The Effect of Construal Level of Negative Feedback in Vision Communication on Subordinates' Vision Pursuit Behavior

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Abstract

To facilitate subordinates' acceptance and pursuit of the vision, leaders intentionally provide negative feedback in vision communication with subordinates. However, how leaders should adjust the wording strategies of negative feedback to enhance the effectiveness of vision communication remains unclear. Based on fantasy realization theory, we conducted a scenario experiment (Study 1, N=76) and questionnaire surveys (Study 2, N=301; Study 3, N=619). Results consistently demonstrate that the construal level of leaders' negative feedback in vision communication influences followers' vision pursuit behavior through their vision realization expectations, and this mediating mechanism is moderated by organizational performance state. When the organization is in a favorable state, leaders should adopt a low construal level when delivering negative feedback, whereas when the organization is in an adverse state, they should adopt a high construal level, thereby enabling negative feedback to achieve optimal effectiveness. The research conclusions help reveal the mechanism through which the construal level of negative feedback in vision communication affects followers' vision cognition and behavioral responses, and provide practical implications for how leaders can effectively deliver negative feedback in vision communication with subordinates.

Full Text

Abstract

To facilitate subordinates' acceptance and pursuit of organizational vision, leaders often intentionally incorporate negative feedback into vision communication. However, how leaders should adjust the wording strategies of negative feedback to enhance the effectiveness of vision communication remains unclear. Based on fantasy realization theory, we conducted a scenario experiment (Study 1, N

= 76) and two questionnaire surveys (Study 2, N = 301; Study 3, N = 619). Results consistently demonstrated that the construal level of leaders' negative feedback in vision communication influences subordinates' vision pursuit behavior through their vision realization expectations, with this mediating mechanism being moderated by organizational operating conditions. When the organization is performing well, leaders should adopt a low construal level when delivering negative feedback; conversely, when the organization is facing adversity, a high construal level should be employed to optimize the effectiveness of negative feedback. These findings help reveal the mechanisms through which the construal level of negative feedback in vision communication affects subordinates' vision cognition and behavioral responses, offering practical insights for leaders on how to effectively deliver negative feedback in vision communication with subordinates.

Keywords: vision communication, negative feedback, construal level, vision pursuit behavior, fantasy realization theory

1. Problem Statement

In today' s increasingly complex and dynamic business environment, the role of organizational vision has become more prominent. Vision not only serves as a crucial guide for strategic decision-making but also acts as a core element in building group consensus and stimulating innovation. Throughout the process of vision internalization, leaders' vision communication is essential to ensure that all organizational members develop a deep understanding and identification with the vision, thereby forming a unified force for collective action. In communicating vision to subordinates, leaders employ not only conventional positive feedback but also intentionally utilize negative feedback [**?**, **?**] to guide subordinates in recognizing the gap between current reality and the vision, thereby narrowing this discrepancy \cite{胡君辰，李涛, 2014}. Recent scholarship has also proposed that vigilant leadership styles focusing on negative prospects can effectively promote subordinate-initiated change [**?**, **?**]. Consequently, how leaders can effectively leverage negative feedback in vision communication to motivate subordinates to pursue the vision represents a question worthy of in-depth investigation.

Negative feedback provides direction for overcoming obstacles and achieving goals [**?**, **?**] and can serve as a powerful tool for motivating subordinates in vision communication [**?**, **?**]. Appropriate negative feedback helps activate subordinates' learning motivation [**?**, **?**], proactive behavior [**?**, **?**], and improves performance [**?**, **?**]. However, as a form of criticism from leaders regarding current conditions, inappropriate use of negative feedback can easily demoralize subordinates [**?**, **?**], damage their motivation and goal expectations [**?**, **?**, **?**], increase negative emotions, and even reduce performance [**?**, **?**, **?**]. Particularly in goal-laden contexts such as vision communication, improper use of negative feedback may lead to subordinates developing negative perceptions of the vision. Therefore, strategic negative feedback can effectively motivate subordinates, whereas

inappropriate negative feedback may be detrimental, necessitating research into strategies for its use.

Verbal wording plays a central role in shaping subordinates' cognition in leader communication [**?**, **?**] and represents an important breakthrough for investigating the appropriate use of negative feedback. Existing research has examined the feedback source, delivery format, and combination with advice and beliefs [**?**, **?**, **?**], yet little is known about what wording strategies negative feedback itself should employ. Considering that different wording leads to different cognitive evaluations and behavioral choices among subordinates [**?**, **?**], to harness the motivational effect of negative feedback in vision communication, it is necessary to fill this research gap regarding its wording.

Among various wording factors, construal level refers to how people encode and decode information [**?**, **?**] and holds significant research value. On one hand, leaders as encoders have operational control over construal level. Although many factors in leader speeches are uncontrollable, the choice between "explicit" and "implicit" communication strategies is often deliberately controllable [**?**, **?**]. On the other hand, the construal level of wording will place subordinates' psychological representation of negative feedback at different levels of abstraction and psychological distance [**?**, **?**], making it a key factor in shaping subordinates' cognition. To address existing research gaps, it is necessary to explore how the construal level of negative feedback in vision communication affects subordinates' vision realization expectations and subsequent behaviors.

To address these questions, this study draws upon fantasy realization theory proposed by Oettingen et al. (2001), focusing on the construal level of negative feedback in vision communication to clarify the self-regulation strategies and theoretical pathways through which individuals activate vision expectations. Simultaneously, combining the relevance of individual expectations to their environment [**?**, **?**], we reveal the differential effects of negative feedback across various contexts to comprehensively depict the influence mechanism of negative feedback' s construal level on subordinates' vision pursuit behavior. The study may contribute in three aspects: logic (Why), boundary conditions (When), and practical strategies (How). First, based on fantasy realization theory, it elucidates why the construal level of negative feedback can influence subordinates' cognition and behavior, revealing the logical principles underlying the effectiveness of various negative feedback strategies. Second, by introducing organizational operating conditions, it extends the applicable boundaries of different construal levels of negative feedback in vision communication from the perspectives of favorable and adverse conditions. Third, it provides clear guidance on when leaders should adopt which negative feedback strategies, offering theoretical support for management practice.

1.1 Theoretical Foundation

Fantasy realization theory centers on two core elements—ideal future and present reality—to explain individuals' self-regulation strategies toward the future [**?**, **?**]. Based on the degree of attention individuals pay to these two elements, the theory initially proposed three regulation strategies [**?**, **?**]: (1) Indulging in fantasy. When individuals focus on the ideal future while neglecting real obstacles to achieving it, they tend to fall into "daydream-like" fantasies, failing to clarify action directions for approaching the ideal. In this case, individuals'expectations for achieving ideal goals are not effectively activated. (2) Dwelling on the present. When individuals focus on present reality while ignoring the ideal future, they overlook the rewards of goal achievement and instead remain fixated on current obstacles. In this situation, individuals similarly lack direction toward the ideal, even perceiving it as unattainable and action as unnecessary. (3) Mental contrasting. When individuals attend to both the ideal future and present reality, they compare the two to identify discrepancies between them. These discrepancies create associations between ideal goals and real obstacles, prompting individuals to understand what obstacles must be overcome to achieve the ideal and to consider the necessity and possibility of taking action. This reflection ultimately stimulates expectations for achieving ideal goals and leads to action.

Subsequent developments in fantasy realization theory have extended to a new regulation strategy known as reverse mental contrasting [**?**, **?**], suggesting that if individuals have already focused on present reality and dwell on real obstacles, subsequent information about the ideal future will hardly stimulate their expectations for achieving it. This underscores the necessity of simultaneously communicating vision and negative feedback.

The connection between our research context and fantasy realization theory has two aspects: First, the vision signal conveyed in vision communication corresponds to the ideal future in fantasy realization theory. The ideal future is an individual' s internal psychological schema [**?**, **?**], while the vision signal represents the organization' s idealized future blueprint, shaping subordinates' mental imagination of the future vision [**?**, **?**]. Both point toward positive distant goals, and vision signals can activate subordinates' cognition of the ideal future. Second, the real obstacle signal conveyed by negative feedback corresponds to the present reality in fantasy realization theory. As Oettingen (2012) stated when explaining fantasy realization theory, overcoming real obstacles to achieve fantasies is the core of individuals' actions regarding present reality. The real obstacle signal conveyed by negative feedback aims to make subordinates aware of the gap with goals and subsequently bridge it \cite{胡君辰，李涛, 2014}. Both point to negative near-term goals that require breakthrough.

Similar to other expectation theories, fantasy realization theory also emphasizes that individual expectations are based on the real environment [**?**, **?**, **?**], necessitating the inclusion of environmental factors. Drawing on social information processing theory [**?**, **?**], after receiving vision and real obstacle signals, subor-

dinates tend to capture environmental cues that can corroborate these signals. This means that under different contexts, the same signals may be processed differently by subordinates [**?**, **?**].

Organizational operating conditions provide a good explanation for such biases. Organizational operating conditions refer to collective perceptions among organizational members regarding the favorable and unfavorable gaps between current environmental conditions and psychological expectations, using psychological expectations of the real environment as a reference point [**?**, **?**, **?**]. Due to individuals' bounded rationality, organizational operating conditions typically present two poles—favorable and adverse conditions. When the environment exceeds psychological expectations, conditions are more favorable; when it falls behind expectations, conditions are more adverse, with continuity existing between the two poles based on the degree of psychological deviation [**?**, **?**]. These two poles connect with fantasy realization theory by respectively emphasizing environmental cues that support vision and real obstacles: the more favorable the organizational operating conditions, the better-than-expected environment helps clarify vision; the more adverse the conditions, the below-expectation negative environment strengthens cognition of real obstacles. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct a comprehensive discussion incorporating organizational operating conditions.

1.2 Construal Level of Negative Feedback in Vision Communication and Vision Realization Expectations

While vision communication conveys distant visions, it also communicates short-term goals for achieving them [**?**, **?**]. Leaders' use of negative feedback in vision communication provides subordinates with short-term goals for improving current conditions, aiming to stimulate them to overcome real obstacles to vision realization \cite{胡君辰，李涛, 2014}. The process of narrowing discrepancies is essentially also a process of striving to achieve the vision, manifested in subordinates' vision realization expectations and pursuit behaviors.

According to fantasy realization theory, individuals' different degrees of attention to vision and real obstacles lead to different regulation strategies toward vision [**?**, **?**], and organizational operating conditions leaning toward favorable or adverse may produce different effects of negative feedback' s construal level on subordinates' vision realization expectations. When organizational operating conditions lean toward favorable, because the organization performs beyond expectations, environmental cues supporting real obstacle signals are weak. If leaders adopt high-construal-level negative feedback in vision communication, conveying vague and abstract problems, it tends to increase subordinates' psychological distance from real obstacles [**?**, **?**], making it difficult to draw attention to real obstacles. Subordinates tend to adopt regulation strategies of indulging in positive fantasies, making it hard to effectively activate vision realization expectations. If leaders adopt low-construal-level negative feedback, through clear articulation of problems, they can compensate for the absence of

negative environmental cues, strengthening real obstacle signals and achieving cognitive balance between vision and real obstacles among subordinates, thereby activating their vision realization expectations.

When organizational operating conditions lean toward adverse, there are typically insufficient environmental cues supporting vision signals while abundant negative cues exist. Since individuals tend to capture negative cues in adverse conditions [**?**, **?**], low-construal-level negative feedback makes real obstacle signals too strong, causing subordinates to adopt regulation strategies of dwelling on negative reality, which is not conducive to enhancing vision realization expectations. If high-construal-level negative feedback is adopted, because the negative content received has greater psychological distance, it helps clarify action directions for overcoming obstacles to achieve vision and prevents subordinates from focusing attention on current conditions. Subordinates can more easily identify gaps between current reality and vision and understand how to act to narrow them, tending to adopt mental contrasting regulation strategies. Therefore, the more adverse the organizational operating conditions, the more high-construal-level negative feedback in vision communication can promote subordinates' vision realization expectations. Based on the above analysis, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Organizational operating conditions moderate the relationship between the construal level of negative feedback in vision communication and subordinates' vision realization expectations. The more favorable the organizational operating conditions, the more negative the relationship between negative feedback construal level and vision realization expectations; the more adverse the conditions, the more positive the relationship.

1.3 Construal Level of Negative Feedback in Vision Communication and Vision Pursuit Behavior

Vision pursuit behavior refers to a set of goal-directed actions oriented toward the vision [**?**, **?**]. According to fantasy realization theory, individual expectations form an important foundation for goal commitment, translating into self-efficacy, proactivity, and sense of responsibility for achieving vision, and helping clarify action plans [**?**, **?**, **?**]. These effects ultimately emerge as individuals' vision pursuit behaviors. When leaders trigger subordinates' mental contrasting and activate vision realization expectations, subordinates will bind the positive mental schema after vision realization with their self-concept [**?**, **?**], generating urgency to achieve the vision. Therefore, the effect of negative feedback' s construal level in vision communication on subordinates' vision realization expectations will further influence subsequent vision pursuit behaviors. Moreover, because the effect of negative feedback' s construal level on vision realization expectations differs under favorable versus adverse organizational operating conditions, these differences are also mediated and result in different levels of vision pursuit behavior. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2: In vision communication, subordinates'vision realization expectations mediate the relationship between negative feedback construal level and vision pursuit behavior, and this mediating effect is moderated by organizational operating conditions.

Based on the above analysis, the research model is shown in Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper]. This study will test this model through three studies using scenario experiments and questionnaire surveys.

2. Study 1: Scenario Experiment

2.1 Participants

Study 1 employed a scenario experiment with a 2 (low construal level, high construal level) × 2 (favorable conditions, adverse conditions) design. Using G*Power 3.1 to calculate the sample size for two-way ANOVA (setting statistical power 1-β = 0.80, two-tailed test α = 0.05, effect size f = 0.40, number of groups = 4), the minimum required sample size was 52 participants. We contacted 76 interns from internet companies through a university career center, campus forums, and public accounts. After obtaining consent, we arranged laboratory experiments on weekends. Participants were randomly divided into 4 groups of 19 each. The experiment followed voluntary registration and participation principles, with 1-2 researchers accompanying each participant one-on-one. Before the experiment, researchers informed participants that the study did not involve any illegal or unethical matters, that research results and personal information would be strictly confidential, and that data would be used for academic purposes only. Researchers disclosed all information except the research content, including privacy concerns and potential harm, to ensure informed consent. During the experiment, participants faced no restrictions or constraints and were allowed to terminate participation at any time. The experimental protocol was approved by the ethics committee of the researchers' institution. Participant demographics were as follows: 45 males and 31 females; mean age 22.37 years (SD = 1.80); 39 undergraduates, 32 master' s students, and 5 doctoral students.

2.2 Experimental Materials and Design

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions: (low construal level, high construal level) × (favorable conditions, adverse conditions). Researchers presented experimental materials to participants and asked them to treat the materials as authentic information from their current company and respond to scale items based on their genuine reactions. The specific procedures were as follows:

(1) Following the approach of Berson and Halevy (2014), participants first read a newspaper article about "organizational vision" prepared by researchers to ensure preliminary understanding of organizational vision.

They then completed construal level scale items based on the article to assess their own construal level when decoding information, providing a control variable for subsequent analysis.

(2) Organizational operating conditions were manipulated through company announcements. The materials were adapted from Roberts and Grover (2012), with two versions differing only in key terms reflecting favorable versus adverse conditions while remaining otherwise identical, as shown in Figure 2 [Figure 2: see original paper] (left: favorable conditions, right: adverse conditions).

(3) Following Stam et al. (2010b), participants listened to an audio recording of a leader' s speech while subtitles appeared in the center of the computer screen. The content was adapted from Wu et al. (2019) and modified based on Berson and Halevy (2014) to control the construal level of negative feedback by altering the abstractness of content: concrete descriptions for low construal level and abstract descriptions for high construal level. Both versions contained vision-related negative feedback, differing only in key wording reflecting construal level while remaining otherwise consistent. The materials were grounded in the internet company context to match participants' identities and ensure immersion. To avoid interference from differences in language tone between the two audio materials, we used iFlytek' s AI voice technology, keeping all parameters consistent across both recordings. The materials were as follows:

Low construal level: "Our vision is to provide an interconnected platform for the world, so we strive to grow our company stronger and attract more users. However, the path to realizing our vision often has setbacks: Last Friday, competitor Company B launched a new product, which is expected to cause us to lose 2.5% of our users in the next quarter, while two partner companies will not renew their contracts with our platform and will sign contracts with our competitor. To achieve our vision, we must take action."

High construal level: "Our vision is to provide an interconnected platform for the world, so we strive to grow our company stronger and attract more users. However, the path to realizing our vision often has setbacks: There was a time when competitors launched new products, which are expected to cause our users to drift away over time, while some partner companies will part ways with our platform and join forces with competitors. To achieve our vision, we must take action."

(4) Participants completed construal level and organizational operating condition scales for manipulation checks, and vision realization expectation and vision pursuit behavior scales for subsequent analysis.

(5) Following Berson and Halevy (2014), researchers informed participants at the end of the experiment: "Next month, the company will launch a new project aimed at strengthening current user stickiness and attracting new users, which aligns well with our vision of 'providing an interconnected

platform for the world.' The project is currently recruiting new members." Researchers used open-ended questions to ask participants about their willingness to voluntarily sign up for this new project (1 = not at all willing, 7 = completely willing) and the average daily working hours they would be willing to invest. These values were standardized and averaged to reflect participants' behavioral intention to pursue the vision. This measure was used to replicate hypothesis testing and ensure robustness of results.

(6) Researchers informed participants that all content was fictional. After ensuring the experimental experience would not affect participants' attitudes toward real work, they received 20 RMB as compensation.

2.3 Variable Measurement

All scales used were validated instruments published in core academic journals. We followed translation-back-translation procedures and adapted some wording to fit the Chinese context. Specific measures were as follows:

Construal level. We adopted the language register perception scale developed by Wu et al. (2019). This 3-item scale used a 7-point Likert format, with a sample item being "I think the leader' s language about problems is colloquial." Cronbach' s α was 0.88.

Organizational operating conditions. We used the organizational economic adversity scale developed by Roberts and Grover (2012). To reflect the continuity of organizational operating conditions and their favorable/adverse poles, we adapted the scale into a semantic differential format, with 1 and 7 on the 7-point Likert scale representing the two poles (e.g., good [bad], consumer-interest-driven [organization-interest-driven]). Higher scores indicated stronger agreement with the pole statement [**?**, **?**]. The 5-item scale used 1 to represent adverse conditions, 7 for favorable conditions, and 4 for neutral. A sample item was: "In the past six months, this organization has most likely been in terms of sales: 'Adverse 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Favorable' ." Cronbach' s α was 0.97.

Vision realization expectations. We used the scale developed by Norman and Aron (2003). This 6-item scale used a 7-point Likert format, with a sample item being "We have the ability to achieve the organizational vision." Cronbach' s α was 0.89.

Vision pursuit behavior. We used the scale developed by Louro et al. (2007). This 3-item scale used a 7-point Likert format, with a sample item being "I am willing to make greater efforts to achieve the organizational vision." Cronbach' s α was 0.93.

Control variables. To exclude interference from demographic characteristics and participants' own construal level when decoding information, we controlled for gender, age, education level, and participants' own construal level.

2.4.1 Manipulation Check

Independent samples t-tests showed no significant differences between high and low construal level groups in demographic variables, own construal level, or organizational operating condition scores. However, construal level scores differed significantly, with the high construal level group (M = 3.16, SD = 1.22) scoring significantly lower than the low construal level group (M = 5.00, SD = 1.22) (lower scores indicate higher construal level), t(74) = 6.10, p < 0.001, Cohen' s d = 1.40, indicating successful manipulation of construal level. Similarly, favorable and adverse condition groups showed no differences in demographic variables, own construal level, or construal level scores, but organizational operating condition scores differed significantly, with the favorable condition group (M = 5.36, SD = 0.95) scoring significantly higher than the adverse condition group (M = 1.87, SD = 0.86), t(74) = 16.82, p < 0.001, Cohen' s d = 3.86, indicating successful manipulation of organizational operating conditions.

2.4.2 Hypothesis Testing

We used ANOVA to test the interaction effect of negative feedback construal level and organizational operating conditions on vision realization expectations. Controlling for participants'gender, age, education level, and own construal level, a 2 (high construal level, low construal level) × 2 (favorable conditions, adverse conditions) ANOVA on vision realization expectations revealed a significant interaction coefficient (F(1, 68) = 10.30, p = 0.0013, ^{2} = 0.14), non-significant main effect of construal level (F(1, 68) = 0.03, p = 0.85, ^{2} = 0.00), and significant main effect of organizational operating conditions (F(1, 68) = 19.17, p < 0.001, ^{2} = 0.24). A similar ANOVA on vision pursuit behavior measured by scales showed a significant interaction coefficient (F(1, 68) = 14.19, p = 0.0013, ^{2} = 0.14), non-significant main effect of construal level (F(1, 68) = 0.11, p = 0.77, ^{2} = 0.00), and significant main effect of organizational operating conditions (F(1, 68) = 28.89, p < 0.001, ^{2} = 0.25). Replication using open-ended measures of vision pursuit behavior yielded consistent results. These findings indicate an interactive effect of construal level and organizational operating conditions on vision realization expectations and vision pursuit behavior. The non-significant main effect of construal level may be because its positive and negative effects on vision realization expectations and vision pursuit behavior under adverse and favorable conditions cancel each other out at the overall sample level.

We further examined the effect of negative feedback construal level on vision realization expectations under different organizational operating conditions using the SPSS macro Process with 20,000 bootstrap analyses. Using dummy variables for experimental groups (0 = low construal level, 1 = high construal level; 0 = adverse conditions, 1 = favorable conditions) as independent and moderator variables, and controlling for gender, age, education level, and own construal level, results showed: at the 95% significance level, under favorable conditions, the effect coefficient of construal level on vision realization expec-

tations was significantly negative (β = -0.79, [LLCI, ULCI] = [-1.41, -0.16]); under adverse conditions, the effect coefficient was significantly positive (β = 0.71, [LLCI, ULCI] = [0.08, 1.33]); the interaction effect of construal level and organizational operating conditions on vision realization expectations was significant (β = -1.49, [LLCI, ULCI] = [-2.38, -0.61]). Hypothesis H1 was supported. The effect curves of construal level on vision realization expectations under different organizational operating conditions are shown in Figure 3 [Figure 3: see original paper].

We tested the mediating effect of construal level on vision pursuit behavior through vision realization expectations. Results showed: at the 95% significance level, for vision pursuit behavior measured by scales, the indirect effect under favorable conditions was significantly negative (β = -0.55, [LLCI, ULCI] = [-1.04, -0.16]); under adverse conditions, the indirect effect was significantly positive (β = 0.49, [LLCI, ULCI] = [0.07, 1.00]). The indirect effects differed significantly between the two conditions ($\Delta\beta$ = 1.04, [LLCI, ULCI] = [0.43, 1.77]). Hypothesis H2 was supported. Replication using open-ended measures yielded consistent results.

3. Study 2: Questionnaire Survey

Study 2 employed a multi-time-point questionnaire method to further examine the relationship between the construal level of negative feedback in vision communication and vision pursuit behavior, testing whether the effects found in Study 1 could be replicated outside the laboratory.

3.1 Sample and Procedure

Participants were employees of a financial enterprise headquartered in Beijing. The company' s branch offices operate relatively independently in terms of management. With the rise of new finance in recent years, the enterprise is undergoing transformation. According to senior management, all branch offices have issued transformation and upgrading vision goals in accordance with the company' s strategy, and vision communication from leaders to subordinates is common. This sample context was well-suited for our research. With the help of senior management, we contacted branch offices. Each branch had a core team, and we conducted online questionnaire surveys with these core teams, obtaining data from 53 teams. This approach was adopted because: (1) Most employees outside the core teams were either temporary hires or primarily responsible for field operations, with weak team connections and numerous interfering factors; (2) Core team employees were all permanent staff whose careers were tied to the organization, had deeper understanding of organizational vision, and were the primary recipients of leaders' vision communication. A two-time-point questionnaire survey was administered with a one-week interval. A total of 390 employees participated. At Time 1, respondents reported the construal level of negative information conveyed by their immediate supervisors during vision communication, organizational operating conditions, and demographic variables

(gender, age, education level), tenure, and years working with the leader. At Time 2, they reported vision realization expectations and vision pursuit behavior. After excluding samples with missing Time 2 responses or unmatched Time 1 and Time 2 questionnaires, 301 valid responses were collected. Among them, 52% were female; mean age was 37 years; 84% had bachelor' s degree or higher education.

3.2 Variable Measurement

Construal level. Following previous research [**?**, **?**], we used a single item to measure perceived construal level of negative feedback: "Is the problem described by the leader clear and specific, or vague and abstract?" This used a 7-point semantic differential format, with 1 representing very specific, 4 neutral, and 7 very abstract.

Organizational operating conditions. Respondents rated a single item: "Do you think your team is in favorable or adverse conditions?" using a 7-point semantic differential format, with 1 representing adverse conditions, 4 neutral, and 7 favorable conditions.

Vision realization expectations and vision pursuit behavior. The same scales as in Study 1 were used, with Cronbach' s α coefficients of 0.87 and 0.83, respectively.

Control variables. Since tenure and years working with the leader may affect employees' cognition and attitudes toward organizational vision and leader communication, we controlled for gender, age, education level, tenure, and years working with the leader.

3.3 Data Analysis Strategy

In Study 2, both construal level and organizational operating conditions were team-level variables based on individual employee evaluations. Using Mplus 8.0 software, we adopted multilevel structural equation modeling (MSEM) for multilevel moderation analysis [**?**, **?**] to calculate confidence intervals for indirect effects and moderated mediation effects. In cross-level analysis, scores for construal level and organizational operating conditions were aggregated to the team level. The validity of data aggregation was assessed using intraclass correlation coefficients. Results showed ICC(1) = 0.47, ICC(2) = 0.84, and Rwg = 0.78 for construal level; ICC(1) = 0.45, ICC(2) = 0.83, and Rwg = 0.83 for organizational operating conditions, all indicating good within-group consistency. The aggregated means could thus serve as team-level measures. Independent and moderator variables were group-mean centered to facilitate interpretation.

3.4.1 Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to test discriminant validity and common method bias. A two-factor model (original model) showed good fit

indices ($^2(26)$ = 43.17, CFI = 0.99, TLI = 0.98, RMSEA = 0.05). A one-factor model showed significantly worse fit, indicating good discriminant validity ($^2(27)$ = 261.73, CFI = 0.80, TLI = 0.74, RMSEA = 0.17). A three-factor model adding a common factor did not significantly improve the original model ($^2(18)$ = 31.06, CFI = 0.99, TLI = 0.98, RMSEA = 0.05), indicating no serious common method bias.

3.4.2 Descriptive Statistical Analysis

Descriptive statistics and correlations for Study 2 variables are shown in Table 1 . Vision realization expectations were positively correlated with vision pursuit behavior (r = 0.46, p < 0.001), consistent with previous research.

3.4.3 Hypothesis Testing

We constructed a two-level structural equation model using Mplus 8.0 to test hypotheses, with results shown in Table 2 . In Model 2, the interaction term between negative feedback construal level and organizational operating conditions had a significant negative effect on vision realization expectations (γ = -0.13, SE = 0.02, p < 0.001), indicating that the relationship between construal level and vision realization expectations differed across contexts, supporting H1. In Model 3, the coefficient between construal level and vision pursuit behavior was significantly negative (γ = -0.29, SE = 0.10, p = 0.003). When vision realization expectations were added in Model 4, this effect decreased in magnitude and significance, while the effect of vision realization expectations on vision pursuit behavior was significantly positive (γ = 0.38, SE = 0.13, p = 0.003), indicating that vision realization expectations mediated the relationship between construal level and vision pursuit behavior.

We calculated regression coefficients between negative feedback construal level and vision realization expectations under different conditions and their 95% confidence intervals. Using plus/minus one standard deviation from the mean of organizational operating conditions to represent favorable and adverse conditions, results showed: under favorable conditions, construal level was significantly negatively related to vision realization expectations (β = -0.32, [LLCI, ULCI] = [-0.46, -0.18]); under adverse conditions, the positive relationship was non-significant (β = 0.10, [LLCI, ULCI] = [-0.01, 0.21]). The regression coefficients differed significantly between the two conditions ($\Delta\beta$ = 0.41, [LLCI, ULCI] = [-0.55, 0.28]), supporting H1.

We calculated indirect effects of construal level on vision pursuit behavior through vision realization expectations under favorable and adverse conditions: under favorable conditions, the indirect effect was significantly negative (β = -0.29, [LLCI, ULCI] = [-0.48, -0.10]); under adverse conditions, the indirect effect was non-significant (β = 0.07, [LLCI, ULCI] = [-0.01, 0.16]). The indirect effects differed significantly between conditions ($\Delta\beta$ = 0.36, [LLCI, ULCI] = [-0.56, -0.16]), supporting H2.

4. Study 3: Questionnaire Survey

Study 3 used validated scales and a sample-split technique to address the single-item and same-source data issues in Study 2. Additionally, it selected a broader sample to retest the relationship between construal level of negative feedback in vision communication and subordinates' vision pursuit behavior when organizational operating conditions lean toward adverse.

4.1 Sample and Procedure

Participants were employees of an automotive manufacturing enterprise headquartered in Beijing. The company has multiple relatively independent subsidiary plants. With the rise of new energy vehicles in recent years, the enterprise is undergoing strategic transformation, with new vision goals issued to various plants and regular employee mobilization activities. Company contacts were asked to randomly select formal employee teams from plants with different operating conditions. A two-time-point questionnaire survey was administered with a one-week interval. A total of 708 employees from 63 teams participated. At Time 1, respondents reported the construal level of negative information conveyed by their immediate supervisors during vision communication, organizational operating conditions, and demographic variables (gender, age, education level), tenure, and years working with the leader. At Time 2, they reported vision realization expectations and vision pursuit behavior. After excluding samples with missing Time 2 responses or unmatched questionnaires, 619 valid responses were collected. Among them, 48% were female; mean age was 31 years; in terms of education, the largest proportions were junior high school or below (39%), high school/technical school (44%), and college (12%).

4.2 Variable Measurement

Construal level. The same scale as in Study 1 was used. Since higher scores on this scale indicate lower construal level, to facilitate interpretation and maintain consistency with previous studies, we used (8 - scale score) as the measure of construal level. Cronbach' s α was 0.96.

Organizational operating conditions, vision realization expectations, and vision pursuit behavior. The same scales as in Study 1 were used, with Cronbach' s α coefficients of 0.96, 0.98, and 0.96, respectively.

Control variables. Gender, age, education level, tenure, and years working with the leader were controlled.

4.3 Data Analysis Strategy

Data analysis for Study 3 consisted of two parts: (1) Using Mplus 8.0 software, we adopted MSEM for multilevel moderation analysis to calculate confidence intervals for indirect effects and moderated mediation effects. In cross-level

analysis, individual ratings of construal level and organizational operating conditions were aggregated to the team level. Aggregation validity was assessed through intraclass correlation coefficients: ICC(1) = 0.45, ICC(2) = 0.89, Rwg = 0.78 for construal level; ICC(1) = 0.44, ICC(2) = 0.89, Rwg = 0.76 for organizational operating conditions, all showing good within-group consistency. Aggregated independent and moderator variables were group-mean centered for analysis. (2) Following Rousseau' s (1985) sample-split technique to overcome same-source bias, we conducted replication tests. Specifically, data from each team were randomly split into individual and team groups. Team group ratings of construal level and organizational operating conditions were aggregated as team-level data and combined with individual-level data from the individual group to form a non-same-source dataset for replication analysis.

4.4.1 Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Confirmatory factor analysis tested discriminant validity and common method bias. A four-factor model (original model) showed good fit ($^2(113) = 639.29$, CFI = 0.97, TLI = 0.96, RMSEA = 0.09). A five-factor model adding a common factor did not significantly improve fit ($^2(97) = 318.44$, CFI = 0.99, TLI = 0.98, RMSEA = 0.06), indicating no serious common method bias. Other models showed significantly worse fit than the original model, indicating good discriminant validity.

4.4.2 Descriptive Statistical Analysis

Descriptive statistics and correlations for Study 3 variables are shown in Table 3 . At the individual level, subordinates' vision realization expectations were positively correlated with vision pursuit behavior (r = 0.54, p < 0.001), consistent with previous research. At the team level, construal level was negatively correlated with organizational operating conditions (r = -0.36, p = 0.004).

4.4.3 Hypothesis Testing

We constructed a two-level structural equation model using Mplus 8.0, with results shown in Table 4 . In Model 2, the interaction term between negative feedback construal level and organizational operating conditions had a significant negative effect on vision realization expectations (γ = -0.49, SE = 0.07, p < 0.001), supporting H1. In Model 3, the coefficient between construal level and vision pursuit behavior was significantly positive (γ = 0.23, SE = 0.07, p < 0.001). When vision realization expectations were added in Model 4, this effect decreased in magnitude and significance, while the effect of vision realization expectations on vision pursuit behavior was significantly positive (γ = 0.37, SE = 0.05, p < 0.001), indicating that vision realization expectations mediated the relationship between construal level and vision pursuit behavior.

We calculated effect values of negative feedback construal level on vision realization expectations under different conditions and their 95% confidence intervals.

Using plus/minus one standard deviation from the mean of organizational operating conditions to represent favorable and adverse conditions, results showed: under favorable conditions, construal level was significantly negatively related to vision realization expectations (β = -0.43, [LLCI, ULCI] = [-0.68, -0.18]); under adverse conditions, construal level was significantly positively related to vision realization expectations (β = 0.69, [LLCI, ULCI] = [0.50, 0.89]). The relationships differed significantly between the two conditions ($\Delta\beta$ = 1.12, [LLCI, ULCI] = [0.80, 1.44]), supporting H1.

We calculated indirect effects of construal level on vision pursuit behavior through vision realization expectations: under favorable conditions, the indirect effect was significantly negative (β = -0.28, [LLCI, ULCI] = [-0.46, -0.10]); under adverse conditions, the indirect effect was significantly positive (β = 0.52, [LLCI, ULCI] = [0.36, 0.67]). The indirect effects differed significantly between conditions ($\Delta\beta$ = 0.80, [LLCI, ULCI] = [0.55, 1.04]), supporting H2.

4.5.1 Sample Processing

Data from each team were randomly split into individual and team groups. After splitting, the individual group had 308 participants and the team group had 311. For the team group, ICC(1) = 0.44, ICC(2) = 0.79, Rwg = 0.88 for construal level; ICC(1) = 0.41, ICC(2) = 0.77, Rwg = 0.86 for organizational operating conditions, allowing aggregation to team-level variables. The aggregated team-level variables from the team group were then combined with individual-level data from the individual group to form a non-same-source dataset for replication analysis.

4.5.2 Hypothesis Testing

Two-level structural equation model results are shown in Table 5 . In Model 2, the interaction term between negative feedback construal level and organizational operating conditions had a significant negative effect on vision realization expectations (γ = -0.51, SE = 0.08, $p < 0.001$), supporting H1. In Model 3, the coefficient between construal level and vision pursuit behavior was significantly positive (γ = 0.27, SE = 0.08, $p < 0.001$). When vision realization expectations were added in Model 4, this effect decreased in magnitude and significance, while the effect of vision realization expectations on vision pursuit behavior was significantly positive (γ = 0.35, SE = 0.07, $p < 0.001$), indicating mediation.

We calculated effect values under different conditions: under favorable conditions, construal level was significantly negatively related to vision realization expectations (β = -0.39, [LLCI, ULCI] = [-0.69, -0.09]); under adverse conditions, construal level was significantly positively related to vision realization expectations (β = 0.82, [LLCI, ULCI] = [0.62, 1.03]). The effects differed significantly between conditions ($\Delta\beta$ = 1.21, [LLCI, ULCI] = [0.87, 1.56]), supporting H1.

Indirect effects were: under favorable conditions, significantly negative (β =

-0.22, [LLCI, ULCI] = [-0.41, -0.02]); under adverse conditions, significantly positive (β = 0.52, [LLCI, ULCI] = [0.34, 0.70]). The indirect effects differed significantly between conditions ($\Delta\beta$ = 0.74, [LLCI, ULCI] = [0.46, 1.02]), supporting H2. Swapping the original team and individual groups and reconstructing the non-same-source dataset yielded consistent results.

5.1 Main Conclusions

Through one scenario experiment and two questionnaire surveys, this study examined the effect of construal level of negative feedback in vision communication on subordinates' vision pursuit behavior. Main conclusions are: (1) The more favorable the organizational operating conditions in vision communication, the more negative the relationship between negative feedback construal level and vision realization expectations. (2) The more adverse the organizational operating conditions, the more positive the relationship between negative feedback construal level and vision realization expectations. (3) The effect of negative feedback construal level on vision realization expectations is further transmitted to influence vision pursuit behavior. (4) The indirect effect of negative feedback construal level on vision pursuit behavior through vision realization expectations is moderated by organizational operating conditions: more favorable conditions show a negative indirect effect, while more adverse conditions show a positive indirect effect.

5.2 Theoretical Contributions

First, this study reveals the mechanisms through which leaders' negative feedback affects subordinates' vision expectations and behaviors from the perspective of wording strategy, thereby advancing negative feedback research. Prior studies have focused on how negative feedback intensity affects subordinates' motivation, attitudes, and proactive behavior (e.g., Kim & Kim, 2020; Xing et al., 2023; Xing et al., 2021). However, negative feedback comprises a complex set of behavioral processes, yet few studies have dissected its complex attributes, mostly treating it as a single entity. Although some researchers have analyzed negative feedback's communication process and direction (e.g., Fang et al., 2014; Kim & Kim, 2020), wording strategy in negative feedback content is also crucial, particularly as construal level is a key cue for subordinates to understand feedback content and develop corresponding cognitive representations [**?**, **?**]. This study focuses on the construal level of negative feedback in vision communication, revealing its opposite effects on subordinates' vision expectations and pursuit behavior under favorable versus adverse organizational conditions. This finding enriches understanding of negative feedback' s complex mechanisms and demonstrates the necessity of expanding research on negative feedback wording.

Second, this study extends the application context of negative feedback in vision communication, supplementing understanding of how the combination of vision communication and negative feedback—two major goal management tools

—affects subordinates' vision cognition. On one hand, current theoretical attention to negative feedback surrounding vision is lacking. Urging subordinates to narrow the gap between current reality and goals is an important function of negative feedback \cite{胡君辰，李涛, 2014}, which theoretically links negative feedback to subordinates' goal commitment and performance expectations, yet few studies have examined how to apply this important function to narrowing the gap between reality and vision. On the other hand, previous research remains divided on negative feedback' s effects (Kim & Kim, 2020), noting that the key to its positive effects lies in whether subordinates can accurately assess the connection between feedback problems and goals [**?**, **?**]. Particularly since vision is a highly hypothetical long-term goal [**?**, **?**], inappropriate negative feedback may easily lead subordinates to doubt what seems like an unrealistic vision. However, most negative feedback research has focused on short-term goal contexts, leaving the question of how to reasonably use negative feedback to stimulate subordinates' vision expectations inadequately answered. Therefore, by introducing fantasy realization theory and examining different organizational operating conditions, this study comprehensively depicts the psychological process through which negative feedback' s construal level affects subordinates in vision communication, integrating negative feedback with vision communication and building a theoretical bridge for the integration of multiple communication strategies.

Third, this study comprehensively depicts the mechanisms through which negative feedback' s construal level affects subordinates in vision communication based on fantasy realization theory, extending the theory' s application context through empirical testing. Fantasy realization theory has long been developed in psychology, education, and health fields, but empirical research on workplace applications is scarce [**?**, **?**]. This study builds logical connections between the theoretical framework, research questions, and boundary conditions by linking the theory's two core elements—"ideal future"and "present reality"—with "vision" and "real obstacles," and connecting them with positive and negative environmental cues from organizational operating conditions. Based on this, we further explore what self-regulation strategies subordinates adopt toward negative feedback of different construal levels in vision communication. Integrating fantasy realization theory, this study reveals the complex mechanisms of negative feedback in vision communication and the logic behind its effects, developing the theory' s application in management and providing new empirical support.

5.3 Practical Implications

This study' s conclusions have practical value: (1) At the management cognition level, leaders need to develop a proper attitude toward negative feedback. Blindly avoiding negative feedback or beautifying negative information is usually detrimental to organizational development [**?**, **?**]. Leaders should adopt appropriate methods to leverage negative feedback' s supervisory function, flexibly adjusting language wording to maximize subordinates' awareness of gaps

between reality and vision in vision communication. (2) Based on our findings, leaders should use clear, specific language to convey negative feedback in favorable conditions to activate subordinates' vision expectations. By directly describing organizational problems, leaders can guide subordinates to recognize gaps between current reality and vision, urging them to maintain vigilance even in favorable conditions. (3) In adverse conditions, leaders should use tactful, vague language to convey negative feedback. Although crises require subordinates to recognize urgency, direct wording can easily break their psychological defenses and cause demoralization. Leaders should carefully grasp the wording 分寸 of negative feedback, providing appropriate guidance for overcoming obstacles while maintaining subordinates' cognitive balance between vision and real obstacles.

5.4 Research Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several limitations. First, although we used established scales to measure the construal level of negative feedback in vision communication, the original scales were not specifically designed for leader speech content, which may affect conclusions. Future research could improve measurement tools to refine our findings. Second, this study used the method of aggregating individual-level variables to obtain team-level variables, which, although widely used in cross-level research, may introduce new data noise due to within-group individual score variations. Future research could improve measurement methods to address this limitation. Third, Studies 2 and 3 used a two-time-point design with a one-week interval, which has limitations in sampling frequency and may introduce uncertainty into mediation conclusions. Future research could employ experience sampling methods considering time series to improve our findings. Fourth, this study focused on negative feedback in vision communication, assuming leaders primarily communicate vision with negative feedback as a supplement. However, in reality, subordinates may receive negative information before vision information, potentially leading to reverse mental contrasting that fails to activate vision realization expectations [**?**, **?**]. Future research could explore more complex combinations of vision communication and negative feedback to supplement our findings. Finally, this study only analyzed the construal level of negative feedback content. Leaders' psychological distance in communication is also related to spatial distance from subordinates, communication media, and facial expressions and body language [**?**, **?**], which future research could examine.

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.