental focus on performance, they invest more physically and mentally in work tasks, increasing work engagement and thus task performance by extending working hours or allocating other resources. Previous research has found that mental focus on performance predicts task participation (Lee et al., 2003), while distraction from task-irrelevant concerns leads to insufficient cognitive resources for task completion (Kanfer & Ackerman, 1996). Therefore, mental focus on performance enhances subordinate work engagement and improves task performance. Furthermore, high-performance demands strengthen the positive indirect effect of amoral management on work engagement and task performance through subordinate mental focus on performance.

3.3.2 Negative Effects of Amoral Management with High-Performance Demands on Subordinate Task Performance

People face two types of moral dilemmas at work: not knowing what is right or wrong, and knowing what is right but being uncertain whether to act accordingly (Nash, 1990). When seeking guidance on moral and immoral behavior, people often turn to their supervisors (Brown et al., 2005). Amoral management's moral "inaction" prevents subordinates from obtaining moral guidance, creating moral decision-making pressure—stress arising from ethical dilemmas at work (Huhtala et al., 2011). If amoral management neither provides ethical guidance nor hopes subordinates will improve performance without crossing bottom lines, subordinates experiencing performance-moral dilemmas will develop performance-moral dilemma pressure.

Performance-moral dilemma pressure is difficult to manage: failing to meet performance requirements may jeopardize job security and result in low self-evaluation and negative evaluations from leaders and colleagues, while doing wrong may incur substantial personal and organizational costs. This dilemma pressure has been shown to promote emotional exhaustion and reduce work engagement (Huhtala et al., 2011), with low work engagement inevitably reducing task performance. Therefore, under high-performance demands, amoral management's promotion of subordinate performance-moral dilemma pressure damages task performance through reduced work engagement. Conversely, under low-performance demands, amoral management creates lower performance-moral dilemma pressure, thereby reducing negative impacts on work engagement and task performance.

3.3.3 Promoting Effects of Amoral Management with High-Performance Demands on Subordinate Expedient Behavior

Expedient behavior is viewed as a flexible way to handle business effectively (Greenbaum et al., 2018; McLean Parks et al., 2010), primarily aimed at quickly and shortcutting the completion of organizationally mandated performance targets rather than harming the organization or its members, making its unethical nature often overlooked. Amoral management with high-performance demands neither provides ethical guidance nor imposes high performance requirements, causing subordinates to either develop intense mental focus on performance or experience performance-moral dilemma pressure. The former may lead to unethical expedient behavior to achieve performance by ignoring ethical requirements, while the latter may seek moral disengagement or moral justification under pressure, resulting in expedient behavior. When leaders' high-performance demands are low, subordinates will not focus solely on performance, and performance pressure is correspondingly reduced (Welsh & Ordóñez, 2014). Even if leaders fail to practice moral principles and model ethical behavior for subordinates, subordinates are unlikely to engage in unethical expedient behavior to promote performance.

3.4 Study 3: Double-Edged Sword Effects of Amoral Management on Customer Performance

From a market competition perspective, we examine sales teams facing customers, establishing an integrated model containing two double-edged sword models (researchers may focus on corresponding theoretical models based on future research needs). First, we explore how, under the condition of team-perceived leader bottom-line mentality, amoral management promotes team customer service performance and team customer-directed unethical behavior through team-shared bottom-line obligation. Second, we examine how amoral management promotes customer service performance through team-shared bottom-line obligation while simultaneously promoting customer-directed unethical behavior by reducing team role ethicality perception. The theoretical model is shown in Figure 4 [Figure 4: see original paper].

Figure 4 Double-Edged Sword Effects of Amoral Management on Team Customer Performance

Note: Solid lines represent positive effects; dashed lines represent negative effects. (This figure contains two double-edged sword models: one showing amoral management simultaneously promoting customer performance and customer-directed unethical behavior through team-shared bottom-line obligation; the other showing amoral management promoting customer service performance through team-shared bottom-line obligation and promoting customer-directed unethical behavior by reducing team role ethicality.)

3.4.1 Positive Effects of Amoral Management on Team Customer Service Performance Under Team-Perceived Leader Bottom-Line Mentality

According to social information processing theory, amoral management leads subordinates to believe leaders do not care about business ethics (Greenbaum et al., 2015), but does not make team members perceive customer service performance as important unless amoral management signals performance importance. Leader bottom-line mentality is such a signaling condition, emphasizing that focusing on bottom-line goals is a way to motivate employee productivity (Latham & Locke, 2007). When supervisors' bottom-line mentality is collectively perceived as high at the team level, it indicates that sales team leaders emphasize the importance of achieving bottom-line goals, clarify economic performance expectations, and reduce team members' task uncertainty by issuing concise, direct work instructions (Babalola et al., 2021). At this point, sales team members believe amoral management ignores morality because leaders devote all their energy to completing bottom-line tasks, making team members recognize that bottom-line goals are overwhelmingly important (including over morality), thereby increasing perceived bottom-line obligation in response to supervisors' demands.

Team customer service performance is the team's overall performance in customer service, a crucial component of organizational profitability and competitive advantage. Team-shared bottom-line obligation may promote team behaviors that meet supervisors' bottom-line expectations, such as prompting the team to timely respond to customer product and service requirements, strengthen interpersonal interactions with customers to facilitate business deals, and increase sales volume. It also promotes post-sale service provision to increase customer return rates. Furthermore, team-perceived leader bottom-line mentality moderates the positive indirect relationship between amoral management and team customer service performance through team-shared bottom-line obligation. High team-perceived leader bottom-line mentality strengthens this indirect relationship, while low perception weakens it.

3.4.2 Promoting Effects of Amoral Management on Team Customer-Directed Unethical Behavior Under Team-Perceived Leader Bottom-Line Mentality

To promote bottom-line goal achievement, sales team members driven by bottom-line obligation may also adopt non-compliant and unethical means to fulfill their obligations, such as submitting false invoices to customers to maintain high sales volume, lying about product quality to close deals, or violating contract terms with customers (Kaptein, 2008). When leader high bottom-line mentality indicates the sole importance of the bottom line and amoral management signals disregard for morality, team members will more strongly believe leaders tacitly approve their maximization of economic benefits and returns. Team members collectively perceive the sole importance

of fulfilling bottom-line obligations, causing morality to fade from view. As long as bottom-line obligations are fulfilled, taking some unethical actions is acceptable. Furthermore, team-perceived leader bottom-line mentality moderates the positive indirect relationship between amoral management and team customer-directed unethical behavior through team-shared bottom-line obligation. High team-perceived leader bottom-line mentality strengthens this indirect relationship, while low perception weakens it.

3.4.3 Promoting Effects of Amoral Management on Team Customer-Directed Unethical Behavior Through Role Ethicality Perception Under Team-Perceived Leader Bottom-Line Mentality

Role ethicality refers to the extent to which team members collectively believe their organizational role includes expectations for ethical behavior and reflects job requirements and considerations for ethics (Paterson & Huang, 2019). This cognition diffuses, shares, and reaches consensus among team members, ultimately reducing team role ethicality. High team role ethicality indicates team members recognize that job roles include moral requirements, and that team performance should focus not only on role completion results but also on morality in the process. When role ethicality is high, acting morally has become an internal team consensus, making team members less likely to take unethical actions to complete work tasks.

When supervisors' bottom-line mentality is collectively perceived as high in sales teams, implementing amoral management leads sales team members to believe leaders prioritize economic performance expectations over moral guidance (Babalola et al., 2021), thereby reducing sales team members' moral cognition of their sales role. When team role ethicality is low, team members may use unethical actions to promote work completion to meet sales targets more quickly, such as using shortcutting or borderline behaviors to accelerate progress toward leaders' bottom-line goals. Furthermore, team members' perception of high leader bottom-line mentality may strengthen the promoting effect of amoral management on customer unethical behavior through team role ethicality.

4. Theoretical Contributions and Innovations

In an era of global economic slowdown and increasingly fierce market competition, business organizations' adherence to ethical management and strengthening of social responsibility performance are particularly important. This concerns not only enterprises' long-term sustainable development but also has non-negligible impacts on the stable operation of China's market economy and overall social civilization progress. This study focuses on amoral management as a widespread leadership practice, aiming to obtain universally applicable innovative research findings in the ethics management field through systematic theoretical research, enriching, expanding, and deepening the knowledge system of ethics-based leadership research. We construct a theoretical framework of amoral management's antecedents and consequences, identifying important

influencing factors and mechanisms of managers' amoral management to explain this widespread phenomenon. Simultaneously, we comprehensively examine amoral management's consequences, internal mechanisms, and boundary conditions, developing and testing theoretical models of its constructive and destructive effects. Specifically, this study's theoretical contributions include:

1. **Universal and novel research topic.** Amoral management has numerous adherents in business practice, yet research on its antecedents and consequences is rare. Amoral management's ambiguity differs from leadership styles with clear tendencies; this special leadership style of moral "inaction" represents a research field with both theoretical extension value and theoretical urgency. This study can contribute important and innovative knowledge to this new area of leadership research, providing reference for organizational ethics management and social responsibility practice.
2. **Unique and inclusive theoretical perspective.** This study creates a theoretical framework for amoral management's antecedents and consequences from the perspectives of situational strength theory and social information processing theory. On one hand, it responds to previous theoretical inferences about amoral management's causes, explaining the popularity of this leadership style through several important individual and situational influencing factors and their interactions. On the other hand, based on social information processing, it reveals multiple mediating mechanisms through which amoral management influences subordinate work performance, extending the stakeholders involved in different work performance variables from internal to external (customers), fully demonstrating the complexity, diversity, and comprehensiveness of amoral management's effects.
3. **Contextual and contingent theoretical conception.** This study examines amoral management's consequences under conditions of high-performance demands and high bottom-line mentality, addressing the ambiguity of information released by amoral management's moral "inaction." It demonstrates that amoral management's "neutral" moral characteristic has double-edged sword effects, alerting organizational management to this leadership style's negative consequences. This provides beneficial insights for theoretical exploration of amoral management and important practical reference for selecting and training corporate managers.

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